Maximizing the Response Rate of Your Online Member Surveys

By Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.

One of the keys to success for any research project is to get as many responses from the target population as possible. Maximizing the response rate provides a greater level of statistical precision, allows for more detailed data analyses and increases the likelihood that your responses will be representative of the entire membership.

1. Surveys

Your reputation for past surveys will affect whether or not members will start the survey, and the length and ease of taking the current survey will determine if they follow through to completion. A relatively low number of click throughs on your survey invitation emails means that members have decided not to take the survey, even before they see it. This could be the result of previous bad experiences with your surveys, or it could mean that there is an insufficient incentive to motivate them to take the survey.

A relatively high number of abandoned surveys indicates that members were willing to take the survey, but once into the survey, it was either too long or too difficult to complete.

1. Keep the survey as short as possible by only asking those questions that are critical to the scope of the project. Resist the temptation to tack on a few extra questions that only serve to satisfy your curiosity.
2. Sequence the questions so that the flow of the survey is logical and not confusing.
3. Place general questions at the beginning of the survey and more specific questions later on.
4. Place demographic and other personal questions at the end of the survey. Respondents are more likely to complete sensitive questions the more time they have invested in the survey.
5. Use question scales that require less thought. Selecting a range of numbers requires less thought than recalling an exact amount.
6. Limit the number of open ended questions. They require more effort to complete than multiple choice questions.
7. Minimize the number of questions that require an answer.
8. Offer an option of “Don’t know” or “Not applicable” for required questions to give respondents the opportunity to bail out of a question and still move on.
9. Include a progress meter to let respondents know how much more time it will take to complete the survey.
10. Eliminate question numbers on the survey. Question numbers, combined with a progress meter, provide respondents with a sense of the overall size of the survey, which can discourage survey completion.

2. Email Invitations

The email carrying the survey invitation and link can only be effective if it is opened and read.

1. Make sure your message is compelling.
2. Identify yourself as the sponsor of the survey. Blind surveys have a lower response rate because most people would like to know who will see their responses, and how their responses will be used.
3. Send the email from the association, even if a third party research firm is conducting the study. Emails from the association will have an easier time of getting through members’ email filters and being opened. Emails sent by the association show that the survey is sponsored and endorsed by the association.
4. Send the survey invitation during the middle of the week to prevent the email from being caught up with all of other emails that accumulate over the weekend. Resist the temptation to send the invitations out on Friday afternoon just to clear your to do list.

3. Reminder Emails

Reminder emails are extremely effective at increasing the number of completed surveys. The chart below was taken from a recent study in which reminders were sent out on Day 8 (one week after the initial invitation) and Day 18 (two days before the incentive deadline on Day 20). Leaving the survey open for several days past the incentive deadline usually produces a few more completed surveys.
4. Incentives

No single element boosts response rates as well as incentives. An incentive will motivate individuals to complete the survey when they may not otherwise be self-motivated. Without an incentive, only those individuals who typically are the flag wavers for the association will be the only individuals who will complete the survey. Without tapping into the “silent majority” your survey results will not have sufficient representation from those members who are less engaged.

Incentives also compensate members for their time and effort and allow the association to show its appreciation to those who have taken the time to complete the survey.

Incentives can either be something nominal, given to all participants, or they can be larger prizes awarded through a sweepstakes drawing. Providing larger incentives in a drawing usually gets more attention and interest, and it caps your incentive budget. Incentives can either be cash (e.g. VISA gift cards), merchandise (e.g. iPads) or association-specific items (e.g. registration and travel reimbursement to the annual meeting, an annual membership to the association or gift certificates to be spent on association products and programs.)

Incentives need to be of sufficient value that they will motivate members to take the survey, but not so valuable that they entice members to take the survey multiple times. Using unique survey links prevents individuals from taking the survey more than once.

5. Sense of Urgency

Creating a sense of urgency overcomes members’ urge to procrastinate, which ultimately leads to not taking the survey.

1. Limit the time individuals have to complete the survey. Two to three weeks is a sufficient amount of time to complete a 5–10 minute survey. Longer time spans encourage procrastination and introduce time-related biases.
2. Establish a deadline for qualifying for the incentive. This is another reason why incentives are effective at increasing response rates.

6. Survey All Members

In the age of online surveys, it is no longer necessary to draw a sample from the population in order to save time and money. Unless you are buying your sample from a list provider, or using data collection software that charges by the completed survey, data collection costs are fixed, regardless of the number of individuals contacted or the number of surveys completed.

Inviting all of your members to participate in a survey:

1. Increases the number of participants.
2. Allows all members to voice their opinion.
3. Eliminates the need to oversample small member segments.
4. Eliminates sample bias.
5. Touches more people with positive marketing side effects.

7. Thank You Emails

Send out a “thank you” email within days after the survey is closed to all members, not just those who completed the survey. Acknowledging your appreciation for the time and effort members took in sharing their comments with you will establish a positive rapport that will be beneficial the next time you launch a survey.

In your follow-up email, let your members know who won the sweepstakes prizes, and assure them you will use the information from the survey to improve the association and their experiences. There is no need to give specifics at this time, but a quick note of appreciation lets them know their time and comments are valuable.

Arguably, the only part of a research study more important than the response rate is the survey itself. Without a sufficient number of responses, you will be left to wonder just how representative your research results are.

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About the Author

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