

Online Survey Best Practices:

Maximizing response rates

In today's fast-paced world, people have less free time than ever before. It is in this hurried environment that good-intentioned market researchers everywhere ask their fellow citizens, consumers, customers, and employees to spend time sharing their opinions by filling out surveys - ideally while relaxing in their favorite chair, and not simultaneously paying their bills online or watching the finale of American Idol.

The unfortunate reality is that completing a survey is seldom as important to the survey recipient as it is to the market researcher who sent the invitation. Like every-day goods and services, surveys compete for the time and attention span of their intended audience. Survey research relies almost exclusively on recipient volunteerism, and today it is becoming increasingly more difficult to get volunteers to take time out of their busy schedules to participate.

While the industry often disagrees about the specific impact that declining participation rates have across various data collection methodologies (web-based, phone, online etc.), most researchers generally agree that response rates – regardless of the data collection method used – are declining. Below is a list of tips to help you maximize survey participation rates in your online surveys.

PRE-MARKET YOUR SURVEYS BEFORE LAUNCH

When surveying a limited population, such as a company's customer base, consider taking the opportunity to create interest and awareness of your survey before sending the first survey invitation. Announcing an upcoming survey can be a good way to increase participation among your target audience, and can be done through a variety of communication channels, including newsletters, websites and email. Leverage existing communication vehicles and scheduled correspondence whenever possible. Treat pre-marketing as an essential part of your survey preparation, especially when you know that achieving a specific response rate is critical to the success of your study. When conducting pre-marketing, consider the following:

- Do a little name dropping. Before launching your actual survey, consider sending an email to your target audience from a high-level executive within the company sponsoring the survey. This will reinforce the importance of the survey and let the recipient know they have the ear of the company's top management.
- Stress the benefits of your survey. Pre-marketing emails should explain the importance of your survey and the benefits that the company, or even better – the respondents – will ultimately derive from the data collected.
- Give respondents a timeframe. Let your audience know when to expect the actual invitations, so they are not overlooked.

- Offer security. In your pre-marketing email, make sure to provide the email alias from which the survey invitation will come to ensure that it will be recognized as coming from a trusted source.

DESIGN AN EFFECTIVE SURVEY INVITATION

There are a number of simple, yet effective design and content tips that can easily be taken into consideration when developing an email invitation to boost response rates.

- Use compelling subject lines. The subject line needs to give the invitee a compelling reason to open the email. Avoid using terms such as “free” or “discount”, as spam filters may catch these terms. Capitalization and punctuation should be used sparingly for the same reason.
- Establish credibility. Survey invitations should establish credentials, clearly identify the sender if different from the sponsor, and convey that the survey is solely for bona-fide research purposes and is being conducted by market research professionals.
- Explain the objective of the survey. Clearly explain the purpose of the research being conducted in the survey invitation, as well as how the information will be used and how it won't be used.
- Protect your respondents' privacy. Establishing an environment of trust is key to eliciting honest, detailed responses. Reassure your respondents that their privacy will be protected, that their responses will be strictly anonymous and that only aggregate information will be reported upon.
- Respect your respondents' time. One of the first questions respondents ask is “How long is this going to take?” Use your invitation to set expectations. If at all possible, keep it under 15 minutes. Be aware that a respondent's conception of a “short survey” is not always consistent with a researcher's. Based on our research among panelists, a “short survey” is under six minutes while a “long” survey is most often described as 19 minutes or more (keep that in mind the next time you send a “short” 20-minute survey!). Whether short or long, respondents will be more willing to complete the survey and give quality answers when they can budget the appropriate amount of time to complete it in their busy schedule.
- Thank your respondents. The quality of the data collected is inextricably linked to the quality of your research. Thank your respondents and express your sincere appreciation for their time, effort and contribution to the success of your survey.

TIMING IS EVERYTHING

Now that your pre-marketing is done and your survey invitation is ready, when should you send it? Here are a few guidelines that will help you maximize response rates.

- Mid-week is best. Experience shows that surveys attain the lowest response rates when sent at the very beginning and at the very end of the work week. Aim to send your survey invitations out on a Tuesday or a Wednesday to get the best response.
- Take advantage of lunchtime. Avoid having your survey invitations buried in the onslaught of

morning messages or being carried over from the evening before. Assuming that inboxes are most likely up-to-date by the middle of the day, try to schedule your survey invitations to drop around noon. Of course, be cognizant of different time zones to ensure good timing, especially if you are conducting research internationally.

