February 15, 1999

Kiosk promises instant survey capability
by Mark De Wolf

Toronto market research firm **SES Research** has developed a new interactive kiosk that collects customer opinions and profiles in real-time, then delivers collated data - including profiles - to marketers within hours, instead of weeks.

Called Automated Survey Kiosk (ASK), the wireless touch-screen device creates a real-time link between business and customer, delivering consumer opinions to the client's desktop PC in any language, on any topic as often as needed.

Does anew TV commercial fall flat? Are shoppers satisfied with customer service? Might they respond positively to certain kinds of incentives? SES says ASK can handle all of these kinds of standard customer feedback questions without the obtrusive necessity of place a research - clipboard in hand - in the paths of exiting customers.

"By relying on a touch-screen kiosk, we really reduce the amount of testing effect that comes with standard research practices," says Steve Irwin, direct marketing manager for Staples Business Depot, which has just concluded a one-year national pilot of the ASK service. "You're getting much more reliable information."

Staples has been using ASK to pose aided-recall questions related to the chain's flyer promotions and catalogue mailings.

A brief touch to the kiosk screen initiates a brief series of prompted questions, usually with accompanying graphics. Completed surveys, along with customer profiles are aggregated and forwarded by wireless link from the kiosk to SES, where the data is complied, analyzed, then immediately forwarded to the client's desktop PC. Survey data can be tabulated and transferred directly to the client on an hourly, daily or weekly basis. Clients can received the data by direct up-link, via the Internet or by fax.

Data can be collected simultaneously from multiple kiosk sites. Changes to the survey questions or graphics can be make by remote at any time, allowing clients to be "in the field" immediately after an issue breaks, confident they'll have a first wave of results within hours. And the client gets to choose in what form the feedback is reported.

"One of the things that cheeses me off when we get an outsider to do our research is that the data belongs to them," says Irwin. "SES is able to deliver the raw data back via a wireless connection so we can do our own tabulations."

"It's one thing to look at the performance of a single store, but what do you compare it to? Its neighbours? Regional averages? We can manipulate the data right here, so we're only limited by the amount of labour we want to put into it."

Nik Nanos, founder and managing director of SES, says the kiosks are usually accompanied by a recruiter who "gently" attempts to guide customers to the kiosks as they walk by, while at the same time ensuring that employees or managers don't skew the numbers by completing surveys

themselves. Though SES occasionally offers coupons or incentives to boost usage, he says participation levels are generally high without them.

"I think a lot of it has to do with the novelty," he says. "We've provided coupons before, but we find that one of the key determinants to participation is the length of the survey. As long as we keep it to one or two minutes long, people don't necessarily need an incentive."

Nanos adds that SES addressed clients' increasingly multicultural customer bases by adding multilingual functionality to the ASK software. Unlike traditional clipboard questionnaires, ASK surveys can be posed in multiple languages, allowing customers to respond in whatever language is most comfortable to them.

The system's graphic capabilities allow clients to use static images such as newspaper ads as well as full motion video clips as part of the overall presentation. Survey questions can be changed, new languages added and new graphics uploaded while the kiosks are still in the field. No on-site visits by technicians are needed since changes to surveys can be made by remote via the wireless link.

Each ASK device can be programmed to include questions localized to a particular site or micro-market. Retailers, for example, may wish to gauge the local newspaper- and television -watching preferences of customers in a given market. Kiosk devices in that area could be programmed by remote to suggest specific newspaper and TV outlets in that market.

Nanos says the rollout will target one "marquee client" in each retail sector who will have category exclusivity.