

DEFINITIONS



What Is a Survey? And the Survey Octopus

A survey is a process

Total Survey Error focuses on reducing problems overall

Meet the Survey Octopus

We'll aim for Light Touch Surveys

Most days, at least one website will ask me to respond to a popup invitation like the one in Figure 0.1.

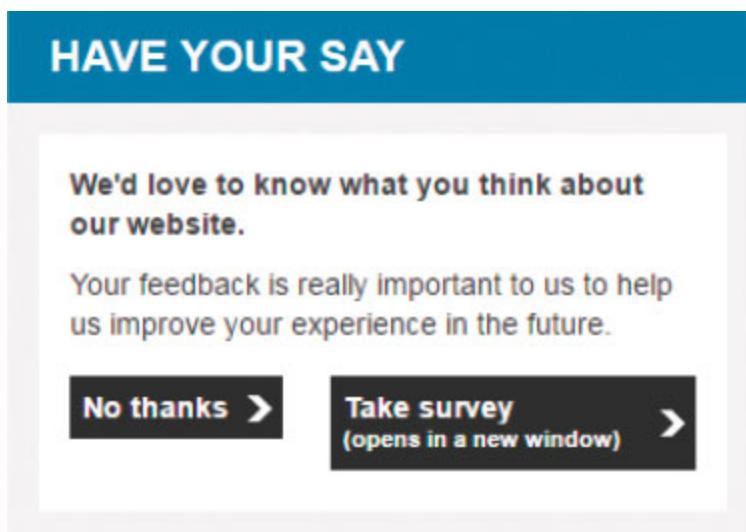


FIGURE 0.1
A pop-up survey invitation.

Because of the button “Take survey”—and many others like it—people tend to think of a survey as a list of questions to answer. But a survey is also the entire process of ensuring that you ask good questions to get useful answers.

A survey is a process

To make it clearer which thing I mean when I say *survey*, I’ll use these definitions:

A **questionnaire** is the set of questions that you will put to the people you want to answer them.

A **survey** is a process of asking questions that are answered by a sample of a defined group of people to get numbers that you can use to make decisions.

Let’s unpack the elements of the definition of a survey.

A survey asks people to answer questions

It’s rather easy to ask people questions. The trickier part is getting them to answer those questions. You’ll learn about the topic of persuading people to answer questions in Chapter 3, “Questions.”

A survey asks a defined group of people

When I talk about a “defined group of people,” I mean that you need to make precise choices about the people you want to answer your survey. You’ll also need to think about how many of them to ask and how to find them.

In some people’s minds, the ideal survey is “to ask everyone.” There’s a specific type of survey that asks everyone: it’s called a *census*.

Even censuses don’t *really* ask everyone. They go to a defined group of people and have specific rules about who gets counted. For example, the U.S. Census Bureau administers the Decennial Census of the people of

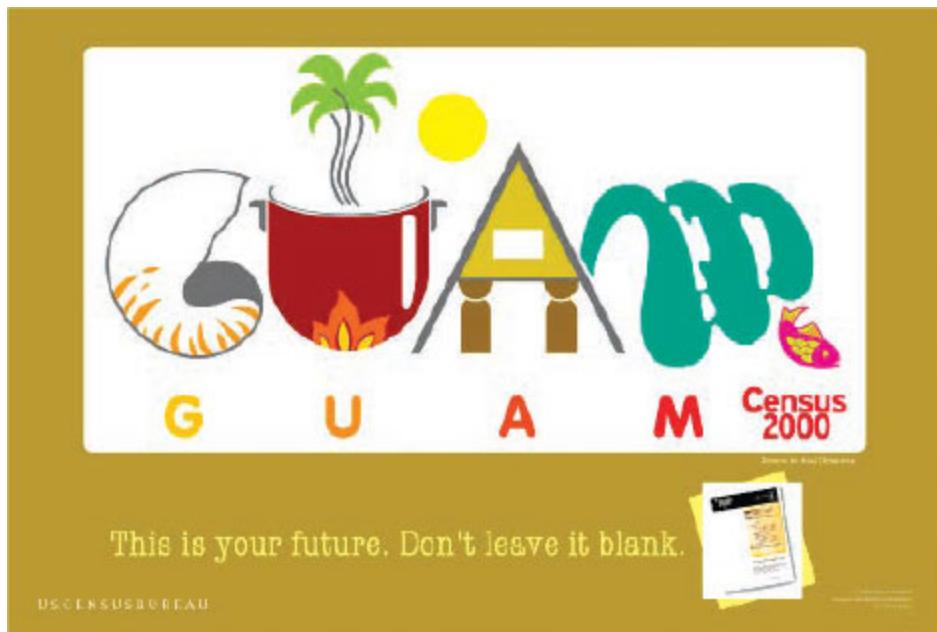
the United States of America. The definition of “people of the U.S.A.” includes the 50 states and the District of Columbia.