- Consider seasonal issues for specific audiences. Just as sending a survey invitation to a U.S. accountant on April 13th would be a waste of time, avoiding the holiday season between the second week of December and the second week of January is wise. Your survey will likely be relegated to the bottom of your respondents' priority lists. In general, investigate any seasonal issues that relate to the particular company, including its industry, target audience, or the area of the world it serves.

REMIND YOUR RESPONDENTS

Like most of us, respondents are busy and often need a little nudge. If the responses aren't pouring in after your initial survey invitation, sending a reminder message can help achieve the response rates you need. There is no question that reminders will boost survey response rates, although how big of a bump varies widely depending on the audience and the survey subject. We do not recommend sending out more than two reminders after the initial survey invite. There are limits to the amount of participation you can expect from any panel or group of invitees unless it is a condition of employment. Time your reminders so they are logically spaced in the period between the initial invite date and the closing date of your survey.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT INCENTIVES

We know that incentives improve response rates, but by how much? And which incentive should you choose? A courtesy thank you calls for one approach. However, if you need to ensure adequate sample of a particularly difficult-to-reach audience, simple appreciation will only take you so far. Other than cash, the options available for incentives are nearly unlimited. NetReflector continually powers research on the effectiveness of various incentives to test incentive strategies and expected thresholds. Our best advice is to know your survey audience well, and to work with your research professional to tailor rewards to the specific needs and interests of that audience.

- Individual incentives vs. lotteries or drawings. If a respondent has a 100% chance of receiving something small, such as a pen or a coffee cup, they are more likely to respond than if they have a .001% chance of receiving something much more valuable, such as a digital camera or an iPod. Most people assume they will not be the lucky winner of the chance prize. A guaranteed incentive shows your respect for every respondent who takes time out of their busy schedule to participate and provide their opinions.
- Time is an executive's most valuable commodity. If you are surveying executives, your focus should be on providing the right incentive, rather than the most expensive one. While consumers tend to respond best to cash awards, executives do not. Consider what you can offer them in exchange for their most precious resource – time. Getting them to understand the importance of the data you are collecting, and in some cases offering to share your research findings with them, can be a powerful motivation for them to participate.

DESIGN IMPACTFUL SURVEYS

Getting respondents to click on your survey link is only the first hurdle. Getting them to complete the survey is the real challenge! There is no better incentive to complete a survey than a positive survey experience. And while the art and science of effective survey design is best executed by a trained market research professional, below are some general design guidelines that will help ensure a positive survey experience, and increase the chances that your survey will get fully completed:

- Use landing or introduction pages. Don't abruptly take participants to the first question. Begin your survey with a short page that reiterates what you have told them in your pre-survey communications, such as the objective of the survey, reassurances about privacy and confidentiality, and an estimate of how much time the survey should take to complete.
- Avoid the appearance of survey density. Don't overwhelm your respondents with a screen packed full of information. They are likely to quit before they even get started! Design your survey, so that questions are displayed simply, one at a time, or otherwise break the survey into small, manageable chunks.
- Warm up your respondents. Begin with easy, non-threatening questions your participants can breeze through and get the survey pace going. If possible, run a progress bar on each question, so respondents get immediate feedback about how far they've come and how far they have to go.
- Ask clear questions with a logical flow. Ask your questions simply and clearly, and organize them in a logical flow that should make sense to the participant. The better job you do writing and ordering your survey questions, the easier it is for the respondent to interpret and answer with useful information.
- Make surveys relevant. Incentives alone are not enough to guarantee that a survey receives a respondent's careful attention. The most important rule of survey design is to ensure that the survey content itself is relevant to the target audience. A well-written, well laid-out survey that is relevant to the target audience will increase participation rates and ensure that the feedback you get is of the highest quality.

Getting high response rates may be a challenging objective for market researchers, but thankfully, there are industry organizations in place that are working to ensure that the volunteerism and sense of goodwill among survey populations is preserved. In addition, it is up to individual researchers to take the appropriate steps to ensure that their survey stands the greatest chance of capturing the interest of their target survey population.

This white paper is provided courtesy of NetReflector, Inc., a full-service marketing insights firm specializing in customer experience and product development research. NetReflector provides organizations with a single source for enterprise-class survey software, managed feedback solutions, and comprehensive market research. For more information, please visit us online at www.netreflector.com or email us at info@netreflector.com.