

Ten Tips For Creating Effective Online Surveys

Most business professionals agree that online surveying is an efficient way to collect data. However, if the survey is not developed using a systematic approach, the results can be inconclusive or irrelevant. By taking the time to identify the research objectives and what business questions need to be answered, you will greatly improve your findings. Many professionals also mistakenly assume that respondents will naturally want to complete their survey. This is often not the case. It is critical to design an enticing online survey for your respondents in order to produce useful results.

Follow the ten tips below to create a well-designed online survey to increase your online survey participation rate and to obtain the information you need:

- Have An Objective
- Make it Appealing
- Automate For Efficiency
- Integrate Relevant Branching & Skip Logic
- Make it Easy
- Be Clear, Be Concise
- Make it Confidential
- Randomize Answers
- Test The Survey
- Analyze Responses

1. Have An Objective

As the old saying goes “If you don’t know where you’re going, how will you get there?” When creating your online survey, be clear about your objectives. What are you trying to learn? What data will validate whether or not you have achieved your goals? You have to work backwards and envision what results you want the survey to yield. Don’t forget that senior management will be interested in your survey results, so consider what metrics would be important and valuable to them. It is also critical to understand the objectives of others who will be reviewing the results so the pertinent questions are included.

2. Make it Appealing

Personalized emails can increase response rates by nearly 60%. To ensure a successful online survey, you should make sure that your survey tool can customize messages to each respondent. Surveys should look professional and appealing to the survey taker. Take time to consider the look and feel of what you are presenting in your messages and the survey itself. Some online survey tools will allow you to customize the survey with your organization’s brand and give you the option to use a professional looking template. Remember, graphical appeal can drastically impact response rates and will always reflect on your organization. Email invitations to participate in online surveys should also be engaging. Offering an incentive to respondents who complete your online survey is an effective way to increase response rates and ultimately yield more data. The incentives can range from product discounts (a great sales generator) to movie tickets and gift cards.

3. Automate For Efficiency

Schedule automated email invitations to go out at the ideal time for your target audience. Timely delivery is proven to increase response rates. Perhaps the best time to reach your customers is at 2pm on Wednesdays or at 10am on Tuesdays. By automating the delivery of your online survey, you can arrange to contact your prospective respondents at the optimal day and time. Remind your respondents to fill out the survey if they haven’t done so already. Reminders are another simple way to increase the participation rate. Your online survey tool could have automated reminder functions built in, so you don’t have to manually determine who to remind and contact. All emails should have a fully automated opt-out link. Respondents who opt-out will not receive any additional correspondence from you and your organization will automatically comply with the Federal CAN SPAM laws. It is also critical that your online survey system notifies you of the respondent’s “opt out” request so they can be removed from your address book within 10 business days. A full-featured survey system has the ability to automatically remove the contact information when the respondent clicks on the opt-out link and further streamlines your process.

4. Integrate Relevant Branching & Skip Logic

Branching is a critical element of a customized survey experience. Surveyors should consider the specific demographics of their respondents and implement survey question logic accordingly. For example, you could begin your survey by asking the respondent about their involvement at a particular organization. Based on their answer, you can direct the respondent to a tailored set of questions to match their targeted audience. With skip logic, you can prevent your respondent from reading and responding to irrelevant questions and obtain quality data from each survey response. Utilize skip logic to maintain your respondent's attention and increase the probability of a complete response. Skip logic provides a user-friendly experience for the respondent, increases your response rates and ultimately provides you with the information you need.

5. Make it Easy

If you already know your respondent's contact information, pre-populate the appropriate registration fields with their name, company, email address, etc. by transferring this data directly from your address book. This will save respondents time and increase the likelihood for participation in the survey. An additional benefit to pre-populating data is that respondents have the opportunity to correct any misinformation you display, thus automatically cleaning and updating your database. Make the survey available to respondents in a variety of formats. Email invitations and reminders should include a direct link to take the survey. Also include a link on your website to drive more people to take your survey. Surveys that are easily accessible will naturally capture more valuable data.