But what about Guam—administered by the U.S., but maybe not exactly a part of it? Try these three questions:

1. Are people in Guam in or out?
2. What about babies who are born on census day—in or out?
3. Foreign nationals on a visit to the U.S.—in or out?

(The answers are: 1: In, as you can see in Figure 0.2; 2: In; 3: Out.)

We'll think about precision in deciding about people to ask in Chapter 1, “Goals.”



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WWW.CENSUS.GOV/HISTORY/WWW/PROGRAMS/GEOGRAPHY/ISLAND_AREAS.HTML

FIGURE 0.2
People in Guam have been included in the U.S. Decennial Census since 1920. This poster is from 2000.

A survey asks a sample

A reliable survey asks a sample, not everyone. Asking everyone creates all sorts of problems. To mention just one issue: if you sent the questionnaire to everybody and something happens to go wrong technically, then you've got no one left to ask.

You'll learn about how many people to ask and how to find them in Chapter 2, "Sample."

A survey gets a number

A survey is a quantitative research technique. When you choose to do a survey, you're choosing to end up with results as a number (well, maybe several numbers—but definitely at least one).

You can certainly include some questions in your questionnaire that get non-numeric answers, such as asking someone to write their opinion in their own words (qualitative answers). But if your aim is mostly to be qualitative, then maybe you'd be better using a qualitative method. You'll learn about different types of methods in Chapter 1.

A survey helps you to make decisions

If you're working for a national statistical institute (NSI), such as the U.S. Census Bureau, then you'll be using the answers to create reference statistics that are used by a wide range of people for many purposes, such as determining how resources like funding for education get distributed to each state.

Most of us have an easier task: we can focus on the specific decisions that our own organization will make, based on the results of the survey.

If you don't want the answers for some purpose, why bother?

Total Survey Error focuses on reducing problems overall

My aim is to help you to get results from your survey that are valid and that accurately measure what they claim to measure. And that are reliable: for example, if you did the exact same survey again, you'd expect to get the same results (assuming nothing much else had changed). To do that, you'll have to tackle all sorts of issues, many of which are connected.

Let's look at one: "How many people do you need to ask?" It's important and one of the main topics for Chapter 2.

Do you answer every survey invitation you receive, or do you make choices about who gets your time?

If you answer every single survey—respect! I did it for a while for research purposes, but mostly I'm firmly in the "make choices" team, and that's much more the norm. If it's an interesting topic, a greater percentage of the people you ask will take the time to answer, so the number of people you ask also depends on the reason you are doing it (see Chapter 1) and the questions you ask (Chapter 3). It turns out that you'll be exploring connections between the issues all the time.

Flip that around, and you'll find plenty of pitfalls to avoid. Too many irrelevant questions, and you'll get more people dropping out, so you'll need to send more invitations to get the same number of eventual answers. One error can create another and another. Overall, the aim is to keep all the errors to a minimum and in balance with each other.

Total Survey Error combines many errors

Because of all the dependencies and related errors in surveys, survey methodologists look at all the choices you make when doing a survey and aim to achieve the least possible error overall, wrapping them up like this:

Total Survey Error is the consequence of all the individual survey errors.

Meet the Survey Octopus

The survey process sits between:

- What you want to ask.
- Who you want to ask.
- What the final result is—“the number.”

To help me to keep track of all the survey choices throughout the process, I combined them into a Survey Octopus in Figure 0.3. Although I’ll be talking about the surveys separately, the Survey Octopus also acts as reminder that they are, in fact, somewhat connected.

