

TEXT ANALYTICS

VISUALIZING AND
ANALYZING OPEN-ENDED
TEXT DATA

A Survey Analytics Production

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Open-Ended Comments – Discover the rich data you are missing

Surveys are often associated with analytics. Almost all surveys are heavily weighted towards collecting, what market researcher's call, closed-ended data – i.e. where users are typically asked to choose between a set of choices (either discrete choice or a rating scale.) Open-Ended text data (aka freeform text), however is different in the sense that there is no concrete question – users are asked to give their opinions on a subject via free-form text.

Open-ended comments on surveys are a curse and a boon for conducting customer perception and satisfaction studies. They are a curse because they cannot be consolidated and analyzed easily. Although there are textual analysis programs that claim to be a by-product of artificial intelligence – I have yet to meet a serious market researcher who uses these automated text analysis tools for real decision making. They are a boon because it allows your respondents to “open up” and give you comments, ideas and suggestions that you were not even asking them.

Here's an example:

As many of you use Survey Analytics regularly know when you logout we ask you to give us comments. This is essentially a survey, with a single open-ended question in it. We realize that it can be annoying at times (especially if you are logging in and out of Survey Analytics several times a day) but the logout survey is entirely optional and you can simply ignore it if you have nothing to say and close the window. One day, about 4 years ago a senior hot-shot VP of Research at Catalina Marketing told us about TURF analysis and suggested that we have an integrated TURF Tool – That is how our interest into integrated TURF analysis began. It's an entirely different story that they made us go through a 40 page RFP and then decided to “build something inhouse” – but the point here is that we never asked our users about TURF analysis or for that matter what kinds of analytical tools they would like integrated into the system. The question on the open-ended comment question was pretty simple – “Enter in comments and suggestion for Survey Analytics.” – And Dave Suedcamp from Catalina Marketing thought about educating us on TURF analysis!

Now, we realize that many companies cannot afford to go through each and every comment and suggestion, especially if you have thousands of responses – but you can put together a human filter and escalation procedure that allows bubbling of interesting comments up the chain of command. We here at Survey Analytics, periodically look at all the comments once a month and think about them and see if we need to do something about them. The other thing that has worked really well for us is that we share the comments with everyone in the company. Some of them are simply hilarious and witty and many of them are general complaints about pricing etc. and yet a few of them are actually constructive suggestions that we've implemented.

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One last thing I also want to mention is the fact that it is generally considered good survey design/practice to have a “catch all” open-ended comment question towards the end of a survey. Even if you do not really want users giving open-ended comments for your research, a simple open-ended comment question can give you valuable insight into areas of research you’ve not even thought about. Users may even give you feedback on the survey itself – they may point out grammatical inconsistencies or even offer suggestions on how you can structure your survey better – Trust us on this one – we are speaking from experience!

So, if you are putting together a survey and you do not have an open-ended comments section, think about the valuable data that you are missing on. You already have a respondent’s attention – why not give him the opportunity to express himself in his own words in addition to conforming to your structured survey?

We talked about the importance of open-ended comments and reason for adding them to your surveys if you are not already doing it. Now we’ll focus on ways and techniques you can use to extract the value out of the open-ended comments that your respondents leave.

Eyeball browsing:

Believe it or not, the easiest way to analyze open-ended comments is (you guessed it right) reading them! This is the primary reason we have the “Open-Ended Text Report” – within Survey Analytics. In some cases if you have a ton of responses, it may make more sense to download the Excel report and read through the comments. For ease of use, the Excel Report is broken down by different sheets and each open-ended question has its own sheet. Reading through the comments while having the analytical data in the back of your head, gives you a complete picture of how to interpret the overall survey.

In fact many times while preparing an executive summary; it is generally prudent to support the analytical data with representative quotes from some comments. This allows for a personal, impact oriented analysis and summary of the survey. This the same reason why news releases and articles always quote some established figure – This allows for personalization and humanization of the survey data.

Grouping/Segmentation:

In some cases, you may want to isolate the comments for a particular data-segment. The most commonly used technique is when respondents are asked a “closed-ended” question and you want to segment it based on that. For example, if you are running a customer satisfaction survey and you ask your customers to choose the region (or department) that they interacted with

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– you’ll probably have a question that asks users which department they interacted with as a closed-ended multiple choice question. Now, the idea is to filter the results of the open-ended comments and view the ones that are associated with some key departments.

This is fairly simple to do within Survey Analytics. Just create a “Data/Segment” for the closed ended question (multiple-choice) and then click on the “Text Report” for that data-segment. The system will filter the open ended comments for that particular data-segment.

Keyword Searching:

This technique can be used if users are specific about a particular topic. The big question here is -- what to search for. Since open-ended comments can be “all over the map” you need to know what kinds of wordings your respondents will be using. A classic example here is a satisfaction survey was fielded for all the attendees of a conference. They had the basics of conference surveys – Did you like the schedule, the speakers, hotel accommodation etc. Turns out that one of the big issues was that the toilet was all dirty and there was apparently a huge line there as attendees shuffled between presenters.

We were able to search of a standard set of keywords (“toilet”, “restroom” etc.) and determined that over 60% of the comments had to do with that issue. This is good example of having context and the only way out there is to read the first few comments and decide if the issues can be framed using a set of keywords. If that is the case, then the data can be analyzed in the aggregate and deeper insight can be extracted out.

Text Categorization:

If you’ve been in the Market Research business, you would call this “Coding” – this is where you pay someone to analyze each text response and categorize/code them into a set of pre-defined buckets. Quite frankly, we do not believe this is a reasonable cost/efficient model. There are numerous flaws associated and model is very cumbersome. The first issue being that someone (either within or outside your company) needs to get trained to understand the categorization model. This is not cheap and really does not scale – It’s a linear cost model – For example the cost to categorize 1000 comments would be 10x the cost to categorize 100 comments. The Web, as we know is all about exponential scaling not linear scaling. You would not be doing online surveys, if you didn’t buy into the exponential scale concept – would you? This model fits in with the “Paper survey” or “phone survey” model, where the cost to conduct a survey is linear – simply because the costs associated with them are time based – where human beings need to spend time as data-entry operators.

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I am sure there are many valid arguments for using a text categorization model, in certain situations – when you are paying through your nose for a niche target demographic (doctors, IT decision makers, CxO's etc.) – in such cases I think it makes sense to spend the time and effort to analyze the comments using a text categorization model.

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Our customers have access to an expert team of developers who are responsible for ensuring 100% client success.



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