

SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT SOCIAL RESEARCH GROUP SOCIAL SCIENCE METHODS SERIES

Guide 2: Omnibus Surveys

What are omnibus surveys?

An omnibus survey is a survey that is carried out at regular intervals (usually weekly or monthly) and allows a range of clients to buy questionnaire space. Subscribers to an omnibus survey buy in on the basis of how many questions are to be asked of the sample, and the type of questions. It is possible to purchase questions on a one-off basis or to run the same set of questions on a number of occasions.

Interviews combine a number of standard questions that are always asked (generally demographic information such as age, sex and occupation) with the clients' questions, which may cover a wide variety of topics. Respondents' answers to these questions are analysed shortly afterwards by the omnibus survey provider, cross-referenced with the standard demographic data, and delivered to the client either as data tables or in a report.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of omnibus surveys?

The **advantages**:

- Results can be provided quickly, as the survey infrastructure is already in place.
- They are cost-effective. Most of the costs of the survey are shared with other clients who have also bought questions. This includes costs for:
 - design of the sample for the survey (i.e. decisions on who to interview to get a representative picture)
 - sample recruitment
 - devising and asking classification/socio-demographic questions
 - professional time managing the survey

The **disadvantages**:

- Omnibus surveys often use quota sampling. For major government surveys, there is a preference for random sampling over quota sampling, because the former tends to be more robust and therefore offers more confidence in the results provided.
- Although the telephone omnibus surveys tend to use a random sampling method, there are still potential sampling limitations depending on the specific method used. For example, households without a fixed line telephone may not be eligible to participate (mobile phone users may be excluded), with the possible result that younger people, people from lower socio-economic groups and the unemployed would be under-represented.
- Sample size may not be large enough for detailed disaggregation of the data. For example, it is unlikely that the results could be broken down to local authority level – sub-group analysis tends to be limited to larger, pre-defined geographical areas (i.e. regions).
- To get a large enough sample of a specific sub-group (e.g. ethnic minorities, remote and rural populations), you may need to pay to boost the sample/quota for that group, or purchase questions in several runs of the survey, decreasing the cost-effectiveness.

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- Telephone surveys do not provide the opportunity for:
 - the respondent to self-complete on more sensitive questions – those on which there is a risk of ‘correctness’ in the answers given verbally to interviewers (e.g. racism, illegal drugs etc.)
 - visual stimuli and prompts to be used (e.g. actual TV and radio adverts that have been used in a media campaign)
- Questions are bought on omnibus surveys by a range of public and private sector organisations, and the mixed nature of the omnibus survey may detract from the specific focus of particular sections. There is limited scope to negotiate the location of questions within the survey and it is difficult to assess the impact of other questions. As questions may vary from month to month, if you are running the same questions over time it is difficult to control the impact of other content, which may vary.
- Not suitable for complex questions or those which are applicable to only a small proportion of the population. Questions need to be simple, unambiguous and self-explanatory. There is limited opportunity to provide long introductions/explanations, and complex questions with skip patterns or many multiple choice answers are also likely to be inappropriate.
- Cannot probe answers. As with all quantitative research, omnibus surveys quantify “*how many*” are aware of, think this, believe that or are inclined to behave in a certain way. If more in-depth information is required, e.g. *why* people think/believe/behave, qualitative research may be more appropriate (or the omnibus survey may need to be supplemented by further qualitative work).
- Less cost-effective if you wish to ask a lot of questions.
- Data collected in a short timescale (e.g. over a week). Therefore, there is scope for people’s attitudes to be temporarily influenced by current events or media.
- There is limited flexibility in the survey interval, which may not fit with requirements in some cases (e.g. a marketing campaign timetable).

When should omnibus surveys be used?

Intended primarily as a vehicle for demand-led ‘temperature-taking’ to provide tentative answers to pressing questions, omnibus surveys tend to be designed more for speed and cost-effectiveness than for depth and high quality. They are particularly useful for:

- providing quick answers to questions of immediate policy interest
- obtaining information on a topic too brief to warrant a survey of its own
- simple issues such as consumer choices or social topics where respondents can be assumed to have a broad understanding of the topic area and of the consequences implied by particular response options
- providing a sample of respondents for follow-up investigations (subject to respondents’ consent, and personal information should not be linked to survey responses)
- question testing and piloting

Examples of the use of omnibus surveys in the Scottish Government

Public attitudes to broadcasting in Scotland

<http://openscotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/222294/0059796.pdf>

To assist the Scottish Broadcasting Commission in their investigations of the role for broadcasting in Scotland's cultural life and broadcast journalism in Scotland, a module of questions was commissioned in the TNS System Three Scottish Opinion Survey. The fieldwork was completed in February/March 2008. The questions were completed using computer-assisted self-interviewing, where respondents input their responses to survey questions directly into a hand-held computer.

