

How to Write Effective Survey Questions

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Up-to-date, trustworthy data should inform all sorts of decisions—for everything from collection development to program planning to website updates. A good mantra to adopt is, "Never *assume* what people want; always *ask*."

Conducting surveys is one of the best ways to get data, but creating a survey isn't as simple as it sounds. The way you word survey questions can greatly affect the answers.

Following is a handful of proven recommendations that will increase your chances of finding success with surveys.

Begin with the end in mind. What's the point of the survey? Why do you want this data? If your questions aren't written with a goal in mind, the answers may not be actionable.

Beware open-ended questions. The answers can be difficult to classify and interpret.

Survey length matters. The shorter the better; usually 8 to 10 questions max. Using multiple-choice answers allows you to gather more information from each numbered question.

Asking "when?" can be as important as asking "what?". The best event ever could still flop if it's happening at the wrong time.

Eliminate lingo. Use the language of your target audience. That means better comprehension from them and better data for you.

Use words and phrases that make your offerings sound as valuable as possible.

For example:

Storytimes = Early literacy lessons

Crafting = Creativity training

Programs = Classes, Workshops

Target your surveys. Unless you're conducting one giant annual (or biennial) survey, don't try to ask everybody about everything at once—you'll get better results by targeting different surveys to the different audiences. This also enables you to keep them shorter and more focused.

Ask the same question in more than one way. If a particular data point is vital for you, ask about it on the survey with two different slants. This will help you verify your data and eliminate responses that hint that respondents aren't paying attention.

Avoid leading questions. If a question implies what the answer should be, you need to reword it and make it neutral.

Write, discuss, test, fix, repeat. When writing questions, think about the endgame. Why are you doing a survey, and what do you want to do with the data afterward? Work with a group to craft the questions, discuss various words, and talk about how they could be misinterpreted. Rework them until they are completely clear. Then test the questions on members of the survey's target audience. Even taking 10 or 15 minutes to run them by a few folks could reveal an error that would have made a question's responses invalid, so it's worth the time.

Think ahead to avoid regret.

You definitely don't want to find yourselves looking at your survey results and saying, "Oh, I wish we'd have thought to ask *that!*" when it's too late. Careful planning will deliver clear conclusions.

Further Reading

How to Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide, edited by Arlene G. Fink. Sage Publications, 2016.

https://www.amazon.com/How-Conduct-Surveys-Step-Step/dp/1483378489/ref=dp_ob_title_bk

The Power of Survey Design: A User's Guide for Managing Surveys, Interpreting Results, and Influencing Respondents, by Giuseppe Iarossi. World Bank Publications, 2006.

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"Reaching the Elusive Library Non-Users," by Donna E. Fletcher. *Marketing Library Services*, Nov./Dec. 2016.

www.infotoday.com/mls/nov16/Fletcher--Reaching-the-Elusive-Library-Non-Users.shtml

Using the value-filled language of education: "2013 Gale/LJ Library of the Year: Howard County Library System, MD," by John N. Berry, *Library Journal*, June 15, 2013, p. 33.

<https://www.libraryjournal.com/?detailStory=2013-galelj-library-of-the-year-howard-county-library-system-md>

"The 10 commandments for writing good surveys and questions," by Sam Gill. Qualtrics blog. Dec. 10, 2018.

<https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/good-survey-questions>

"Surveys 101: A Simple Guide to Asking Effective Questions," by Stephanie Beadell. Zapier blog / ebook chapter, no date.

<https://zapier.com/learn/forms-surveys/writing-effective-survey>

"How to Hook New Cardholders and Make Them Loyal with Email," by Angela Hursh. Super Library Marketing blog. Feb. 11, 2019.

<https://superlibrarymarketing.com/2019/02/11/libraryonboardingemails>

"Avoid this Marketing Don't – 'We Need Your Input'," by Nancy Schwartz. Getting Attention blog. Feb. 2019.

<https://gettingattention.org/blog/connect-nonprofit-audiences>