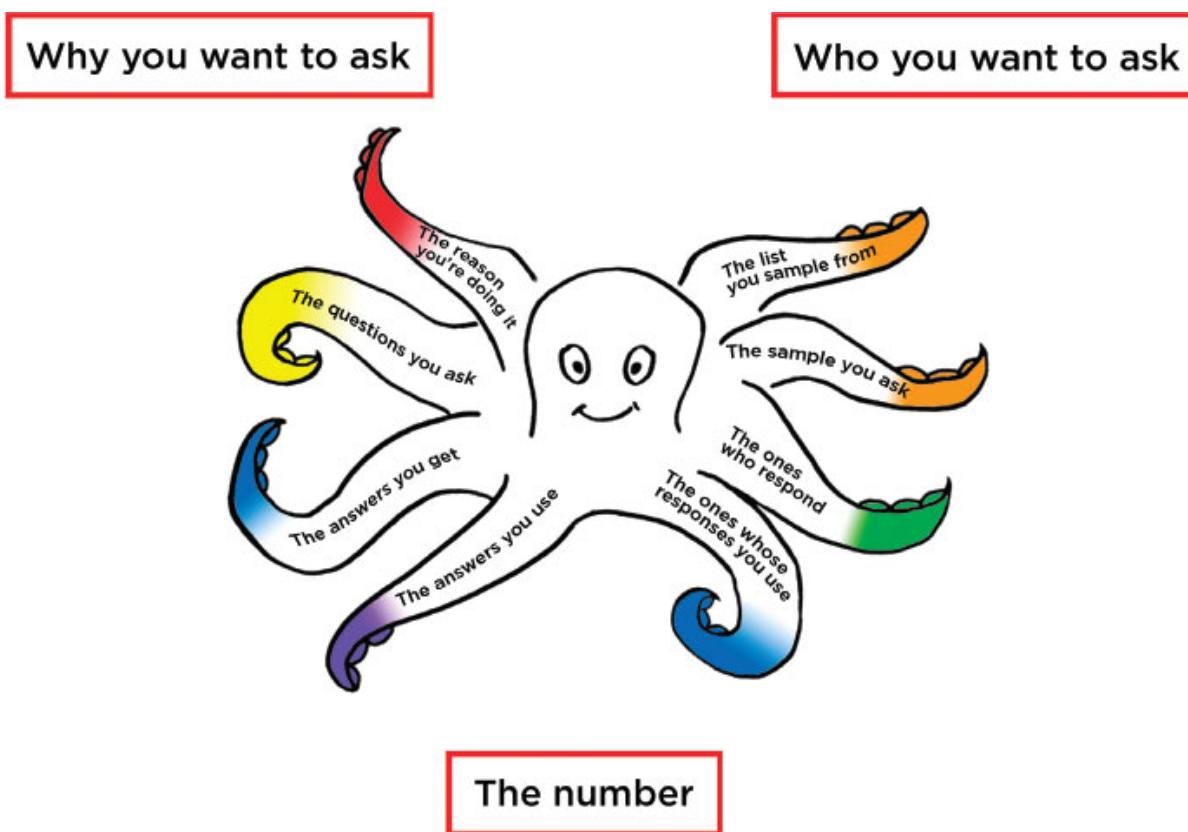


FIGURE 0.3
The Survey Octopus has tentacles about the choices you make in surveys.

We'll focus on the top half of the Survey Octopus as we prepare and test the questionnaire (see Figure 0.4) in the first four chapters.