The questions covered:

- perceptions of and satisfaction with the way Scotland is currently covered by broadcasters, with particular emphasis on the way current broadcasting reflects life in Scotland and Scottish identity
- perceptions of and satisfaction with coverage of Scottish news and different aspects of Scottish news in network news programmes
- behaviours and expectations in relation to broadcasting.

Smoking in public places omnibus survey

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/95598/0023143.pdf>

This research gathered information on public awareness and opinions in relation to the new legislation that would make certain enclosed public places smoke-free. The research was carried out by placing a module of questions in mruk in-home omnibus surveys conducted in May, August and November of 2005 and January 2006.

Respondents were asked about:

- their smoking status
- the smoking policy in their workplace
- the smoking 'policy' in their household
- their awareness of the new legislation (including the 'launch' date)
- perceptions of the risk associated with passive smoking
- whether action should be taken to reduce people's exposure to second hand smoke
- support for the new law
- the anticipated impact that the new legislation would have on them
- awareness of recent advertising about health risks of passive smoking
- recognition of images from the smoking ban TV ad campaign

Children's participation in culture and sport

<http://openscotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/235324/0064561.pdf>

This research was undertaken to gather information on participation in culture and sport of children aged 11-15, to complement the findings collected through culture and sport questions in the Scottish Household Survey (SHS), which covers adults in Scotland (aged 16+). The research on children's participation was carried out by placing a module of questions in the Ipsos MORI Scotland's Schools Omnibus¹.

The questions were completed by pupils in the sampled schools using self-completion questionnaires, and covered:

- the extent and levels of participation in culture and sport, both within and outwith school hours
- attitudes towards participation in culture and sport
- barriers to participating in cultural and sport activities

¹ The Ipsos MORI Scotland's Schools Omnibus was an annual face-to-face survey of 2000 Scottish young people (aged 11-18). It is not currently running.

'One Scotland Many Cultures' 2005/06 - Campaign evaluation

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/148647/0039524.pdf>

As part of a long term strategy to address problems of racism in Scotland, the Scottish Executive launched a major advertising campaign in late September 2002. The campaign has varied slightly at each phase; at phase 4, which ran from February to March 2006, it was designed to raise awareness of racist attitudes among the general public, highlight its negative impact and recognise the valuable contributions that other cultures have made to Scottish society. To evaluate the impact of phase 4 of the campaign among the target audience, and also to track general racist attitudes and experience of racism among adults living in Scotland², questions were included in the TNS Scottish Opinion Survey Omnibus in September 2005 (pre-campaign phase 4) and in March/April 2006 (post-campaign phase 4).

Questions covered:

- Respondents' ethnicity and country of birth
- Exposure to racist behaviour (as victim, perpetrator or witness)
- Spontaneous recall of advertising
- Verbally and visually/auditorily prompted awareness of advertising
- Awareness of brand and strapline
- Attitudes to racism
- Self-assessment as racist
- Racism as a problem in Scotland
- What constitutes racism
- Wider race-related issues

Key references / links

Scottish Opinion Survey, TNS

Monthly face-to-face survey of 1000 Scottish adults (aged 16+).

http://www.tns-ri.co.uk/assets/files/SOS_Ratecard_022010.pdf

Scottish Consumer Omnibus, MRUK

Monthly face-to-face survey of 1040 Scottish adults (aged 16+).

<http://www.mruk.co.uk/scotomni.html>

Scottish Opinion Omnibus, Progressive Partnership

Weekly telephone survey of 1000 Scottish adults (aged 18+).

http://www.progressivepartnership.co.uk/our_services/so_omnibus

Scottish Public Opinion Monitor, Ipsos MORI

Quarterly telephone survey of 1000 Scottish adults (aged 18+).

<http://www.ipsos-mori.com/offices/scotland/scottishpublicopinionmonitor.aspx>

YouGov Scottish Omnibus

Twice weekly online survey of 1000 Scottish adults (aged 18+)

<http://www.yougov.co.uk/services/services-omn-lonScotWales.asp?submenuheader=1>

Opinions (Omnibus) Survey, ONS

Monthly face-to-face survey of 1500-2000 UK adults (aged 16+)

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/about/who-we-are/our-services/omnibus-survey>

This guide was prepared by Alison Stout (OCR).

² Omnibus surveys have also been used to monitor the effectiveness of the previous campaign phases, which means that comparable data are available from 2001 onwards.