

## Ten tips for better web surveys

To help you write better web surveys, following are ten tips for better web surveys drawn from years of experience:

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- 1. Explain why:** When receiving an invitation (often by email) to complete a web survey, the respondents must understand why they are being asked to fill out the survey. You need to clearly state the purpose of the survey and how the results will be used. This can usually be stated in one to two sentences, e.g. "This survey is to collect your thoughts on the seminar you attended yesterday. Your feedback will help us to improve future events".
- 2. Promise confidentiality:** Most people will respond to your survey if they know their personal details and opinions will not be shared with the whole worldwide web. If needed, you can ask demographic questions such as age, education, country of residence and income but these need to be phrased sensitively (e.g. for age, ask for the year of birth and for salary offer a range e.g. "do you earn between \$40,000 - 50,000, 51,000 - 60,000, etc."). On your email invitation and first page of your survey you need to reassure respondents of confidentiality and anonymity. A simple sentence will do, such as "All feedback provided is anonymous and will be treated confidentially".
- 3. Tell people how long it will take:** Often people get frustrated completing surveys as they don't know how long it will take. It is better to state up front in the email invitation how long the survey will take, such as "This survey will take some 10 minutes to complete". In addition, within the survey, you should activate the progress meter feature (which most online survey systems have), that shows respondents how much of the survey they have completed often with a small graph, e.g.: "30% of the survey completed".
- 4. Keep it short:** People often abandon surveys because they are too long. A good rule of thumb is that if you go over 25 questions you are asking quite a lot of respondents. Of course it depends on your subject and the potential respondents: if the subject is important to people they will spend more time responding to the survey.
- 5. Vary the type of questions:** Many web surveys often ask use the same type of question repeatedly, such as using a scale "poor to excellent" with a long list of subjects to check off. This can induce survey fatigue where the respondents simply click down the columns vertically (e.g. they choose "good" for every subject) just to complete the survey. If possible, question types should be varied in order to avoid such a problem.

«The owl can see that which others cannot; which is the essence of true wisdom» (ancient lore)

**6. Always include at least one open question:** These are questions where people can type in their own responses. Often web surveys only have closed questions where respondents check off the answers. Open questions, although requiring more time for analysis, often provide much more in-depth feedback and some insight into the “how” and “why”. If you are not sure how to place an open question in a survey, add one at the end of the survey requesting comments, such as “This survey has been about XYZ. Do you have anything else you would like to add?”

**7. Place demographic questions last:** To be able to make some useful analysis of the data you collect, you will need to collect some demographic data - in most cases this would be the country/state of residence and type of work as a minimum. These questions should be placed at the end of the survey by which time respondents will feel more comfortable answering such questions. This is even more important for questions on more sensitive demographic information such as age, income and ethnic background.

**8. “Other” may be your most useful response:** When providing respondents with a pre-defined list of responses (e.g. what type of work do you do? Legal, finance, IT, PR, etc.), include an “Other, please specify\_\_\_\_\_” option. This helps to clarify if your pre-selected responses covered all possible answers and you may well be surprised by new groups of responses placed in “Other” that emerge.

**9. Always give people a way out if they can’t answer:** Sometimes in a survey you will arrive at a question with pre-defined responses and you will think “well, none of these apply to me”. Respondents are then forced to select a false response. Always read through your questions and imagine the range of responses possible. If in doubt, place a “none of the above” or “Not applicable” as a possible response for questions with pre-defined responses.

**10. Always email invitations on a Tuesday - and send a reminder:** Studies show that email invitations that are sent on a Tuesday will more likely be opened than on other days. It is also important to send a reminder - say 10 days after the initial invitation - if you can filter out those respondents that have already responded all the better.

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## Cost-effective evaluation

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Contact Glenn O’Neil, Owl RE for further information: 41 (0) 76 325 6213,  
[oneil@owlre.com](mailto:oneil@owlre.com)

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