

Guidelines for Conducting Surveys

These guidelines, based on the combined recommendations of Babbie, Converse & Presser, Dillman, Fowler, and Pelosi, Sandifer & Sekaran, are shown below.

PRE-SURVEY ACTIVITIES:

Before conducting a survey, the following steps should be completed.

1. Develop a clear and concise purpose statement – What the requester or researcher wants to know and why they want to know it?
2. Develop the items (questions, etc.) for the instrument – Make sure they are clear, unambiguous and bias-free.
3. Test the questions on a group of at least 20 volunteers to determine the face validity of the items is adequate. Make any required changes in the items.
4. Develop the introduction to the survey and the letters that will precede the distribution of the survey, accompany the distribution of the survey, and the reminders after the survey has been sent out.
5. Determine the modality of the survey distribution (web, email, paper, etc.)
6. Schedule the sending of the initial letter, the launching of the survey instrument, and the sending of the follow-up letter(s).
7. Avoid “coverage error” by gathering a sample list of potential participants that matches the population of interest as closely as possible.

SURVEY PREPARATION GUIDELINES:

The following guidelines are provided for the preparation of survey items and all correspondence surrounding the survey administration. These recommendations should be followed for every survey.

TONE AND LANGUAGE IN INTRODUCTIONS AND LETTERS:

1. Where possible, have the most legitimate authority figure available sponsor the survey and sign all of the correspondence.
2. Use a professional tone, a scholarly approach, and a business format for all survey correspondence.

3. Write so as to demonstrate respect for participants' time and regard for their opinions.
4. Set forth in very clear and concise language the purpose of the research and use of the information being collected.
5. Assure participants of their Confidentiality or Anonymity (whichever applies).
6. Be sure to clearly delineate how their voluntary participation in this survey can benefit others (the entity, the profession, or society).
7. Stress the unique and limited opportunity that the survey provides them to affect decisions, policies, procedures, etc.
8. Communicate the timeframes for data collection, analysis and reporting.

ITEM CREATION AND DESIGN:

1. Avoid the "measurement error" by constructing survey items so that they capture the concept of interest as accurately as possible.
2. Items should be relevant.
3. Items should be answerable by the respondents (knowledgeable & competent to answer the questions).
4. Items should be clear (simplest language possible) and concise (as short as possible).
5. Items should not have double negatives.
6. Items should not have biased or leading phraseology.
7. Items should not have double-barreled questions – one point only.
8. Response categories must be mutually exclusive.
9. Response categories must be inclusive.
10. Response categories must be properly scaled for the level of data required.
11. Whenever appropriate and possible, items should be modeled after those on nationally recognized surveys (i.e. – U.S. Census, NCES Surveys, etc.)

12. To the highest degree possible, reduce the psychological cost of completing the survey by (a) making it as interesting as possible, (b) making it as easy to complete as possible, and (c) making it as short as possible.
13. Open-ended questions and areas for respondent comments should also be incorporated into survey instruments whenever appropriate.

EIGHT QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT EACH SURVEY ITEM:

1. Does the survey item require an answer?
2. Does the respondent have an accurate, ready-made answer to the survey item?
3. Can the respondent accurately recall and report past behaviors and attitudes?
4. Is the respondent willing to reveal the requested information?
5. Is the respondent motivated to answer the item?
6. Will the response categories influence the responses?
7. Will responses differ with collection modes?
8. Will changing an item disrupt any established time series?

DISTRIBUTING THE SURVEY:

The following are the general steps that should be followed during the distribution of a survey instrument.

1. Seek to avoid the “non-response error” by employing state-of-the-art survey research techniques.
2. Each participant should be contacted at least four times.
3. First contact will be a letter (email) of introduction including the information specified above and announcing that survey will follow shortly.
4. Second contact will be the mailing of survey itself.
5. Third contact will be a reminder.
6. Fourth contact will be the final reminder.
7. Each contact should be and look different since difference attracts attention.

8. Timing of the contacts will be determined by the nature of the population being surveyed and the medium being used.

POST SURVEY ACTIVITIES:

The steps below should be taken immediately after the survey administration phase of the research has been completed.

1. Each survey received will be examined for completeness.
2. The entire database will be examined for completeness.
3. Decisions will be made on how to handle incomplete surveys and database fields.

