Guide to Better Web Surveys

Access to some form of DIY web-survey platform has never been easier – even the more powerful enterprise systems have begun to offer bare-bones DIY systems. We understand the desire to save money or even capture revenue by conducting your own web surveys in-house.

Unfortunately, these DIY solutions often leave users with tepid response rates, skewed results, data they can't do anything with, or 'all of the above.'

So when does it make sense to go it alone ?

DIY surveys make sense in some cases:

- Little or no budget for the study
- When topline data are all you need
- Little or no time to conduct a formal survey
- When using the data only for internal purposes
- When looking for informal feedback or a simple 'reality check'
- When surveying an intact group with a high-likelihood of responding (e.g., staff surveys, HOA's, etc.)

DIY can be downright foolish at other times:

- When the sole reason for trying it yourself is to save money
- When conducting anything more than a very basic survey
- When using the data to make important decisions
- When trying to generalize the results to a broader population
- When the survey involves skip patterns, quotas, embedded materials (e.g., video or imagery), or other complexities
- When you need to defend the reliability and validity of the results to higher-ups or external audiences

The Top 8 Suggestions for Improving Web Surveys

With 50+ years of research behind us, we know surveys – and web surveys are just one of the many methodologies we employ. Below are our top tips, based on observations from a wealth of 'DIY Debacles'.

1. **Be aware of the survey length.** Usually DIY surveys are too long, as if clients are trying to learn everything possible all at one time. But it's also possible to write surveys that are too short; generally speaking, launching a survey that only takes 1 or 2 minutes to complete is a waste of

time, as most people are just as likely to stick it out for 4 to 5 minutes. On the high end, if the survey takes more than about 8 minutes to complete, you're likely to have mid-point terminations or other issues. (Incentives help, but they can only do so much.)

2. **Avoid leading questions.** This is probably the most important benefit a professional researcher can offer; we know how to ask a question or series of questions without skewing the results. So no more 'Would you be more likely to buy an Acme Widget if you knew that Acme quality was superior to other brands?'

3. **Expand your scales.** DIY surveys typically have too many yes/no questions. Instead of asking someone if they agree with a statement, expand the scale to 'Strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree'. Learn how to use 7-point and 10-point scales, likert scales, semantic-differentials, and so on. The increased variance could be the difference between 'significant' findings or noise.

4. **Know the difference between 'ratings' and 'rankings', and when to use each**. We see this all the time, clients will list some product features (price, reliability, appearance, whatever), then ask the respondent 'which is most important?' Better to ask them to rate each feature on an importance scale, <u>then</u> ask them to rank them in a head-to-head fashion. More data, more variance, more to work with.

5. **Use open-ended questions sparingly**. One strength of web surveys is that respondents can provide as much detail as they like, without having to worry about an interviewer capturing everything. But open-ends also take longer to complete and can slow the respondent's progress down. Use open-ends to capture examples, suggestions, or emotional feedback.

6. **Sequence the questions logically and effectively**. Don't launch right into your most important questions at the beginning of the survey, ask a few simple ones to ease into the survey flow. Keep the demographic questions (age, income, etc.) at the end, unless you need them up front to screen out respondents. It's much easier than you think to bias results by poor sequencing, so always keep it in mind.

7. **Write the survey with your audience (and sample size) in mind**. If you're doing a 'down and dirty' customer satisfaction survey with 100 or so customers, don't waste your time adding questions about age, gender, occupation, education, or the like. A sample size of 100 completes will barely allow you to analyze the full-sample results, let alone breaking the results down by segments.

8. **Know when to ask for help.** There's no shame in admitting that you need help, we've been doing this for a long time and we don't have all the answers. This is no different from any other professional skill, it takes time and experience to do it right.