

How to Get a Respectable Response Rate



Extension
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Generally speaking, higher response rates make better evaluation studies.



Specific techniques exist to increase your survey's response rate.

$$\frac{\text{\# that completed your survey}}{\text{\# that you asked to respond}} = \text{response rate}$$

Your survey **response rate** is the number of people in your sample who successfully completed your survey.¹ It is calculated by dividing the number of responses received by the number of people invited to complete the survey.

The higher the response rate, the better the data describes the people in the sample or census. If you get a low response rate to your survey, your results will be biased towards describing only your respondents and ignoring those who did not respond (known as “nonresponse error”).² Generally speaking, higher response rates make better evaluation studies.

While there is no “magic number” response rate, you can estimate based on your audience. Expect a higher response rate for surveys with a known audience or a smaller number of contacts. Expect a lower response rate for surveys with a larger, less known audience.

Use a combination of the following techniques to increase response rates

- Explain why you are asking for their response by presenting your research agenda and details of your project.

- Tell respondents you value their input. Let them know why their response to the survey is important.
- Share how the information will be used. You can also offer to send a brief summary of the results so they know their information will be used.
- Be clear about whether responses are confidential or anonymous.
- Give them an idea of how long it will take them to complete the survey.



EVALUATION
Quick Tips

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- Be sure to thank them in advance for their time.
- Consider a token incentive for their completed questionnaire if appropriate. For example: a voucher for a publication; a few dollars, if your budget allows; an opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a prize. Make sure to keep in mind any ethical complications this might raise.³
- Keep your survey concise and readable. It should be “respondent-friendly,” meaning it is clearly written, easy to complete, and non-offensive.

Send reminders to increase response rates

- Reminders are easy to do for online surveys distributed via e-mail. A good rule of thumb is to send two email reminders, each a week apart.
- In your reminders, thank those who may have already responded and encourage those who have not yet done so.
- If you do have the ability to track who has already responded, send reminders only to those that have yet to reply.

Endnotes

1. Qualtrics. “How to increase online survey response rates.” <https://www.qualtrics.com/experience-management/research/tools-increase-response-rate/>.
2. Dillman, D. (2000). *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, 2nd Edition*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
3. Better Evaluation. “Questionnaires.” <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/evaluation-options/questionnaire>.

