Designing and Formatting Surveys

The formatting and general design of a survey has much to do with the eventual success (or failure) of the project; this includes the quality of the data generated by your survey questions, your sample size (number of people who complete the survey), and your response rate (the proportion of people who receive the survey that actually complete it). The latter relates to the concept of "representativeness". Surveys are often sent to a sample or subset of the people you are interested in learning about, referred to as your population of interest. Sending the survey to a smaller subset saves time and money and the results can be highly accurate as long as your response rate is high. Careful attention to the following suggestions can help in this regard.

1. Clarify your objectives.

    It is important to establish clear goals before you start designing a survey. Your goals determine the questions you ask, your approach to sampling, the method you use for delivering the survey, and the analyses you eventually conduct. A lack of clarity in the purpose of your survey will lead to data that may not answer your key questions.

    Start by asking yourself the following: "*What do we want to learn from this survey?*" Write down all of your objectives in the form of research questions and then prioritize the list. Surveys that try to do too much or answer too many questions, often run into problems. Try to narrow your focus to three to five topics at most.

    For example, one police department might establish the following research questions for their upcoming community survey:

    - How safe do people feel in our community?
    - What crime/public safety issues are of greatest concern to our residents?
    - What crime prevention strategies do residents support?

    Another police department might have a very different focus:

    - How many residents had direct contact with a police officer in the past 12 months?
    - Do people feel that they were treated fairly during these encounters?
    - Are there racial/ethnic differences in how residents evaluate these interactions?

Kris Henning (Portland State University) & Christian Peterson (Portland Police Bureau)

It should be clear that the final questions asked, the sampling process, and the data analyses for these two community surveys would be quite different.

Once you have documented your research questions, you can use them to evaluate every step of the survey process. Will the questions on the survey form produce data that answer your questions? Is the proposed sampling process going to access the right people given your primary objectives? If not, then you know more work is still needed before you launch the survey.

2. Make it short (and then shorter).

The competition among people administering surveys is stiffer today than at any time in the past. Visit your local coffee shop and your barista asks you to rate their service on a short questionnaire. Get the A/C fixed in your house and the technician gives you a web link to their feedback system. Buy something online and ten days later, an email arrives asking you to rate the product. Everyone is doing surveys.

This is the current environment law enforcement agencies face when they decide to conduct a community survey. Your survey will be one of many that local residents receive in a given period and they will weigh the potential value of participating against the time/energy it takes to complete the survey. Perhaps the most important thing you can do to help shift their decision in your favor is to keep the survey SHORT. A good rule of thumb is to keep the survey under 15 minutes for the typical respondent. Ten minutes is even better unless you have reason to believe that your survey will tap into a lot of intrinsic motivation. If necessary, you might need to revisit your prioritized list of research questions and drop some of the items. It usually is better to get valid data on a small number of topics than questionable data on a large number.

3. Make your survey easy to fill out.

In addition to being short, your survey should be easy to complete. Avoid anything in your survey that might confuse or frustrate people. Consider the following suggestions:

a. Provide instructions where needed.

Things that seem obvious to you after working on a survey for several days may not be so clear to someone looking at it for the first time, especially if they are multi-tasking while filling out your survey. Give simple instructions for anything that might not be immediately obvious to a respondent.

b. Help people transition from one topic to the next.

If your survey addresses different topics, provide brief transitions from one section to the next. Sometimes it is also helpful to explain <u>why</u> you are asking certain questions. For example, "*In this next section we ask a few questions to describe the people who participated in the survey*."

c. Use consistent formatting.

Try to develop a consistent pattern in the design, formatting, and layout of your survey. If you use *italics* to provide instructions on page one, then use italics for instructions throughout the survey. If you give people boxes to check for their answer on a multiple-choice question, then stick with the same boxes for all of the remaining multiple-choice items.

d. Limit how many open-ended questions you include.

Open-ended questions require a participant to write/type a response using sentences or full paragraphs. While the information you collect from these items can be extremely valuable, they take people a lot more time. For surveys distributed by mail or online, you should probably limit yourself to no more than two to four open-ended questions.

e. Use filter questions.

Some of the questions that you want to ask may not apply to all of the respondents. You can save them time and frustration by using filter questions like the one below. Online survey platforms provide advanced options to control the flow of a survey and save people time.

> **Did a local police officer contact you in the past 12 months? (This includes a police officer contacting you to investigate a crime, give you a warning, issue a citation, make an arrest, etc.)**
>
> ☐YES… (continue with the next question)
> ☐NO……(skip to question 8)

4. Build commitment to the survey.

A key goal in conducting surveys is to maximize your response rate, or the proportion of people contacted who actually complete and return the questionnaire. Anything you can do to build commitment to the survey, and avoid the trash bin or delete button, will help in this regard.

a. Provide a cover letter or introduction to the survey.

