

## **What I Learned from 100 Million Survey Respondents**

Having a powerful information resource at your disposal does not mean you will use it to best advantage. Online communities will continue to fail despite the millions of dollars spent building and managing them. And broad adoption of the Internet has not solved many of the basic challenges researchers face.

While online surveys now account for more than 60 percent of survey-based research, response rates remain low and hard-to-reach demographics still balk at participating. Ubiquitous survey software in inexperienced hands means that there are more poorly designed surveys with confusing questions than ever before. There is an overabundance of people seeking feedback, and mushrooming survey fatigue among target audiences.

And then there are those who just don't get it. To them, survey respondents are commodities to be used, discarded, and replaced. It's all about getting the most bodies for that one-shot project. It's an attitude that is not only outdated but also dangerous if applied to members of your online community.

One of my favorite industry anecdotes concerns a woman in England. A few weeks after her late husband's funeral, she received a phone call asking her to participate in a survey for the hospital where her late husband spent his final days. The first question asked by the clueless interviewer: "How would you rate your recent experience with XYZ Hospital?" Who would you shoot in this fiasco, the hospital, the interviewer, or the company that designed the survey and trained the interviewers?

Gaffes like this one explain why we still hear horror stories about research projects. Let's see if you can guess why the following surveys (all real cases, by the way) failed to produce the desired results:

- Only two of more than 200 clients invited to take a customer satisfaction survey responded.
- Researchers were unable to analyze responses to a 44-question, open-text survey.
- Only 11 percent of respondents completed an 81-question, "10-minute" survey.

- A total of 22 respondents completed a survey sent to 2,500 people.

Not all the news is bad, though. Numerous companies and research organizations improved their ability to obtain valid, accurate information because they recognize the changing realities of market research as well as the opportunities to improve the way we gather and use feedback.

“There are only two ways to get the job done,” an old colleague was fond of saying. “Why don’t we begin by trying the right way?”

Today, the right way is through online research, the most potent and affordable feedback mechanism available. It takes a lot of careful planning and plain old hard work to get the job done, but there’s no real mystery to creating and administering a survey that works. In fact, you can boil it down to a short list of Do’s and Don’ts for survey success:

***Don’t ask too many questions.*** Far too many survey respondents have already seen purgatory. Call it the Colombo syndrome, a survey that just won’t end because the interviewer goes at you with the zeal of a siding salesman with his foot jammed in your doorway. He has you hooked, and he’s determined to extract every last shred of information. He routinely throws extra questions into the survey that extend its length unnecessarily, or includes questions that are overly complex. Often, his questions are too granular or the topics lack a clear focus. As a result, he scares away or confuses respondents, reduces the response rate, and fails to get the information he needs.

***Do keep your surveys simple and focused.*** Study after study shows that keeping the survey short—thirty or fewer questions and under ten minutes—improves participation and the likelihood of good results. Look for ways to focus the survey and reduce the number of questions. For example, if your panel is pre-registered and profiled, you can avoid most, if not all, of the questions needed to qualify respondents. Maintaining this information and integrating it with your CRM solutions lets you gather this information once and use it over and over if panel members are expected to participate in multiple

surveys over time. Avoiding these questions lets you focus on the underlying survey theme so you gather the exact data you're after, and makes it easier to resist the temptation to ask "just one more question."

***Don't interrogate respondents.*** Surveys will not provide useful data when they are loaded with leading questions ("Do you enjoy cheating on taxes?"), biased questions ("You like your new dishwasher, so tell me about your favorite feature?"), judgmental phrases ("Are you very satisfied or just satisfied?") or confusing statements ("There should be only one answer per question, unless more than one answer is applicable.").

***Do use questions that allow you to interview.*** A valid survey uses questions that leave plenty of room for thoughtful, balanced responses. Never assume you know the answer to every question, and make sure your responses are balanced. Call in a neutral third party to review questions and responses, and conduct practice interviews prior to inviting participants to take your survey.

***Don't take responses for granted.*** Your survey results are only as good as the respondents providing them. Those that give you that coveted representative sample are worth their weight in gold, and should be treated as such. All of us have plenty of things vying for our attention and time each day. While the survey may be extremely important to you, chances are, it is a lesser priority for the respondents. Unless you pay close attention to the way you recruit and treat survey respondents, you risk a poor response rate, a high abandonment rate, or both.

***Do invite respondents with the greatest care.*** A concise, clearly worded, and enticing invitation shows respect for the recipients and their time. Studies indicate that most e-mail recipients spend just eight seconds or less reading before deciding whether or not to take action. If you don't get to the point quickly, grab their attention and give them a reason to take action, you invariably end up in the trash bin, and you've likely lost them for current and future surveys.

***Don't become part of the spam plague.*** Name someone who likes spam or spammers. Don't give your community members a reason to hate you, your survey, or your organization.

***Do use your community members and lists appropriately and legally.*** Your best respondents will come from your online community or other internal sources (customers and employees, for example). If you use an outside list or service, make sure the list broker or panel provider is reputable. Ask for evidence that they maintain their lists and adhere to the requirements of the CAN-SPAM Act. These organizations will enable distributions to their lists without providing you with direct access to the names and addresses of prospective respondents.

***Don't substitute data for analysis.*** Many organizations gather results, compile the data, and then present it in a linear fashion that follows the exact order of the survey questions, and nothing more. They perform little meaningful analysis to dig deeper and uncover more valuable information; they merely repeat the findings for everyone to see. The result is data that is not compelling because it lacks a "storyline," so fewer people read the reports and gain any meaningful insights from them. In effect, they degrade the survey data by making it difficult for people to find any actionable data.

***Do analyze your results and present a compelling story.*** Analysis is what makes data useful. Never assume the data will speak for itself. Presenting data through a combination of charts, graphs, and narrative brings it to life by giving the information a storyline and making it easier for report readers or your audience to make the connection. Use visual variety to lead them through the information and bring them to the important results. Never assume that just because there is data on the page, people will read it. Make use of presentation techniques like call-outs and brief analyses to help your audience find the important information on every page.

***Don't underestimate the value of data.*** *NEVER* underestimate the value of data. All primary data has value because it is information you cannot get anywhere else. While the

data may originally have targeted one purpose, more often than not, it also has value beyond a single research project.

***Do look for ways to repurpose and share data whenever you can.*** As you analyze and report on the data you gather, share it with colleagues who might benefit from the same information. For example, the insights you can glean from a customer satisfaction survey may have as much value for product development or marketing as for customer service. Also, share information with your customers and prospects, business partners, and anyone in your industry who might be interested in the results. Feedback also works well as a media relations tool. Surveys are a proven vehicle for obtaining media coverage, and many organizations develop their reputations as thought leaders simply by making a regular practice of repackaging and publicizing survey results.

***Don't worship data.*** Far too many organizations and those building surveys for them view the data as the finish line. Gathering enough data, they rationalize, will reveal the answer to anything, and even poorly constructed surveys will provide some good information. In fact, the only good data is that which reveals the information you're after. And the data is only the first step.

***Do understand your feedback objective and keep your eye on it.*** When you spend an appropriate amount of time thinking through the objectives of your survey, you can build one that works. With an online community of cooperative members, you have a feedback structure that enables you to reach out and secure responses quickly and effectively, so you can focus on quality responses instead of quantity.