KINESIS SURVEY REVIEWED

TIM MACER CONSIDERS A HIGH-END PLATFORM FOR WEB, MOBILE AND MIXED-MODE ONLINE SURVEYS. WILL IT TICK ALL THE RIGHT BOXES?

Kinesis Survey Technologies has big aspirations to inject some new dynamism into how web surveys get done. The software is still virtually unknown in the UK, yet in the eight short years of its existence Kinesis has already enticed an impressive list of high-profile research companies in the USA away from more established web survey software providers.

The suite is 100% web-based, though you may install it on your own infrastructure or use Kinesis' own hosted service. Unlike many survey packages which force a dependency on Microsoft's various technologies, its underlying technology is open source, using the Apache web server and MySQL database, and it will work with any browser and coexist happily within Windows, Mac or Linux environments.

In addition to the main survey software, which includes some competent data reporting and publishing, there are separate panel and communities modules, and within a month or so Kinesis will be releasing downloadable survey apps for Android and iPhone users, which can make sense for panel and community engagements.

A key feature of the survey module is blending of conventional and mobile web surveys. Surveys can be run in either mode, or both. It means you can create one survey and ensure that it can be delivered in large and small formats – the software detects a huge range of smart phones and will render the survey so that it maximises the actual device being used.

'Ease of use' has long become a cliché of software marketing. Yet this software is a lesson in what the term should mean. It takes a rigorous approach to making each task simple and obvious to achieve without compromising on the functionality on offer. Complex conditions, sophisticated randomisation models, validation, text piping, customised exit routines and much more, are all made easy to prepare and review in the software's highly attractive GUI.

Ease of use can sometimes come at the expense of productivity – with repetitive or advanced tasks then requiring disproportionate effort to achieve. Kinesis offers three ways to tackle the drudgery of getting questions set up in the first place. The simple GUI route is a two-stage process. A simple pop-up appears first in which you enter question and answer texts, then a second, tabbed page presents options arranged logically and with sensible defaults. Or, you can cut and paste whole questions from a fully formatted Word document when creating a question. Kinesis will intelligently deduce from this what to use as question text and answer text, and what to discard.

A third method is aimed at firms with their own technical team, or those using offshore resource providers – there is a complete XML-based scripting language that can be used to create surveys, which can be human or even computer-generated, and can create an entire script including the logic, or just set out the basic framework of question and answer texts. What is disappointing is that syntax files can only be imported – there is no way to write out an updated version of the syntax once you have made changes.

Related to this, neither does the software offer version control, which

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CLIENT PERSPECTIVE: ADAM BERMAN, CATALYSTMR, USA

Adam Berman is President of CatalystMR, a market research services company based in Oakland, California, which has been using Kinesis Survey for two years. He comments: "When I started this company, our primary focus was simple to very complex online surveys, respondent panels and back-end reporting. Kinesis did not have the reputation of the others but appeared to have all the high-end programming and functionality we were looking for. And, although it should not be the main consideration, the cost was also attractive."

As a service company, hosting surveys and panels for research clients, CatalystMR has to cope with a very broad range of surveys, from simple to highly complex, non-linear surveys. "We are building flash modules and integrating these modules with Kinesis and with other software sytems. It has been very easy for us and for our outside developers to work the Kinesis Survey system and Kinesis' API. Everything has worked very well."

CatalystMR uses Kinesis on a software-as-a-service basis. Berman rates the infrastructure to be among the most stable in the industry. "Not only is the software very flexible, but their infrastructure is also extremely solid. In one project, an administrative oversight by a client led to far more sample invitations being issued by our client than we originally planned. We had over 24,000 completes over a 24-hour period – but at no time was there any noticeable slowdown."

When Berman first evaluated Kinesis, he was not expecting the reporting capabilities to meet his client's needs, as the tool is not fully developed in this area, but he has been pleasantly surprised. "Something we now rely on is the custom portals capability. These let us show a single real-time table or a full real-time tab report customised to the needs of our clients. The portal also allows our clients to download real-time data in their chosen formats. We create these portals for our clients and our panel partners to give them a quick view of the study's status." CatalystMR has used Kinesis to extend its services into mobile interviewing. Berman reports: "You can ultimately run a survey and it can display in both a conventional desktop web environment and on a mobile device. Currently 1.5% of our conventional online surveys are taken via a mobile device. The Kinesis software makes it easy to render surveys on small format mobile devices."

would be handy when managing changes in a multi-user environment such as this. Although it is entirely possible to make extensive changes to a survey after going live with no harm to the data, it is a nuisance that you have to take the survey offline in order to make certain changes.

The look and feel of both the survey screens and the client data portals are very easily customised. The lay user can use a built-in WYSWYG editor to upload and configure logos and graphics and change the colours and fonts of each individual component. It's all delightfully easy to do. Or, if you are working with a web developer, template CSS and HTML files can be exported and re-imported after being worked on externally.

Questions too can be templated. This provides a good way to make custom questions available or to build up your own library of flash or other interactive questions. Kinesis provides an API or programming interface that standardises exchanging data between

your survey and flash components or any other external application or database in a way that any web programmer would be comfortable with. The tool provides similarly rich support for survey invitations and reminders, and supports multiple languages in the survey as well as invites – though you need to check that your translation agency is able to cope with translating from XML files.

Reporting capabilities are ideal for monitoring fieldwork progress – and you can give your clients full access or simply publish key tables and reports for them to view. You can also use these tools to do more in-depth analysis, but may find them limited in this area. There's no support for weighting, for example. Similarly, there not much on offer to let you manipulate, code or clean your data, though these can be achieved, offline, by very capable exports to a variety of formats including Triple-S, and there is a handy and simple to use utility to import and merge or append data.

THE VERDICT: KINESIS SURVEY

High-end platform for web, mobile or mixed-mode online self-completion surveys with integrated real-time reporting and publishing.

Ease of use ★★★★★
Cross-platform compatibility ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

PROS
- Offers a feature set as advanced as any of the established major players
- Genuinely platform-neutral – works with any modern web browser, Windows, Linux or Mac
- Attractive, intuitive graphical user interface with option to use syntax
- Integrated panel tool

CONS
- Some limitations on the analysis and data processing side
- Lacks version control
- Needs more documentation – help files rather cryptic
- Currently UK sales office but US-based support

COST
Hosted service: Transactional pricing at 45p per complete plus £6,000 per annum, or tiered pricing by volume starts at £38,900 for up to 100,000 completes. Panel module from £20,000 for 50,000 panellists; £1,500 for each additional 10,000. Client installed pricing also available.

www.kinesissurvey.com