



# 10 Simple & Effective Tips to Help You Create Surveys Like a Pro

Creating a survey sounds easy: Just ask the question or questions you need answers to, find some willing warm bodies to take the survey, launch it and watch the insights roll in. But wait a minute! Let's slow things down. There's a lot of ways in which you can sabotage yourself if you're not careful. Survey questions must be written and organized with care, and the instructions we give to respondents are a crucial step to assure you obtain accurate rather than misleading or incorrect data.

Career researchers often spend years perfecting the art of questionnaire design. If you'd like to quickly improve your survey creation skills, take our advice. There are ten basic key principles and guidelines that can put you on the fast track to success. Set these tips to work and you'll be creating your own surveys with confidence in the results in no time at all!





#1

## Do Keep it short

Nearly twenty years ago, SSI asked our panelists to tell us their ideal survey length. Almost three quarters thought a survey between two and ten minutes was about right. Only 9% thought a survey over 15 minutes was ideal. Since then we have repeatedly tested preference and performance, and consistently find that after 15 minutes, people's attention and therefore, the quality of the data, diminishes. Even more concerning is that people may start to answer questions differently because they discover that giving a positive answer risks expanding the survey even further. For best results, be a ruthless self-editor. Ask only essential questions.

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#2

## Do use simple language

Tortured, complicated language or industry-specific jargon almost always confuses and intimidates your audience. Why run that risk with a survey when it's easy to avoid? Your aim should always be to use clear and precise language to communicate, period. To make sure your language is simple enough, test your questionnaire with someone—preferably an ordinary person with no stake in the game. Ask what they think you mean in your questions – you might be surprised to find they're not as clear as you'd hoped. The inherent danger in possibly confusing your respondent is that you'll still get answers, but you can't really trust the data and you may not know that the respondent gave you false or incomplete data. Mark Twain famously said, "Don't use a five-dollar word when a fifty-cent word will do." He knew what he was talking about. Keep it simple.



#3

## Do use simple math and numbers

Remember that kid in school who just couldn't get percentages? Well, nothing's changed –he still can't, except now he's participating in your survey! Many people find percentages and math confusing. Keep math uncomplicated and straightforward. Use simple number games to replace percentage allocation questions—and let the computer take care of making sure it adds up to 100! It's also important to use simple proportions that everyone can understand and relate to: 1 in 10 is 10%, 1 in 5 is 20% etc. etc.

## Do keep it neutral

How hard is it to keep your personal opinions out of the survey process? It's extremely hard. Still, you must do so, no matter how strongly you feel about the subject. It can be all too easy to lead the participant towards your ideal answer. After all, a respondent is trying to please you and give you what he or she thinks you want. Don't sabotage your research by letting them know what that is! Add to this challenging situation the human biases we all share. People tend to want to agree, so you must be vigilant and aware that respondents are more likely to answer Yes/No questions with a "Yes". On top of all this, the desire to look good, even if just to ourselves, can actually influence responses. This very human desire for acceptance can create a situation where we might not be 100% honest about our views. We say what is acceptable – that's social desirability bias. Make sure you make it explicitly clear that giving any of the answer options provided is acceptable.

#4



# Do add instructions

Don't make assumptions about what your respondent understands. Just because you already know how you want your questions answered, or you think understanding should be clear or obvious based on the way you worded the questions or answer options, that may not be the case. If you're allowing multiple answers, say so. If only one answer should be given then say that too—but remember to clearly state on what basis the single choice should be made if more than one answer is possible. Make it standard practice to add appropriate instructions. Clear instructions yield better data. .

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# Don't ask the impossible

There are limits to what you can reasonably expect participants to speak accurately about—yes, even in their own lives. Is it sensible to ask someone the size of their refrigerator in cubic feet, how many times they have bought toothpaste in the past year, how many websites they visited in the past week, the serial number on their PC or the number of yogurts in their refrigerator when they may not be at home to count them? Remember to use short timeframes when you're asking people to recall mundane actions and keep in mind the reality of the survey-taking situation. Could you answer your own questions accurately?

#5

#6



# Don't ask "double barreled" questions

When your question contains two (or worse, more than two) items, it can quickly become impossible to know how best to answer. Here are a few problematic questions to illustrate this concept. Should cars be faster and safer? Was the service quick and friendly? How satisfied are you with your pay and job conditions? Each of these questions could legitimately have multiple answers. That's simply unacceptable. Every question you write must be clear and specific—and about only one thing. Check your questions and answers for the words "and" and "or". If they do, it's a tipoff that you may have a problem—you'll need to re-word where necessary.

#7



# Don't ask for shades of grey when the answer is black and white

A lot of experiences in daily life can be described in straightforward black and white terms. Was the train on time? Do you like this dress? Did you get the hotel room you booked? If you want to ask a more nuanced question you'll need to find the right words. How late was the train? How much do you like this dress? How well did the hotel room you booked match your expectations? Survey questions become difficult to answer when you force the responses into agree-disagree statements. Make the statements extreme. Would you agree or disagree that... the train was extremely late?... the dress suits me perfectly? ...the hotel room met your expectations precisely? Read your own questions and don't look at the written answers – what answer comes into your mind?

#8





#9

## Don't expect everyone to know everything

For every question you ask, expect that there will be someone who comes back with an answer you haven't already thought about, someone who can't remember their answer or someone who has no answer because the question doesn't really apply to them. You should prepare for each of these possibilities, otherwise the participant might feel forced to tell a little lie or, even worse, to drop out. It's a simple check: make sure every question has—where appropriate—the options for 'other', 'don't know', 'can't remember', 'none of the above' or 'not applicable'. One easy exercise to tighten things up might be to try running through your questionnaire as if you cannot answer the questions—and see how far you get.

