

A Few Notes on Survey Response

What factors determine who will respond to a survey? Do the questions posed have an impact on the rate of respondent compliance?

Response to surveys can be explained, in part, by Social Exchange Theory, which asserts that for every action that does not involve a financial payment, there are costs and benefits.* The more the benefits outweigh the costs – or to be more precise, the more that the *perceived* benefits outweigh the *perceived* costs – the more likely an individual is to agree to the proposed action. Likewise, the more that the perceived costs outweigh the perceived benefits, the *less* likely an individual is to agree to the action.

The costs of participating in a survey are usually obvious and tangible – answering a survey takes time, other activities must be deferred or interrupted, thought and sometimes self-reflection are required, and privacy is invaded. The benefits of participating in a survey, on the other hand, are usually vague and intangible...if apparent at all.

Therefore, the longer a survey is (or *appears* to be); the more intrusive, personal, or invasive the questions are; the more difficult the questions are to understand and/or answer, the higher the perceived costs are...and the lower the response will be.

The implications for survey construction are clear – in terms of content, in terms of structure and cognitive flow, and (for self-administered surveys) in terms of layout, visual appearance, and other design issues. Dozens of textbooks and thousands of papers have been published on these topics, and Don Dillman's *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method* (published by John Wiley Co) is an excellent book with which to start. Two points, however, are worth mentioning here as they underscore the critical nature of the questions posed (or not posed) to the efficacy of survey results.

First, a survey should never include any questions for which data already exists, unless the goal is to confirm data *believed* to be accurate or to test respondent awareness (i.e., asking Alumni Association members if they are members or not). For instance, when respondents can be identified (i.e., with an alumni ID number), there is usually no need to add length, time, and effort to a survey by asking for gender, class year, degree or other such information available in the alumni database. This is especially true for behavioral data (such as giving history), not only because of the added time and effort, but because “self-reporting” of behavior is notoriously inaccurate for many reasons, including the fact that memory is not perfect, because some respondents give themselves the benefit of the doubt, and because others are inclined to give “socially desirable” answers.

*Actions involving payment move from the social to the economic arena, and are explained by the different rules posited by Economic Exchange Theory.

Second, when personal information is requested, these questions should be as close to the end of the survey as possible – and the more personal, sensitive, or intrusive the question, the further toward the end it should be placed. This way (on a telephone survey, for example) if a respondent feels things are getting too personal and terminates the interview, most other questions have been answered and the interviewer has not wasted time and money. On a self-administered survey (paper-and-pencil or online), respondents who see questions they object to or feel uncomfortable answering often simply decide not to return the survey, a decision with significant impact on the response rate and thus the completeness of the results.

With these issues in mind, a few comments can be made about questionnaires designed to collect address, phone, e-mail, and other contact information.

The main things such questionnaires have going for them in terms of response are that they have low perceived costs (they are very brief, take little thought to answer, and do not include sensitive questions)...and have fairly clear, though limited, perceived benefits (enabling the respondent to receive communications from and stay connected with the institution). If the institution has not abused its trust, most alumni are happy to provide contact information and keep their relationship current.

However, adding attitudinal questions increases the perceived costs by adding to the length of the survey and the thought required to answer the questions – while also potentially *decreasing* the perceived benefits, by clouding the issue and causing respondents to wonder why they are being asked those questions and what the institution can do with the information. And, obviously, the more questions added, the more pronounced these problems become. It may be tempting to toss in some questions about feelings and attitudes: “We’re spending the money, we’ve got their attention, so why not ask a few things we’re curious about?” But if the data is merely *descriptive* (X percent feel something) rather than *actionable* (enabling decisions to be made and actions to be taken), response could suffer with nothing gained in return.

Adding demographic or fundraising questions is even worse – because perceived costs are increased not only by the added length and thought required, but also (and even more importantly) by the added sensitivity and invasion of privacy. Indeed – in today’s environment of sophisticated data mining techniques, hackers and identity theft, and government and corporate abuse of data and violation of civil liberties – privacy concerns are more acute now than ever before. *Furthermore, perceived benefits can suddenly become perceived costs* – as respondents suspect that the information they are asked to provide (such as income, estate plans, ethnicity, profession, hobbies and interests) will be used not so much to keep them informed as to solicit, sell, and market to them.

In summary, before conducting an alumni survey for whatever reason, it is essential to clearly define your goals and objectives. If the primary objective is to collect as much current contact information as possible, resist the temptation to sacrifice that objective by including other questions that are “of interest” to one or another part of the advancement operation. Attempting to achieve multiple objectives through one project is rarely successful and often leads to a failure to achieve the primary goals.

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