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SURVEY TIPS



5 questions to ask for a successful survey



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If you're getting ready to send an online survey, you probably already have some questions in mind for your audience. No doubt about it, the questions you ask your respondents are important and should be well thought out. Equally important (though less well known) are the questions you ask yourself *before* you send your survey. These 5 basic questions—how, why, who, when, and what—don't get as much attention as the more popular questions you include in your survey. But they should. Take a few minutes to



Questions To Ask Yourself Before You Send Your Survey

1. **How:** *How do you want to ask?*

Okay, this is the easy part. After all, you're reading this blog because you already decided that you want to use an online survey to do the asking for you. So really, the place to start is our second question...



2. **Why:** *Why do you want to ask?*

The most important step in a survey is figuring out what you actually want to know. It's important to make your objectives really clear up front or the next steps of survey formation won't go so well. For example, stay away from vague goals like measuring "satisfaction." What do you mean by satisfaction? Do you want to know if your public awareness campaign was engaging and fun? Or if it was informational? Or persuasive? Not only will a clear sense of the feedback you want up front help you to analyze your data when you get it back, it will also make your actual survey questions clearer and simpler—something that the people answering your survey will definitely appreciate. Which brings us to our next question...

3. **Who:** *Who do you want to ask?*

This may seem like a silly question, but it really is very important. Survey respondents should be a "sample" of a "population." A **population** is the entire set of people who you want to ask. For example, American citizens, or non-profit workers in Texas, or teenage internet users in New York City. Your **sample** is the portion of that bigger population that actually ends up taking your survey. You can think of a population as all the fish swimming around in the Pacific Ocean, and a sample as all the fish you caught on Tuesday afternoon. Figuring out which fish you want to catch (so to speak) is directly related to why you're fishing in the first place.



Let's say you're a non-profit looking to make sure you get lots of donations for your next year. Do you want to make sure your current donors are happy with the way you are spending their contributions? Or are you trying to figure out how to attract new donors? If it's about your current donors, then your population would be all of your current donors and to access that population, just send your survey out to your mailing list of donors. Your sample will be the people who actually respond and fill out the survey. If you're trying to get new donors, however, it gets a little trickier. First you have to spend a little more time defining who your population is exactly. That is, who could potentially donate to your organization? Adults probably. Maybe only English-speaking adults. Maybe if you're a local, grassroots organization, maybe only American adults who live in San Francisco. It's really up to you! Now that we've tackled the question of who to ask, let's move on to our next question...



Survey Tip: Need help accessing a sample of your target population? We have an [Audience](#) available to take your surveys.)

4. **When:** *When do you want to ask?*

So, to understand the “when,” let me bring us back to the fishing metaphor. When you go out fishing, how many fish you catch can depend on what time you go out to fish and how long you stay out there. Some kinds of fish tend to be easier to catch in the morning, others at night. Fishing for 2 hours will yield a different catch than fishing for 2 days. In surveys, depending on who you want to “catch,” you’re going to want to send out invitations at different points of the week, and leave surveys open for different amounts of time—especially if you want to get more responses. Closing a survey too quickly can frustrate people who tried to respond, and exclude people who are just a little slower at getting around to things. This could potentially bias the conclusions you draw in an unhelpful way. For example, if you’re trying to recruit new donors,



actual substance of what you're asking, which brings us to our next question...

5. What: *What do you want to ask?*

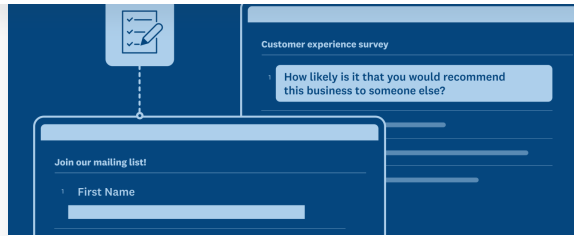
Finally. The question you've all probably been waiting for. You've got your objectives and your sample population nailed down. You've figured out when to ask them. But your survey is still blank. What do you ask?! Well, that's a complicated problem, and there's not just one right answer. If you have clear answers to the last four questions, it should make the "what" part a lot easier. There are so many different kinds of question designs and factors to consider, but here are some general guidelines to get you started:

First of all, keep your questions simple, straightforward, and concise. This will make it easy for your survey-takers to understand what you're asking, and will make it easy for you to analyze your data. If you're not sure if your questions are easy enough to understand, test them out on a friend or someone who's not familiar with your particular industry to make sure the questions are comprehensive. Next, if you're going to give your survey-takers answer choices, try not to use more than 7 answer choices for any given question—people get overwhelmed. Also, make sure to label the answer choices. So that means don't ask your survey-takers to rate how happy they are on a scale of 1 to 5. Ask them if they're extremely happy, very happy, moderately happy, slightly happy, or not at all happy. Words are easier for people to think about than numbers.

There you have it. Stick with those 5 questions, and your survey will be off to a good start before you've even started writing it!

What do you think? Have other survey methodology questions? Share your thoughts with us in the comments section below!

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