



How Do I Conduct A Web Survey?

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Effective Web-Based Surveys

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Although they are inexpensive and produce fast results, web surveys still require proper project planning for maximum effectiveness. The key steps for conducting a successful web survey are:

- Identify your objective.
- Decide what information you need.
- Develop a questionnaire.
- Conduct the survey.
- Analyze the responses.
- Recommend a course of action.

Identify Your Objective

Web surveys are conducted to find out the characteristics, behaviors, opinions, and knowledge of a particular population. No matter what the subject matter, all surveys are conducted to gather information relevant to a specific problem or situation. The key to a successful survey is to clearly identify your research objective up front.

To define your objective, ask yourself "what problem am I trying to solve?" The ideal objective has a narrow scope and can be clearly stated. The wider the scope, the more complex your survey will become and the less meaningful the results will be.

Decide What Information You Need

Once you have defined your research objective, you need to identify the information you need to reach your objective. If you identified a clear and narrow objective for your project, the information you need to meet your objective will be apparent. Be specific and avoid the temptation to gather information that does not help solve your problem. Surveyors are often tempted to collect a few "extra" bits of information that are "nice to know" but irrelevant to the problem at hand. Focus on the information that will help you meet your objective and save everything else for another project.

Once you have identified the information you need to reach your goal, you should explore the possibility that each data requirement might be met through an existing data source. With an abundance of information available from corporate databases (e.g., sales receipts, customer support logs, shipping records, etc.) and public information sources (e.g., the Internet, US Census reports, etc.) you might discover that you can collect much of your data without conducting a survey. However, if the information you need is not available from an existing source, a web survey can deliver the information faster and at a lower cost than mail surveys, telephone interviews, focus groups, and face-to-face interviews.

Develop a Questionnaire

Questionnaire development is where web surveys differ dramatically from their traditional brethren. Not only are the surveys easier and less expensive to build and distribute, but they are often less intrusive for respondents. Like their traditional counterparts, web surveys allow you to use single select, multiple select, sliding scale, and open-ended questions. In addition, online surveys add a drop down list format that enhances the look of your web survey for questions with long lists of alternative answers. As a bonus, electronic surveys offer better support for skip patterns (the ability to skip over entire blocks of questions based on previous answers) than their paper counterparts.

Before building your questionnaire, it is important to consider who will be taking it and how you are going to distribute it for maximum impact. The two primary methods for distributing a web survey are from a website or as an attachment to an email message. A survey distributed as an attachment to an email message should be relatively small since most people hate receiving long files in email messages. In addition, a survey distributed via email should not include graphics or other imbedded objects that must be downloaded from an external source, forcing the user to be “online” in order to complete it.

If you are distributing your survey from a website, pay special attention to the amount of time it takes to display the survey on a remote browser. Although the use of graphics and embedded components is acceptable since the user is already at your website, overdoing it will increase the time it takes to download your survey and increase the probability that potential respondents will abandon your survey before it is fully displayed in their browser.

The beginning of your survey should include an introduction that is enticing and clearly states the purpose of your research. Because web surveys are self-selecting (i.e., you have no control over who decides to participate), it is important that your introduction grabs the attention of potential respondents and encourages their participation. It is easy for online survey participants to abandon a survey, so you must communicate up-front why they should help you with your survey. Failure to do so will decrease the number of participants. The introduction should also include instructions on how to complete the survey and an estimate of how much time it will take.

After the introduction, it is time to ask questions. As in any survey, the way you phrase questions will have a major influence on the answers you get. If your questions are biased, unclear, or ambiguous, you will get misleading responses. You should also consider how specific the questions need to be and whether your audience is willing and able to answer them. To maximize results, make sure you:

- Ask questions that provide the information you need to solve your problem.
- Use plain, easy to understand language.
- Avoid technical terms, jargon, and acronyms.
- Organize your questions in logical groups.
- Ask important questions first—demographic questions last.
- Be sensitive to the feelings of the respondent.

As a general rule, keep your survey short, simple, and to the point. Finish your survey with a place for participants to add comments and thank them for their assistance. If you plan to publish the results, include instructions on how and when participants can get a copy.

Conduct the Survey

Once you have built your questionnaire, you need to test it on a few people to determine if it is clearly written and can be understood by people representative of your target audience. Testing the survey might take several iterations, but it is well worth the effort. Once you are satisfied that your questionnaire is clear and unambiguous, you are ready to conduct your survey.

If you send the survey out as an email attachment, or you use an email message to invite people to your website to take the survey, make sure your email message is clear and compelling. A boring message will not get recipients to participate. In addition, you should also:

- Address messages to a single person when possible.
- Always use the blind carbon copy (BCC) field if you must send a single message to an entire group.
- Never list more than one address in the "TO" or "CC" fields since all recipients will see the entire list.
- Include a valid email address in the "FROM" field or recipients will consider your message "spam".
- Provide the URL that will take people directly to your survey (if you are inviting them to your web site).
- Tell recipients how to contact you if they have a problem or concern.
- Identify the source of purchased email addresses so recipients know who to contact if they want to be removed from the list.
- Ignore the "flame" or "hate" messages you might receive in response to your email invitation. A small percentage of the population of any group always takes offense to something, and email makes it far too easy for these people to "speak" before they think!

If you distribute your survey from your website, you need to consider how you will get people to participate. If your site has heavy traffic, you can probably just place a hypertext link on your home page, through which visitors can reach your survey. You can also use a program on your web server to randomly deliver your survey to people who visit your home page. If your site does not have sufficient traffic, you should consider sending invitations by email, postal mail, or placing advertisements in both traditional and new media sources.

Once you have sent out notifications, responses will begin to come in immediately. For web surveys that invite individual participants (email or postal mail), most people will respond within 72 hours of receiving your invitation. Surveys that rely on passive participation (clicking on web site links or responding to indirect advertising) generally take much longer. In either case, you need to decide how long to keep your survey active based on your target audience. If you are surveying a known group of people (e.g., customers, employees, etc.) you might need to send out reminders to prompt some people to participate.

Analyze the Responses

You can begin to analyze results as soon as responses are received. Unlike traditional survey techniques, the online nature of web surveys makes it possible to process results without human intervention. Results are received in electronic format and are added immediately to a database. Once in the database, they can be manipulated with a variety of tools, including statistical packages, spreadsheets, and presentation programs.

The key to proper analysis of web surveys is no different than any other form of survey. You must be able to filter the data and display results in a variety of formats to maximize your analysis. The key thing to remember is that you should always relate your analysis back to your objective.

Recommend a Course of Action

The last step in conducting a web survey is to identify the next step. With the objective of your research in mind, you should be able to recommend specific actions as a result of your survey. Your recommendations can vary widely depending on the nature of the problem you were trying to solve. If you cannot identify any actions as a result of your survey, then it is highly probable that your objective was too broad, your information needs were incomplete, or your questionnaire was poorly written. In this case, your recommended action should be to conduct further study.