Considerations for Using Online Surveys

Extension
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Online surveys are a common method and can be a useful way to gather data from diverse audience groups.

Online surveys still require the use of best practices for survey and question design, and are subject to the same sources of error that occur with paper surveys.

Keep in mind ethical concerns and internet access when administering an online survey.

Online surveys are now commonplace. They may be distributed via e-mail, text, or social media platforms, and/or accessed through website links, QR codes and more. Online survey tools abound, such as Qualtrics, Survey Monkey and SurveyGizmo.

There are some obvious benefits to using online surveys

- They can be inexpensive (or free) to administer.

- They are quick and convenient to create, distribute and complete.

- Most allow for personalization and use of skip patterns and question logic, allowing you to tailor surveys to individual respondents.

- Data can be quickly aggregated and prepared for analysis and reports can be generated with relative ease.

Some things to consider before deciding to use an online survey

- Online surveys don't eliminate the need to follow best practices in survey and question design.

- While a significant proportion of the population is digitally connected, it is prudent to consider the characteristics of the people in your potential sample or census, and whether they have ready access to the Internet and feel comfortable using it.

- Do your survey respondents often receive requests to complete surveys? Because online surveys are easy to send, the format is often overused. If individuals are desensitized to responding, you could struggle with a low response rate.

- In order to keep the survey length as short as possible, differentiate what you need to know from what is nice to know so that you include only essential questions.

EVALUATION
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Online surveys warrant ethical considerations

- Before you begin, consider the ethics of data collection and have a plan for what physically happens to the data once a respondent submits it (e.g., how will it be managed, stored and shared).

- If you ask sensitive questions, can you assure respondents that their answers are confidential? How do they know that they have a secure connection?

- If the online survey is a research study, there may be an Institutional Review Board that needs to review the study and approve your methods and survey language. Even if not, it is still best practice to include the contact information of someone managing the survey, any potential benefits and risks of participating, and whether responses will be held anonymous or confidential or not.

- Participants should be informed how their information will be used.

- Participants should be allowed to opt out of surveys and individual questions.

Tips

- Personalizing your survey is relatively easy to do with online surveys and can increase response rates. Consider using a respondent's name on the invitation. Use skip patterns and display logic to tailor the questions with greater specificity.

- If respondents will need to gather or prepare information in order to answer some questions, offer a preview or PDF of the survey they can refer to in advance.

- Use cues such as a progress bar or a numbering system (e.g., Q1 of 10, Q2 of 10, etc.) to communicate progress towards completion.

Further reading

Dillman, Don A., Jolene D. Smyth, and Leah Melani Christian. *Internet, Phone, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: the Tailored Design Method* (New Jersey: Wiley, 2015).

Regmi, Pramod R., et al. "Guide to the design and application of online questionnaire surveys." *Nepal Journal of Epidemiology* vol. 6, (2016) 640–644. https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5506389