Subject matter edits in online forms; problem definition, exploration, development and alternatives

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Abstract

Over the last twenty years, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has added online questionnaires to almost all collections so that almost all businesses now respond online. However, business survey managers face high costs for moving and maintaining collections online and seek to balance costs by gaining efficiencies and cost reduction in processing and editing. For many stakeholders, the use of edit messages in questionnaires (often called in-form edits) is an obvious tool for getting respondents to provide correct data and achieving a net benefit from online collection. What is not often obvious is how to can use in-form edits to actually obtain benefits in processing and editing while not increasing other types of non-sampling error.

The ABS has developed ways of evaluating, developing and implementing in-form edits, or their more effective alternatives. I will outline how, when we are developing or redeveloping an online form, we define the problems we seek to solve and arrive at definitions of those problems as related to online collection and not to other (previous or concurrent) modes. I will then outline how, in cases where an in-form edit may be a solution, we work through the algorithms for identifying respondents' errors in the typical form completion pattern/s and how we might describe to respondents the problems and possible solutions in terms that are understandable and implementable by them. We've had limited success conducting cognitive testing with businesses (or individuals in households). Because both the evaluation and exploration stages often raise blockages to effective use of in-form edits, I will discuss how we have worked with subject matter and technical teams to develop alternatives that address the root causes of poor quality data.