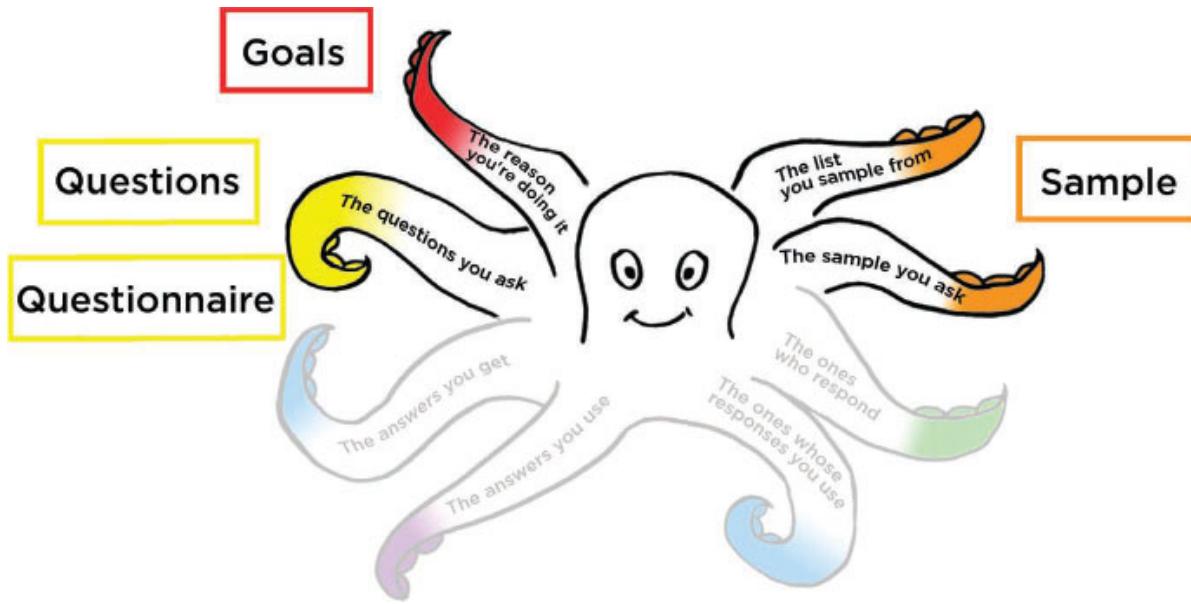


FIGURE 0.4
The preparation is about goals, sample, questions, and questionnaires.

Then we'll be thinking about the ones who answer when we're in Fieldwork: run the survey from invitation to follow-up (see Figure 0.5).

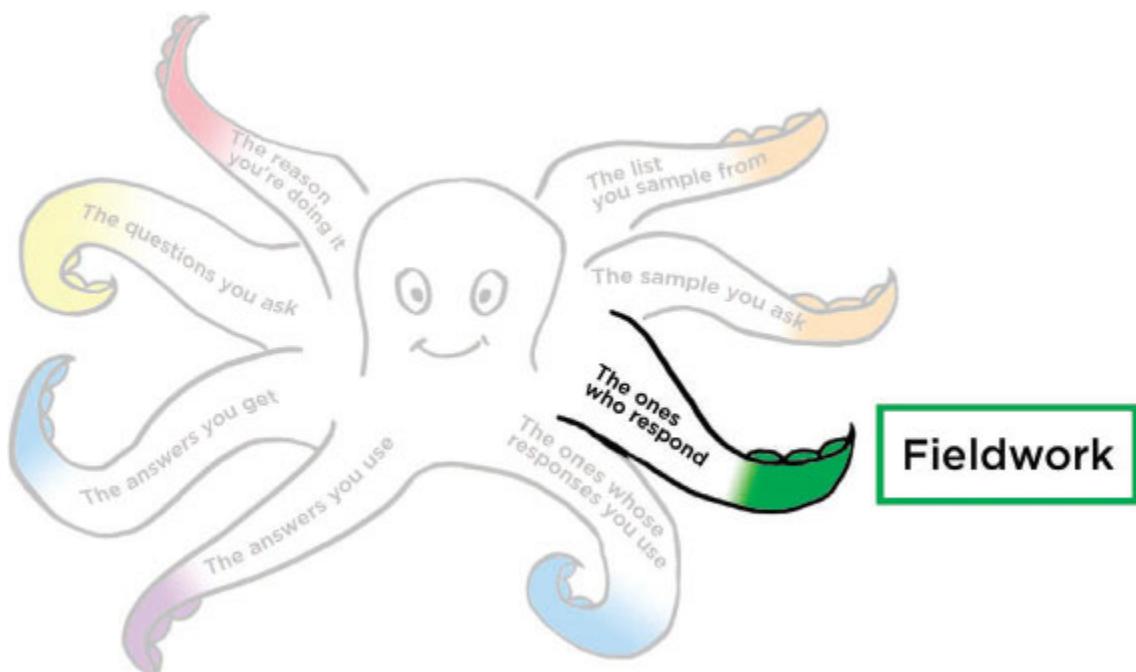


FIGURE 0.5
Fieldwork is about getting your questionnaire to the people who will answer.