Standards for Validating Survey Findings

The following standards are based on the combined recommendations of Babbie, Converse & Presser, Dillman, Fowler, and Pelosi, Sandifer & Sekaran.

RESPONSE RATE STANDARDS:

Determine the optimal number of survey respondents needed to adequately address a given research question. Some general requirements are indicated below.

1. A response rate lower than 30 percent will be considered inadequate for analysis.
2. A 30 to 50 percent response rate will be considered marginal. Therefore any analyses performed and any conclusions drawn will be treated in a tentative and cautious manner.
3. A 50 to 60 percent response rate will be considered adequate.
4. A 60 to 70 percent response rate will be considered good.
5. A 70 to 100 percent response rate will be considered excellent.

Analyses should always include levels of significance at 0.05 and 0.01. The sampling error and confidence intervals will be provided for all parameters at these pre-determined levels of significance unless otherwise agreed to by the requester or researcher and duly noted in the research report. Sampling error will decrease as the sample size increases. Examples are shown below.

1. Assuming a 60/40 split on a survey item, there is a 95 percent chance (LOS = 0.05) the population percentage will be within plus or minus:
 - Five percent (5%) with a sample size of 369

- Four percent (4%) with a sample size of 576
 - Three percent (3%) with a sample size of 1,024
 - Two and a half percent (2.5%) with a sample size of 1,475
 - Two percent (2%) with a sample size of 2,304
 - One percent (1%) with a sample size of 9,219
2. Assuming a 60/40 split on a survey item, there is a 99 percent chance (LOS = 0.01) the population percentage will be within plus or minus:
- Five percent (5%) with a sample size of 640
 - Four percent (4%) with a sample size of 1,000
 - Three percent (3%) with a sample size of 1,775
 - Two and a half percent (2.5%) with a sample size of 2,550
 - Two percent (2%) with a sample size of 4,000
 - One percent (1%) with a sample size of 16,000

Confidence intervals of this nature should be provided for all statistics on all parameters reported as survey research findings.

REPORTING STANDARDS:

While the process of analyzing survey research data is shown above, the standards for reporting findings are presented below. Three issues are covered below; these are: how to handle conclusive findings, how to handle inconclusive results, and how to handle recommendations in the final report.

HANDLING CONCLUSIVE FINDINGS:

Conclusive findings will be those that are found to be statistically significant at 0.05 or lower (95% or higher). These conclusions should be noted as the “Major Findings” from the survey.

HANDLING OF INCONCLUSIVE RESULTS:

Inconclusive results will be those that are found to lack statistical significance at 0.05 or lower (95% or higher). These results should be noted in the tables and texts of the report, but should not be included in the summary or in the major findings of the report.

Inconclusive results can be caused by several factors:

1. Inadequate sample size
2. Inadequate response rate
3. Inadequate statistical significance

The final report should include “if” and “how” factors (1) and (2) might be addressed.

HANDLING OF OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES & COMMENTS:

There are several types of open-ended responses and comments that can be collected through survey research. The following types are discussed below: (1) those that are interesting and useful to the research question, (2) those that are interesting and useful but not germane to the research question, (3) those that involve a legal/compliance/regulatory issue, and (4) those that are fueled by an individual's underlying hostility and would, at best, represent a minority opinion.

1. Open-ended responses and comments that are interesting and useful to the research question should be included in the final Survey Research report. At a minimum, these comments will be included in an appendix.
2. Open-ended responses and comments that are interesting and useful but not germane to the research question shall be noted. However, these issues should not be included in the final Survey Research report.
3. Legal/compliance/regulatory issues that are captured in open-ended responses and comments shall be directed to the appropriate parties to be expeditiously and formally addressed. These responses and comments will not be reported in the research findings unless they are (a) predominant, or (b) specifically germane to the research question.
4. Hostile, minority opinions that are extraneous to the research question shall be directed to the appropriate parties. These responses and comments will not be included in the final Survey Research report.

HANDLING OF RECOMMENDATIONS:

Actionable recommendations should be proposed based upon the findings from survey research. The items that follow indicate the process that will be followed in developing and publishing recommendations.

1. Recommendations arising from the survey findings should be "reality checked" by "content experts."
2. "Reality Checking" by a "content expert" can assist with shaping the recommendation to be of the most value to decision makers and/or researcher.

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