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Pros and Cons of Various Research Techniques

There are a wide variety of information-gathering techniques. Here are the advantages and limitations of several primary research methods.

Focus Groups

Advantages

- Exploratory; good way of getting people to talk about their attitudes and perceptions. Provides in-depth information.
- Client can observe research as it is being conducted.
- Visual aides can be used.

Limitations

- Can be an inefficient way of gathering information.
- Reveals attitudes of small group only. Not a scientific sampling.
- Moderator needs to be in control or group dynamics could taint responses.
- Recruitment can be difficult without a strong incentive.
- Competitive and intimate topics are unsuitable for focus group discussion.

One-on-One Interviews

(i.e., intercept interviews, face-to-face interviews, door-to-door interviews.)

Advantages

- Respondents can look at samples, advertisements, or other visual materials.
- Ability of interviewer to conduct complex or lengthy interviews.
- Ability of interviewer to focus on one person's responses, rather than dealing with a group dynamic.

Limitations

- Can be very costly due to time-intensive nature.
- Intercept interviews can be subject to bias if not carefully recruited.

Telephone Interviews

Advantages

- Fast; often computer-aided; offer instantaneous results.
- Cost efficient.
- Good control over sampling recruitment; complex recruiting patterns are easier to follow.

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Limitations

- Inability to show visual materials.
- Probing can be more challenging because interviewers and respondents often feel rushed.
- Impersonal; probing more difficult because interviewer is unable to watch respondent's face and body language.
- Interrupting people in the office or at home.
- Harder to use rating scales (e.g., "please rate the following on a scale of one to ten, ten being excellent...")

Mail Surveys

Advantages

- Allows respondents to answer at their convenience, at a time and location where they are comfortable.
- Relatively low cost.
- Respondents have the chance to spend more time with the questionnaire, and often give more detailed responses.
- Good control over the sampling audience.

Limitations

- Interviewer has no opportunity to explain complex instructions, to answer questions or to probe for more detail on open-ended questions.
- Respondents can skip through questionnaire, so that questionnaires that follow a set sequence cannot be used.
- Easier to leave a mail questionnaire unanswered than to say "no" to an interviewer. No control over those who do respond—may contribute to a bias in the results.

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