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20 Top tips to writing effective surveys

By Martin Day

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by: **Martin Day**

Writing surveys is easy; or is it? The truth is that writing surveys is easy but writing effective surveys is more difficult. The following are twenty tips that if followed will help you write more effective surveys.

1. What is the purpose of the survey?

Surveys are conducted for many reasons. By phrasing the questions and structuring the answers surveys can be used in a multitude of ways and for a variety of reasons. When compiling a survey don't lose sight of its purpose.

2. Title the survey

The survey title is a golden opportunity to instantly summarise a survey's objective and grab the attention of invited respondents. Respondents are going to invest time in completing the survey so make them feel that their investment is worthwhile.

3. Do not make the survey any longer than it needs to be

Every question that is asked should be asked for a reason. Focus on 'need to know' questions and minimise 'nice to know' information.

4. Use plain English, avoid jargon and acronyms, maintain consistency and don't ask questions that may result in ambiguous answers

Care must be taken in wording a question. If a question is not clear then there is every chance that respondents may interpret the question differently to that intended by the publisher making any analysis of the data meaningless or at the very least misleading.

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5. Avoid long questions

Try to use short sentences wherever possible. Long questions tend to cause respondents discomfort and can lead to a higher level of incidents where respondents abandon a survey.

6. Ask one question at a time

Avoid confusing the respondent with a question like 'Do you like football and tennis?'

7. Avoid influencing the answer

It is important not to load the question. 'Should irresponsible shop keepers who sell tobacco to children be prosecuted?' is unlikely to have any value.

8. Ensure that the answer format used allows the respondent to answer the question being asked

Allow the respondent to answer how they really feel or they may be less inclined to complete the survey. As a last resort consider the benefit of including a "Don't know", "Can't say" or similar response option.

9. At the same time that you compile the survey consider, when the survey is complete, how the compiled data is going to be analysed

If a question is asked that allows a free text open ended response appreciate that such information is likely to be difficult to score and/or summarised. Consider grouping answers. For example "How long have you worked here?" – 'less than 1 year', 'between 1 and 3 years' and 'more than 3'.

10. Ensure that the questionnaire flows

When asking questions group the questions into clear categories as this makes the task of completing the survey easier for the participants.

11. Target your respondents

In some cases you will want to target a specific group, in others a cross section. If you can't easily control the respondents consider including questions/answers that will allow you to filter out respondents who don't fit your target profile.

12. Allow the respondent to expand or make comments

Allowing the respondent to make additional comments will increase their satisfaction level and will also give valuable feedback on the specific questions and/or the survey as a whole. Remember though for a large sample collection it may be difficult to analyse free text open ended responses.

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13. If the survey you are conducting is to be confidential ensure that your pledge is upheld

If you have assured the respondents that the survey is confidential ensure that the individual data is not to be shared with anyone and the information is not going to be used for any other purpose. Confidentiality must be maintained at all times and any identifying information destroyed after the survey is complete.

14. Weigh up the benefits of allowing respondents to be anonymous or identifiable

If your respondents are to be anonymous then appreciate that you will be unable to follow up or match "pre" or "post" surveys. However in some cases allowing people to remain anonymous will allow people to respond without possible peer pressure.

15. Give careful consideration to the best response format

It is good practise to maintain a consistency in the format used for responses. Keep in mind that when analysing the data radio buttons are easier to analyse than check boxes that offer the respondent

multiple responses. Do not use a check box if a radio response would do.

16. Give the respondent an idea of how much time the survey will take.

Respondent drop out can occur if the survey appears to be a stream of never ending questions. It is good practise to give an indication as to how long the survey is likely to take so the respondents can choose the best time to complete the survey.

17. Inform the respondents of the survey end date

Encourage respondents to complete the survey as soon as possible but advice respondents as to the surveys end date so that they have the opportunity to schedule the necessary time.

18. Pilot the survey

Before publishing a live survey publish a small pilot survey to check for questions that are ambiguous or confusing and to ensure that the survey is aesthetically pleasing.

19. Before publishing the survey proof read the survey several times

Check and check again that the survey is grammatically correct and makes sense. If possible get someone else to proof read the survey before you publish, if no one else is available then take a break before checking again.

20. Remember to say thank you

To complete surveys respondents need to invest their time and should be thanked either in a covering

letter, at the end of completing the survey or in a follow up letter. You may even want to consider incentives such as a prize draw or reward.

For more information please visit

Martin Day is a Director of Survey Galaxy a website that allows anyone to create and publish online surveys. For more information please visit

Paid Surveys – Do They Really Work?

By Joey Merrick

Being paid to take online surveys has become a very sought after internet business. Simply pay a small fee to a paid survey site and they will send you a list of companies that will send the surveys to you.

All you need to do is sign up with these companies and the surveys will show up in your e-mail box and you will get compensated for your time. Depending on the company you can be paid in cash, entered into large cash drawings, or be compensated with discounts and merchandise.

The cash surveys can range from a couple of dollars for a really short survey to \$15–25 for longer surveys that can take around 30 minutes to complete. Not bad wages... One problem that many people have is that they will sign up for some free survey list and then gripe that they get lousy surveys.

We have tried both and when we signed up with reputable survey companies we saw much better paying surveys as opposed to the sweepstakes, prizes, and \$2 surveys we saw when we were being cheapskates.

Whenever you get surveys in your e-mail box they will tell you what kind of survey it is, what the compensation will be, and how long it will take to complete. So you will always be able to see if a particular survey is worth your time and effort.

Paid Surveys are a great way to earn some extra money in your spare time. The surveys show up in your inbox and you decide when and if you are going to fill them out. The key is to sign up with a reputable company that will give you the better paying surveys.

* This article may be distributed with the authors resource box intact.

Joey Merrick is the webmaster of

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