And we'll focus on dealing with the last three tentacles when we're looking at Responses and Reports (see Figure 0.6).

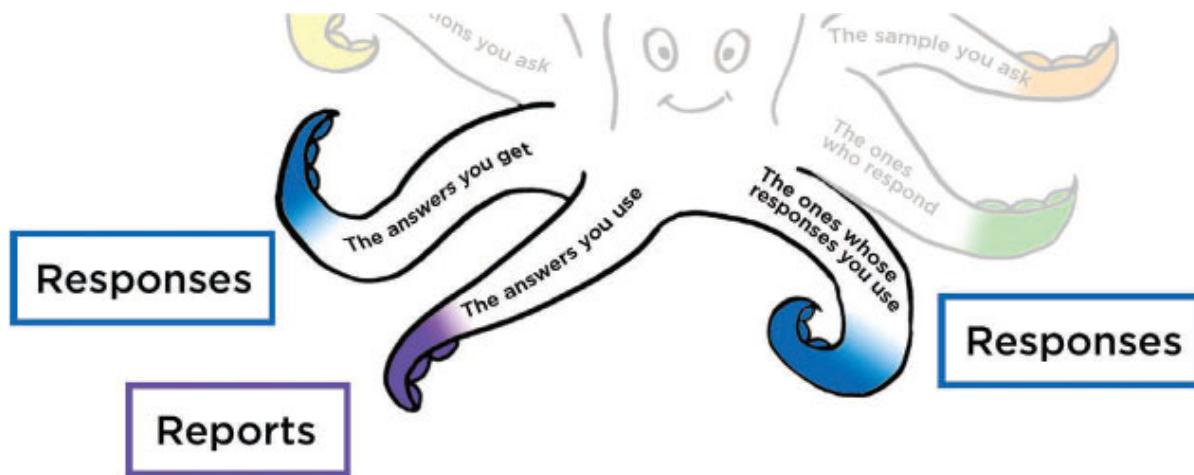


FIGURE 0.6
When you have some answers, it's time to consider the answers you get and turn them into insights.

For now, the important things to know about the Survey Octopus are:

- All the issues are connected.
- You'll meet them along the way.
- If you make good choices for all the issues, you'll get solid results.

We'll aim for Light Touch Surveys

How can surveys be a lot of hard work, but then I claim that you can get a better survey quickly?

Let's step back into history for a moment.

The 1940's mindset was Big Honkin' Surveys

In the 1940s, when the U.S. Bureau of Census took the picture of a census interview in Figure 0.7, the fieldwork for surveys was hard. An

army of interviewers would head out, armed with their clipboards, to ask people questions face-to-face—admittedly, usually in homes or offices rather than their rose gardens. Telephone surveys were time-consuming. Even mail surveys took a lot of planning when printing had to be sent to a specialist shop.



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FIGURE 0.7
Taking a break from gardening for a census interview.

Because fieldwork was laborious, it was important to do it infrequently, which meant packing as many questions as possible into each questionnaire. And because surveys were infrequent, organizations looked for large sample sizes to support every possible analysis.

So the Big Honkin' Survey became the norm.

The problem is that each extra question adds to the burden of your survey:

- Harder work for your respondents means that fewer people will respond, so you have to ask more of them. A larger sample is more expensive.
- When you get all those responses, you've got a lot of work ahead of you because you asked a lot of questions.

Big Honkin' Surveys are a challenge. But if you have to do one, we'll get you through it.

The 21st century mindset: Light Touch Surveys

Technology has moved on since 1940. With the convenience of the internet, it's now possible to do lots of very tiny surveys. Instead of a long telephone call, you can ask questions by text message. Even printing is much simpler now.

All this means that you can now do short, sharp surveys—but lots of them: Light Touch Surveys.

The ideal Light Touch Survey has just a single interesting question that you really want to know the answer to. You test the question to make sure that it's one that the people you send the questionnaire to want to answer.

CASE STUDY 1

Insights from Mailchimp

Mailchimp's tagline is "Send Better Email." They help people manage contacts, send emails, and track the results of email campaigns—and they have a great user experience team.

