

Survey Guidelines- Tips for writing insightful surveys

Getting started

Start with the end in mind.

Write down what you want to find out, and what decisions you will make based on the research.

Do you need to do a survey? The information may already exist. You might get better insight by looking at data analysis for example, or by doing face to face research using focus groups. Contact the Market Research and Insight Team to find out if anyone has run a similar study, or for advice on the right methodology for your project.

Who else needs to know about the project? Are there any committees or groups that will help to action the results.

What do I ask?

For each question ask yourself 'how will the answer to this help me to make a decision'? 'What will I do with the answer'?

Each question should answer the objectives you wrote down earlier- be strict with yourself as the longer the survey, the fewer responses you will get.

Make sure that your respondents will be able to answer the question- think about what knowledge they will need to have. The group are likely to vary in their level of expertise and interest. For example, they may not be able to comment on your 'communications strategy', but they may be able to comment on what news stories they have heard about the Department in the last month.

Be audience focussed, not internal focussed. It's easy to think in terms of internal structures, terminologies, and acronyms, but your audience might not recognise these. Keep language straightforward and before launching, try testing the questions.

How do I ask it?

Avoid leading questions that imply a certain answer, and make sure that the question is phrased in a balanced way. If the question is phrased to favour one answer over another, the results are invalid and may frustrate your audience.

People answering your survey need to be able to answer your question in a way that allows them to express their views. Consider all possible answers not just the ones you are interested in finding out about. It is good practice to include an 'other, please specify' option, and consider the use of open questions such as 'Why did you choose to visit today?' to help reveal a range of opinions on a topic. Whilst this won't provide you with ready percentages, this will help you to ensure that you have covered the breadth of views, and may reveal insights into your audience you hadn't thought of before. Closed questions with multiple answers provide an alternative, but do require your audience to force-fit their perspective to your survey.

It's best practice to make sure that scales are balanced with an equal number of positive and negative points on either side, and a neutral point in the middle. Forcing people to answer a question positively or negatively when they may have a neutral viewpoint could invalidate your data. Don't make people answer the question- let them skip past if they don't want to fill it in or don't understand the question, it could frustrate them.

Qualtrics have some good tips for writing survey questions (<https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/good-survey-questions/>).

Sending your survey out

Keep your email text short, and neutral (don't use it to raise awareness of your initiative, or say how good it is!). Be honest about the purpose of the research, and what it will be used for (but don't go into detail- keep it short).

People are more likely to fill in surveys if the email is addressed to them personally, if you mention how long the survey will take to fill in (no longer than 10 mins), and it is incentivised. Incentives should not be for our goods or services, as that contravenes Market Research Society guidance. If you are using a prize draw, say when the prize draw will be allocated.

Think about what else is happening for your audience, and how long you need to keep the survey open. A fortnight is usually long enough to get a good response, and send out a reminder half way through. Try not to clash with any other major surveys. If you want to run a large scale student survey, you'll need to request this through the Market Research and Insight Team.

How do I analyse it?

Make sure that respondent identifiers aren't linked to the results. This could include respondent name, ID, address, etc. They may also identify themselves through their free text comments- this should be checked before any results are shared.

Consider who completed your survey, do you have a good spread of respondents from different demographic groups who are likely to have different opinions? Be careful assuming their views are representative of a wider population (this calculator may help <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>).

The analysis should refer back to the initial aims of the research, and provide clues as to how to interpret the charts and data that accompany it. Most survey software allows filtering and editing- which can help order the raw data for your analysis.

It's fine to be selective in what you present- not everyone needs to see everything, but make sure that the analysis is balanced and representative of the findings in your interpretation, especially when picking out free text comments. Include the sample definition, methodology and the number of respondents.

Act upon it

Don't let your efforts sit on a shelf- use your insight. Share it with others. Tell your respondents what their feedback has been used for, and thank them for their input.