7 TIPS FOR WRITING SURVEYS

Two key components of any well-devised assessment plan are direct and indirect measures. We spend a considerable amount of time discussing ways to directly assess student learning, but indirect measures often get overlooked and underestimated. A good indirect measure, such as a survey, can give you the student’s perspective of how much they think they learned in your program. Therefore, this month’s newsletter is devoted to providing some quick tips on writing surveys. (Adapted from 7 Tips for Writing Surveys by Scott M. Smith, Ph.D, Qualtrics.com)

1. Keep It Simple
Do you remember taking the SAT or ACT? It’s a long and boring process. Your average survey respondent can start to feel that way about 15 minutes into a survey. Fifteen minutes is a good upper-limit for most surveys.

WHEN A SURVEY IS TOO LONG, THREE BAD THINGS CAN HAPPEN

Respondents Drop Out: They simply quit taking the survey. It costs money to find respondents, and a high drop-out rate can not only cost a lot, but can influence the quality of your results. Having a reward for completion can reduce drop-outs, but you can’t stop it completely.

People Stop Paying Attention: Remember your elementary-school classmate who just filled in random bubbles during a test? He grew up. If it takes too long to take your survey, he might do it again. If time to complete survey is recorded, then these may be able to be filtered out.

Clients Get Angry: The irony of upsetting customers with an overly long satisfaction survey is not lost on your respondents.

The best way to collect quality data is to keep your surveys short, simple, and well organized.

2. Use Scales Whenever Possible
Rather than asking respondents a basic yes or no question, use scales that measure both the direction and the intensity of opinions. This is critical for research. Someone who “Strongly Supports” a decision is very different from someone who “Slightly Supports” it.

Use scales whenever you can. You will get more information from each question.

3. Keep Coded Values Consistent
Every survey response, option, question, or answer is coded as a numeric value that is reported as a percent of responses or as a mean, median, range, etc. These values are the basis for analysis. Values must be coded consistently. Generally, we assign the highest value to the best outcome (i.e., “Strongly Agree” that customer service is responsive) and then move down from there. For simplicity, keep your scale direction consistent throughout your survey. This makes it easier for respondents to answer and for you as a researcher to conduct your analysis. If responses have the same scale of points, you can quickly compare responses to different questions.

You can reverse scales (or word questions negatively) to encourage respondents to read more carefully. However, if you use reversed scales or negative wording for some items, be sure the scales all point in the same direction. This will allow you to quickly compare multiple areas of customer service.

The simplest solution is just to keep all scales consistent throughout every survey.

4. Explain Why
Respondents are more likely to help you if they see something of positive value for them. Value offerings can range from a very general altruistic appeal for their help to a very specific offer of an economic incentive. For instance, with a student feedback survey, you can explain that feedback will help improve the student experience.

MAKE IT SPECIFIC TO THEM
With graduating senior or alumni surveys, you can explain that their feedback will be used to determine if a program is providing the appropriate experiences for all of its students. If a consistent negative theme persists throughout the student surveys, then the program can address it.

**EXPLAIN UNEXPECTED QUESTIONS**

Explain unexpected questions. For instance, if it’s important for you to ask about courses outside of their major, tell them why it is important in the overall grand scheme of things.

**JUSTIFY REQUESTS FOR SENSITIVE INFORMATION**

This is particularly true with any information that may be deemed sensitive. You can often diffuse respondents’ concerns about sharing information by telling them how it is going to be used. For instance, you can explain that purchasing habits will only be analyzed in aggregate for benchmarking purposes or that results will not be shared outside your organization.

**5. Speak Your Respondents’ Language**

Asking about caloric content, bits, bytes, and other industry specific jargon and acronyms is confusing. Make sure your audience understands your language level and terminology and above all, that they understand what you are asking. The best move is to write to your least-informed respondent. If a respondent won’t understand an acronym, either define it, or don’t put it in.

**6. Follow a Logical Order**

Make your survey easier for respondents by keeping questions in their logical order. Avoid changing topics unnecessarily.

**USE THE FUNNEL APPROACH**

- The funnel approach makes the respondent’s job easier. Start with broad and general questions that qualify the respondent and introduce the topic
- Move into more specific questions
- Finish with general, easy-to-answer questions (like demographics)

This approach allows respondents to warm up with broad and general questions, work into more specific and in-depth questions, and cool down at the end. This turns the survey into a smooth road for respondents, which decreases drop-out rates and may even increase the quality of answers you receive.

**7. Take Your Survey for a Test Drive**

Even the best researchers have the occasional typo, misdirected question, or unfamiliar buzz word in their surveys. Finding these last little issues is a difficult process.

Fortunately, there is an easy solution:

**ASK 5 PEOPLE FROM YOUR TARGET DEMOGRAPHIC TO TAKE YOUR SURVEY**

Then ask them:

- How long did it take? (be sure to keep it short.)
- Which questions were confusing?
- Were there any other problems while taking the survey?

This allows you to quickly correct lingering problems before distribution.

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Any ideas for the Assessment Matters Newsletters can be sent to: evmi@email.arizona.edu