They use surveys as one of their research methods, so I asked them to describe one of them. Laurissa Wolfram-Hvass and Fernando Godina from Mailchimp answered my questions.

Q. What was this project about?

Based on past research, we already knew that many customers import subscriber data into the Mailchimp app from other systems. What we *didn't* know, however, were the specific problems customers have during this process.

Q. What made you decide to go for a survey over a usability test?

We pick whatever research method is right for the questions we have at the time. We'll look at the data we already have and then decide on the best method to move us forward.

This time, when we reviewed the data we already had from our past research about importing, we couldn't see any real trends and needed to talk to more people. Usability tests are great for understanding workflow details and user interface problems, but we weren't at that point yet. We needed to first get a handle on the broader issues that people have during the import process before we could begin drilling down to problems with the user interface.

We wanted to reach as many customers as possible in a short period of time, so we opted for a survey. Within a day or two, we could identify a targeted list of recipients, write our survey questions, get feedback on those questions from our team, build and send the survey to a small pilot group, and then make refinements before sending it out to the recipient list. Within a week, we would have a body of data that we could mine for information.

While we may begin with surveys as a research method, we rarely end with them. We are often unable to solve a specific problem or answer all of our research questions through surveys alone, but they do help us quickly establish a baseline and identify areas that need further exploration.

Q. Did you follow a particular approach or work it out for yourselves?

We developed our survey methodology ourselves. The first stage, "goals," was probably the most significant stage for us. Once we had a

set of clearly defined goals, we let those goals drive the research process and guide our decisions. This helped us stay focused as we moved from one stage to the next. We, of course, wanted to gather answers and come to a conclusion as quickly as possible, but we didn't force ourselves into a short timeframe that wouldn't allow us to experiment or self-adjust in the middle of the process.

Q. Did you do any interviewing when you developed the survey?

We actually held interviews twice during this project: once before we sent out the survey, and then again after we had tallied and coded the responses. At the start, we talked to over a dozen customers about how they import information into Mailchimp. The interviews gave us our starting point for the survey questions by helping us identify the kind of feedback we needed to gather from our customers.

Our second round of customer interviews took place after we had gathered all our survey responses. These interviews helped us take the survey data and turn it into a story—a qualitative narrative we could use to provide context to the survey's quantitative data.

Q. How did you find the customers to survey, and what sample size did you choose?

We had a list of 5,150 customers who told us that they imported subscriber lists regularly. We wanted a personal touch in our survey invitation, so we decided to use each person's first name. That limited us to people who had a first name saved in their Mailchimp profiles, which left us with 2,626 people—roughly half of our original list. It's a smaller sample, but we felt that we'd get a better response rate.

Then we randomly selected 100 of those folks to receive our survey as a pilot—just to test it and work out any kinks before sending it to everyone else. A pilot of 100 seemed large enough to uncover issues with the survey but small enough that if we had any problems to address, it wouldn't drastically affect our data.

Q. I call that “narrowing down from a list.” So finally: What are your top tips for people doing a survey?

We learned so much. We'll start with three tips about thinking about your goals and audience:

- **Narrow your target audience.** Be specific in choosing users who match the survey goals.
- **Be specific and direct.** Be clear about your goals and communicate those goals to your users.
- **Revisit your goals/objectives.** It's easy to lose focus when you're working on a project. We had four key questions we wanted to answer, and we returned to those questions many, many times. If we had a good idea but it didn't help us answer those four questions, we put it aside for later. This helped us keep our scope narrow and allowed us to move quickly.

These tips are about building your questionnaire:

- **Keep it short.** We had seven questions in our survey (and we would have had fewer if we could have managed it). The only way we were able to keep it short was to focus on one particular customer action/behavior we wanted to understand.
- **Use checkboxes (multiple choice/multiple answers) if you can.** This is something we would do differently another time. Most of our questions were open-ended because we wanted customers to explain their processes to us. But tagging and analyzing all that data, answer by answer, was a lot of work. Another time, we'd work out the most common answers and then let respondents select from them or fill in an “other” option for any that we'd missed.

And maybe these last two are the most important:

- **Be human.** Send the survey from a real named person, write like a human, and respond like a human.

- **Move fast.** Do any follow-up activities quickly: respond immediately to technical problems and do follow-up interviews within a week.

Q. Thanks so much.