The first thing a potential respondent should see in a mailed or online survey (or hear in an in-person survey) is a cover letter introducing the project. A well-designed cover letter builds commitment by engaging their interest and, in some cases, by appealing to their sense of civic responsibility. At a minimum, your cover letter should answer the following questions: 1) who is conducting the survey, 2) what you are asking them to do, and 3) why you want them to participate – how will your agency use the data. Other things to consider in the cover letter include brief instructions for filling out the form and returning it, limits that may apply to confidentiality of the data, and a contact number for questions.

Regarding the first item above, who is conducting the survey: Someone known and respected in the community should sign the cover letter. This might be the Chief of Police or, if some degree of separation is needed given the purpose of the survey, perhaps the Mayor or a University partner. Printing the cover letter on official letterhead adds to the professionalism of the communication and may generate additional interest in the task.

Provided below are two examples of cover letters from law enforcement surveys:

- Fairfax County Police Department Survey (PDF)

- Parkrose Portland Police Bureau Survey (PDF)

b. Make the survey look professional.

We have probably all seen surveys that were disorganized and unprofessional in appearance. There may have been spelling errors, major grammatical issues, formatting inconsistencies (e.g., font, font size, margins, spacing, numbering, etc.), and poorly articulated questions. When you see these surveys, you have to wonder why anyone would fill them out when the developer(s) put so little time into the project to begin with. Making your survey look professional is critical to your success (i.e., response rate), so take the time to get feedback, revise, and improve your form before you distribute it to community members.

c. Make it interesting.

Fortunately, crime and public safety are topics that most people in the community find interesting and personally relevant. It should be a lot easier for law enforcement

agencies to get residents to fill out a community survey than the local water bureau. Try to capitalize on this interest in your cover letter. Likewise, the initial questions you ask should be the most engaging and relevant items from the survey.

d. Be as neutral as possible.

We live in highly political times where boundaries are drawn, sides are chosen, and positions are heavily defended. In this context, people are highly attentive to the tone of communications, including surveys arriving in the mail or their in-box. Even a hint of your opinion on a given topic may be enough to lead a person to reject your survey.

For example, a large city in the Northwest used to have the following question in their annual community survey: "*How do you rate the City's efforts to control misconduct by local police officers?*" Let us think about this item for a moment. The framing of the question suggests that the survey administrators presumed that police misconduct was a significant problem. The wording of the question might also suggest to community members that police misconduct is "out of control". Finally, how likely is it that a typical resident in the city would even know what steps the police department has taken to address misconduct?

This kind of question or tone in a survey might divide your potential respondents into two groups: Those who are generally supportive of the police and those who are not. If large numbers of the former get angry and discard the survey, your results will not accurately reflect the community as a whole. It is important, therefore, that all aspects of your survey, from the cover letter to the individual questions, remain as neutral as possible.

e. Save difficult, upsetting, and controversial questions for the end.

If you have difficult, potentially upsetting questions that you are required to ask, it is usually best to put these toward the end of the survey. Once people have invested a certain amount of time in a task, they are more likely to complete it, even if it involves a little discomfort.

f. Do not ask for anything you do not need.

Any single question in your survey might be the proverbial "*straw that breaks the camel's back*" for one or more people. This might be due to the nature of the question (i.e., controversial, overly personal, seemingly unrelated) or the fact that the survey just looks longer with it in there. Either way, you should carefully review

the draft of your survey and ask whether each question is really needed. Is it critical to answering your top research questions? If not, you should delete the question.

5. Pilot-test your survey (at least once, maybe twice).

    "Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try." — Atul Gawande

    Consistent with the quote above, every single survey ever designed could be improved. Probably the single-most important thing you can do to improve a community survey is to conduct a pilot-test before you distribute the form to your full sample. It should be relatively easy to find people at work, family, friends or even a small community group to fill out your survey and provide feedback. Time how long it takes them to complete the survey and directly ask about the cover letter, instructions, layout, formatting, wording of questions, and response formats. It is also good practice to enter the data from the pilot test into a computer or download the data into MS Excel if you are using an online survey program. Does the survey design facilitate accurate data entry? Does the export from your online system go according to plan? Are you able to run the analyses needed to answer your primary research questions? A thorough review at this stage can save a ton of headaches down the road.

Additional Resources

- Dillman, D. A. (1991). *The design and administration of mail surveys*. Annual Review of Sociology, 17(1), 225–249.

- Fanning, E. (2005). *Formatting a paper-based survey questionnaire: Best practices*. Practical Assessment Research & Evaluation, 10(12), 1–14.

- Sills, S. J., & Song, C. (2002). *Innovations in survey research: An application of web-based surveys*. Social Science Computer Review, 20(1), 22–30.