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Kiosks ASK shoppers for their views

By Fawzia Sheikh

Raise your hand if you avoid those friendly sorts who clutch clipboard surveys on mall floors and promise people that "It will only take a few moments..."

It's likely that many of us decline to complete such questionnaires because, after all, we visit malls to shop, not be quizzed. But Markham, On. based Staples Business Depot Canada is betting that consumers will offer their opinions via kiosks installed last year in certain outlets and now being rolled out nationally.

Stephen Irwin, the retailer's direct marketing manager, chose SES Research's Automated Survey Kiosk (ASK) to gain a better and quicker handle on research data. Not only can survey results be downloaded within 24 hours, they can be made available in raw form or delivered in a report, he says. "It's a snap for me to manipulate data rather than pay extra costs for a research company to do it."

Staples Business Depot has measured customer satisfaction with pricing, selection, location and service. Irwin says the kiosk gather a sample size and are periodically moved to other locations. Although he won't provide specifics, Irwin reports better results using ASK than manual surveys. According to Nikita Nanos, managing director of Toronto-based SES Research, two out of three people take part in the short, unobtrusive surveys compared to one of every three who fill out the clipboard variety. He says the trick is to ensure questions can be answered in two minutes.

The appeal of ASK is based on several other factors. A SES recruiter approaches people to see if they'll participate, and guards against bias or inappropriate participation should employees or children fill out surveys. Marketers can target specific cultural groups within a city by programming ASK in any language. And ASK graphic capabilities allow consumers to respond in real time to both static images, namely newspaper ads, and full-motion video clips, such as TV spots.

Marketers, who receive category exclusivity, can also use the kiosk to demographically profile customers and ask about their future spending intentions. Nanos says that initial discussions with potential ASK clients indicate that retailers want to examine particularly whether distributing store flyers leads to customer purchases.

The cost of enlisting the services of ASK? Between \$75,000 to \$300,000, depending on the extensiveness of the kiosk roll-out. SES Research is in the midst of negotiations with a women's fashion retailer and an auto manufacturer, which can set up kiosks at trade shows. The company will launch a direct mail campaign this month, and potentially TV ads in March.