

Proofpoint: Capitalizing on a Reporter's Love of Statistics

>Abstract

Proofpoint provides antispam software and e-mail security software solutions for large enterprises. Their software products stop spam, protect against e-mail viruses, ensure that outbound e-mail messages comply with both corporate policies and external regulations, and prevent leaks of confidential information via email and other network protocols, like blogs and text-messaging. Proofpoint knew from its customer inquiries that the IT professional was increasingly concerned with outbound information privacy compliance issues. Believing that painting this broader picture would earn them valuable space and airtime in the business, IT, and mainstream media, Proofpoint sponsored a series of surveys among IT professionals. This case is about those surveys.

>The Scenario

Media coverage is important in the information technology sector. Such coverage often establishes a perception of expertise that a new or emerging firm can use to capture prestigious clients. A three-year Web-based survey, orchestrated by Proofpoint's director of corporate communications, Keith Crosley, and fielded by Forrester Research, demonstrates the use of research for capturing such media attention.

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Proofpoint knew from its customer inquiries that the IT professional was increasingly concerned with outbound information privacy compliance issues. Believing that painting this broader picture would earn them valuable space and airtime in the business, IT, and mainstream media, Proofpoint sponsored a series of surveys among IT professionals. The first study in the series was motivated by a common adage in public relations: Reporters love statistics. "Statistics catch a reader's attention," shared Crosley, "while giving the story credibility."

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>The Research

The 2004 Web study focused on what technology and non-technology techniques IT professionals were using. “One surprising finding was the large percentage of firms using people to monitor outbound email as a means of controlling information leaks and policy compliance.” This study also showed the increasing concern of firms about the potential risk of outbound information.

The 2005 study added questions focusing on the IT professional's concern level relating to various issues. In addition to capturing media attention, their answers helped Proofpoint's software engineers strengthen current products and design new ones. The 2005 study also delved into cultural issues related to a firm's information control choices.

By the time the 2006 study was launched, Proofpoint had grown from 50 to 150 employees in three years and established itself in the United Kingdom. It designed the study to compare IT attitudes and choices between the U.S. and U.K. Newer protocols were also explored as employees worldwide were launching sanctioned and unsanctioned web blogs and more firms were using message boards and FTP protocols.

Explore the published study report for each of the three years found on the text website. Then explore the three year's survey questions.

>Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the value of this longitudinal research design. What issues does this case reveal that longitudinal studies must address?
2. Researchers are increasingly asked for more than data displays; they are asked for recommendations. Choose one statistical finding in each year's study that you would recommend Crosley use in a press release about that year's study. Remember, his goal was to capture media attention. Support your choices.
3. Forrester prescreened participants to determine if each had the appropriate level of knowledge and IT responsibility. Why would prescreening participants be important to this study?
4. In the 2006 study, recruiting U.K. participants was three times as expensive as recruiting the U.S. participants. Knowing this, why was it important for Proofpoint to have comparative responses?



5. In future studies, Proofpoint is interested in expanding the study to IT professionals in its other market segments, especially in Australia and Japan. Make the assumption that in each market segment it will be more expensive to recruit participants than in the U.S. Make an argument for conducting the next year's web survey in each of these segments, as well as in the U.S. and U.K.
6. Proofpoint captured significant media coverage each year, both print and broadcast, with its longitudinal study. Assume that Proofpoint has continued to do this study each year since 2004. Make a recommendation for continuing or not continuing the Proofpoint study in the next calendar year. Support your argument.

>URLs

www.proofpoint.com
www.forresterresearch.com

>Additional Materials

1. 2004 Study Data (Excel file).
2. 2005 Study Data (Excel file).
3. 2006 Study Data (Excel file).

All files contain the questions as well as the data.

4. 2004 Report (PDF file)
5. 2005 Report (PDF file)
6. 2006 Report (PDF file)

>Source

This case was developed through interviews and e-mails with Keith Crosley, Proofpoint's director of corporate communications, and with materials provided by Proofpoint. Used with permission of Pamela S. Schindler, © 2008.