10 Tips for Building Effective Surveys

You don’t have to be an expert to build and distribute an effective online survey, but by checking your survey against tried-and-tested benchmarks, you can help ensure you’re collecting the best data possible. Here are ten best practices to consider when building and distributing your survey.

1. Make Sure That Every Question Is Necessary

You’re building your survey to obtain important insights, so every question in the survey should play a direct part. It’s best to plan your survey by first identifying the data you need to collect and then writing your questions.

2. Keep it Short and Simple

Respondents are less likely to complete long surveys, or surveys that bounce around haphazardly from topic to topic. Therefore, make sure your survey follows a logical order and that it takes a reasonable amount of time to complete.

3. Ask Direct Questions

Vague or poorly worded questions confuse respondents and make your data less useful. Strive for clear and precise language that will make your questions easy to answer.

4. Ask One Question at a Time

Take a closer look at questions in your survey that contain the word “and”—it can be a red flag that your question has two parts. Here’s a sample: “Which of these cell phone service providers has the best customer support and reliability?” In this case, a respondent may feel that one service is more reliable, but another has better customer support.

5. Avoid Leading and Biased Questions

Some descriptive words and phrases may interject some bias into your questions, or point the respondent in the direction of a particular answer. In particular, scrutinize adjectives and adverbs in your questions. If they’re not needed, take them out.

Example

Don't Ask This...

Channel 6 News’ weather forecasting is heralded by many as being the most accurate forecasting in this area. In your opinion, how often do you feel Channel 6's weather forecasting is accurate?

Ask This

How often do you feel Channel 6 News' weather forecasting is accurate?

In addition, an unbalanced response scale can lead a respondent in the same way a poorly worded question might. Make sure your response scales have a definitive midpoint (aim for odd numbers of possible responses) and that they cover the whole range of possible reactions to the question.

6. Speak Your Respondent’s Language

Use language and terminology that your respondents will understand. Make words and sentences as simple as possible and avoid technical jargon. However, don’t oversimplify a question to the point that it will change the way the question will be interpreted.
7. Use Response Scales Whenever Possible

Response scales that give the direction and intensity of attitudes provide rich data. By contrast, categorical or binary response options, such as true/false or yes/no response options, generally produce less informative data.

Avoid using scales that ask respondents to agree or disagree with statements, however. Some people are biased toward agreeing with statements, and this can result in invalid and unreliable data.

Don’t Ask This...

True or False? Golf is a white-collar sport.
   True
   False

Ask This

To what degree is golf a white-collar sport?
   Not at all
   Slightly
   Moderately
   Very
   Extremely

8. Consider avoiding the use of Grids or Matrices for Responses

Sometimes respondents don’t fill in grids correctly or accurately according to their true feelings. Also are often not mobile friendly. It’s often better to separate questions with grid responses into multiple questions in your survey with regular response scales.

9. Rephrase Yes/No Questions if Possible

Many yes/no questions can be reworked by including phrases such as “How much,” “How often,” or “How likely.” Make this change whenever possible and include a response scale for richer data.

Don’t Ask This...

Does the traffic on Highway 49 frustrate you?
   Yes
   No

Ask This

How pleased or displeased are you with the traffic on Highway 49?
   Extremely displeased
   Moderately displeased
   Slightly displeased
   Neither pleased nor displeased
   Slightly pleased
   Moderately pleased
   Extremely pleased

10. Take Your Survey for a Test Drive

Ask at least two people to test your survey to help you catch and correct problems before you distribute.