6. Be Clear, Be Concise

Remember that people have to take the time to read your survey, so make sure that it is clear, concise, and easy to follow. Let the respondents know your survey objectives from the start and indicate how long it will take to complete the survey. Include a progress bar on your online survey to help your respondents gauge their progress and determine how much time they have left. This technique eases respondent frustration and guarantees a higher rate of completion. Keep it short and sweet. Break the survey into multiple pages so as to not overwhelm the respondent. Limit your survey to approximately 15 questions so it only takes approximately 5 to 10 minutes to complete. Keep the flow of the survey in mind and ask the easy questions first. Give respondents time to get involved before you ask more difficult questions towards the middle of survey. Reserve your most sensitive questions for the end. Phrase questions in an unbiased manner. For example, instead of asking, "What did you like about the company party?" and assuming that the respondent did like something about the party, you should ask, "What did you think of the company party?" At the end of your survey, don't forget to thank your respondents. You should also carefully consider where to direct respondents upon completion. Many surveyors redirect respondents to a customer testimonial page or product pages on their organization's website. Finally, remember that not everyone is a survey-writing expert. Choosing an online survey program that offers a variety of survey questionnaire templates (such as employee satisfaction and market research surveys) will save you time and effort. Templates are a great starting point so you can focus your efforts on customizing more specific questions. Why reinvent the wheel and make your job more complicated than it has to be?

7. Make it Confidential

It is important for respondents to know how their responses are viewed and stored. Let respondents know if the survey is anonymous survey or confidential. Online employee survey participation will increase if the employees are aware that their responses are completely anonymous. Compared to confidential surveys, anonymous surveys guarantee more open and honest feedback because they eliminate the perceived fear of retribution. Respondents tend to feel more comfortable giving honest feedback not being associated with their answers.

8. Randomize Answers

Results are more statistically relevant if the multiple choice answers are randomized. In randomized surveys, the answer choices appear in a different order for each respondent. This method is applied to reduce any bias that may occur when respondents choose answers without reading all of the options. For example, a respondent may choose the first response available for each question in order to expedite completing the survey. This typically respondent practice will have an impact on your survey results. Applying randomization features help surveyors avoid this problem. Do not randomize answer choices that are typically listed alphabetically or numerically such as states or number ranges. A high-quality online survey program should give you the option to keep the answers in the order you entered, A-Z, Z-A, or randomized.

9. Test The Survey

Before launching your online survey, send it to yourself and a sizable test group within your organization. Testing your email message and the survey itself is an essential way to learn whether or not you are asking the right questions in order to accomplish your objectives. If you can't test within your organization, send a test to a small sample of your target group. This will help you see how your survey or campaign message should be amended. After you launch your survey and collect the results, look at your post-survey metrics, such as response rates, deletion rates, and bounce rates. Examine this type of data from every survey to improve upon future campaigns.

10. Analyze Responses

Now that the survey results are in, take the show on the road. Make sure that your online survey software can give you results that are easy to download and display in a variety of formats. For instance, you may want to use charts or graphs to visually demonstrate your results. Many professionals find that graphical survey results are an effective way to present findings to your audience. Your chosen online survey program should give you the option to download results in Excel, PDF, XML, CSV, TIFF, and Web Archive formats. Even if you do not see a need for advanced statistical analysis, these reporting tools are extremely valuable for extracting business intelligence from a survey. This function is called Cross Tabulation analysis and is a key reporting function to a high quality online survey application. It is imperative that your online survey program can easily track, analyze and record results. After all, that is the ultimate goal of a survey – getting results! Without intelligible results, you will not be able to determine actionable next steps from your data.

Conclusion

Online surveys are easy to design and implement. For this reason, they are often created without much thought and simply emailed out to respondents. In order to increase respondent participation and produce valuable results, always keep these tips in mind. By choosing a full featured online survey application, you can reduce the manual work, produce professional looking surveys and gather valuable data for your organization. Online surveys can be used by all the departments in your organization in the form of employee satisfaction, market research, sales lead generator, customer service satisfaction surveys and much more. Knowledge is power and online surveys are the key to maximizing any organization's business intelligence. Cvent Web Surveys offers a full featured tool that incorporates all of the key features listed in this article. For more information, please see our Web Surveys page.