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#10

## Don't forget to be nice!

Survey respondents give up their valuable time to provide you with actionable insights. They don't get paid very much and it can sometimes be a bit of a slog. To that end, a proper "thank you" goes a really long way, especially if you must cut some people loose and screen them out of the survey. Remember, it's not their fault they don't qualify! It's also good form to be a bit of a cheerleader: use motivational language that emphasizes the value of their input, their competence in providing it, that they're teammates in the overall process, that you understand they're participating on a volunteer basis and you respect their time. You can't go wrong in throwing a little flattery their way. People appreciate being recognized for their work. It's a win-win—both for your data and for the participant, who will feel he or she is making a useful and appreciated contribution to the research at hand.

A young woman with long, straight, light brown hair and blue-rimmed glasses is smiling broadly, looking off to the right. She is wearing a bright orange, textured knit sweater over a white collared shirt. Her arms are crossed, and she is leaning against a white brick wall. The background is a blurred indoor setting, possibly a cafe or office, with other people and tables visible.

# In summary

If time allows, and especially if you are collecting data from a large sample, we suggest running a quick "test survey." This will allow you to collect and collate a bit of live data and correct any errors or confusion on the part of respondents

Ask for feedback from those taking the survey—and act on it. The vast majority of survey participants try their best to do a good job answering our questions and can be extremely helpful

Using these basic tips while keeping your research goals top of mind and remaining cognizant of how you'll ultimately use the data will increase your chances of getting reliable, relevant data to answer your business questions

To start building your own surveys for free, [CLICK HERE](#) to request an account.

# The SSI Suite

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SSI Suite gives you fingertip access to a powerful platform of research tools and technology connecting you with people and data—at the speed of your business. Its powerful platform of easy-to-use tools and technology lets you gather rich customer insights when you need them most.

Each individual tool within SSI Suite delivers unparalleled quality and performance that has kept SSI the market leader in research data collection for decades



## Survey builder

Easily create and launch powerful surveys for free



## Self Serve Sample

Our quality sample on an automated cost-effective platform



## Survey Score

Predictive survey testing technology that identifies programming issues



## Sample API

Access to SSI's sample audiences via your company's existing system



# Test your knowledge: what's wrong with these questions?

Now it's time to test yourself. There are five or more errors in each of the five questions below. How many can you spot?

#1 | How many times did you take a bath last year?

- 0 - 1
- 1 - 2
- 2 - 5
- 5 - 10
- 10 - 20

#2 | Which of the following types of illnesses/conditions do you suffer from?

- Hypertension
- Cancer
- Breast cancer
- Crohn's disease
- Hepatitis C
- Lyme disease
- Glaucoma

#3 | Most people think our boss is ineffective. What do you think?

- I like him.
- I don't like him, but he is the best man for the job

#4 | How many times did you take a bath last year?

- Very frequent
- On a regular basis
- Somewhat frequently
- Irregularly
- Never

#5 | Which of the following do you own?

- A car
- A mobile device
- A motorbike
- An iPhone
- Other (please specify)

# Answers:

What exactly is meant by "bath"?  
Do showers count?

#1 | How many times did you take a bath last year?

- 0 - 1
- 1 - 2
- 2 - 5
- 5 - 10
- 10 - 20

Missing a "don't know" option

Scales Overlap

No option for those who took more than 20

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People can't remember a mundane event over a long time period

Some people may not recognize the term hypertension; a technical term for high blood pressure

Using "/" is confusing; use "and" or "or"

#2 | Which of the following types of illnesses/conditions due you suffer from?

- Hypertension
- Cancer
- Breast cancer
- Crohn's disease
- Hepatitis C
- Lyme disease
- Glaucoma

Missing "if any" from the question

Due is a typo

Breast cancer is also a cancer - should people code both?

Missing "None of these" option

Do we want to know "Currently" suffering or have ever suffered from?

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State "Please select all that apply"; otherwise people may only check the first option that applies

# Answers:

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The question is leading  
(suggestion what "most  
people" think)

The question suggests we  
already know the answer;  
so why are we asking?

#3

**Most people think our boss  
is ineffective. What do  
you think?**

**Answer wording  
assumes  
boss is male**

- I like him.
- I don't like him, but he is the best  
man for the job

The second option combines  
two concepts in one (likability  
and suitability) and should  
be separated into different  
answer options. A better  
design would be to ask two  
separate questions: Do you  
like your boss? Do you think  
he is suitable for the job?

Need a "Don't know" option  
in case someone is new to  
the company or boss

For a potentially sensitive  
question, consider a "Prefer  
not to say" option

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The question asks about effectiveness while the  
answer choices indicate likability and suitability

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# Answers:

Specify a time period  
(in the past 24 hours);  
people find it challenging  
to state an average

Many would  
answer "It depends"  
since frequency is highly  
dependent on activity

## #4 How often do you wash your hands?

**Social desirability may cause an inflated number**

- Very frequent
- On a regular basis
- Somewhat frequently
- Irregularly
- Never

Consider asking for a number of times;  
One person's "Frequently" is not the  
same as another person's

Use consistent concepts: frequency is  
not the same as regularity

For items like  
"car" do you also  
want to know if  
the item is leased?

## #5 Which of the following do you own?

An iPhone is a  
subset of a  
mobile device;  
should people  
check both?

- A car
- A mobile device
- A motorbike
- An iPhone
- Other (please specify)

**No option  
for "None  
of these"**

What should go into the "Other"  
category? Are we asking someone  
to list every item they own?

Implied that you should check "all that apply"  
but it is not stated



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