How to Write Effective Survey Questions to Get Useful Data

Presented by Kathy Dempsey of Libraries Are Essential
Sponsored by the Public Library Systems of Wisconsin

Libraries Are Essential

Hi, I’m Kathy Dempsey!
Coming to you from my desk in New Jersey

What We’ll Cover in this Webinar

- Basic Concepts of Effective Surveys
- Strategies and Examples
- Tips for Survey Success

Basic Concepts of Effective Surveys

Ground rules of the survey game

- Have a specific purpose and goal.
- Be brief: usually 8-10 questions, mostly multiple choice.
- Have a defined target audience.
- Promote the survey & deadline.
- Be aware of survey fatigue.
- Offer incentives if you can.

Lessons from my mentor, Dr. Christie Koontz (FSU)

Never guess when you can ask.
Any data is better than no data.
Need to convince bosses to try it?
Surveys can help make **data-driven decisions** on:

**Items to Track:**
- Planning
- Programming
- Collections
- Marketing
- Patron Services

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Data is vital for good customer service

RESTAURANT #1

![Image 1]

RESTAURANT #2

![Image 2]

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What do you need for successful surveys?

Questions that are well-thought-out and purposeful
Carefully consider what questions to ask and how to word them to ensure that you’ll get useful answers you can trust.

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Demographic questions

Ask about respondent demographics only if that data matters to how you’re going to use the answers (for collection development, programs, changing areas of the building, etc.). Leave demographic questions until the end of the survey.

Be sure to include a broad array of options to questions on gender identity, age, ethnicity, including “Prefer not to answer.”

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Excuses to avoid surveys ... and Responses

It takes extra time and effort to do it.

We already know what they like.

We don’t have patrons’ email addresses OR We’ll invade their privacy by emailing them.

The results might not be worthwhile.

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Yes, this means customization is necessary

Even when sending the same survey to different audiences, customize the introductory text and / or subject line.

When surveying a narrow target audience, only place the survey where they’re most likely to see it. Don’t put it everywhere.
Quiz Question for the End of Section 1

Every survey should have:
Choose 3

A) A question mark at the end
B) A goal and a purpose
C) Multiple-choice answers
D) A specific target audience

Strategy 1 for crafting great survey questions

Begin with the end in mind. Define your goal for each question: What decisions will it help you make? How do you intend to use that data later?
The way your survey looks is a silent indicator of how professional / serious it is. No paper scraps!

Vague questions = vague answers
Readers’ misinterpretations can ruin results.
Look “real,” get “real” answers.

EXAMPLE: Consider the difference between these two queries:

A. Does the library offer enough public computers? Yes / No / NA
B. In the past 6 months, when you’ve wanted to use a library computer, was one usually available? Yes / No / NA

“When we asked patrons if computers were available when they wanted one, over the past 6 months, 34% said no.”

Strategy 2 for crafting great survey questions

Use words and phrases that show the value of library offerings. Eliminate library lingo.
Use words that are part of your target audience’s lives.

Elicit thoughts and emotions. Not understanding a question can result in responses that aren’t really true.
Make it easy and intuitive to take your survey.

EXAMPLE: Words that show value (and aren’t lingo):

Storytimes = Early literacy lessons
Crafting = Creativity training
Programs = Classes, Workshops
Collections = Learning tools
Programs & services = Public education curriculum
Circulation statistics = Public usage data
Strategy 3 for crafting great survey questions

Avoid leading questions. Don’t influence the answers.
Beware open-ended questions. Responses take more time to assess and may not offer useful data.

EXAMPLE: A question where the ‘right’ answer is implied:
“Should we continue to bring in cuddly therapy dogs while you’re stressing out during finals week?”
This implies a “Yes” answer in a few ways. The dogs are “cuddly,” the students are “stressing out,” and someone already wants to “continue” it.
Here’s a less-biased way to ask the same question:
“Do you think the university library should provide therapy dog visits during finals week?”

Strategy 4 for crafting great survey questions

Don’t ask about “interest,” ask about action. People are interested in many things, but that doesn’t translate to action.
Asking “when” people would participate can aid event planning.

EXAMPLE: Questions that yield more-useful data:
A. Are you interested in learning how to play chess? Yes / No
B. How likely would you be to attend a weekly class on how to play chess? 5 (very likely), 4, 3, 2, 1 (not at all likely)
Ask about timing too, while people are thinking about the topic. Use branch logic to take 5s and 4s to this extra question:
When would you prefer to take this weekly class? Indicate your top two: Weeknights after 7 p.m. / Friday nights / Saturday mornings / Sunday afternoons

Strategy 5 for crafting great survey questions

Find colleagues and non-librarians who are not involved in the survey and ask them to read and react to your drafted questions. Are they clear? Could they possibly be misinterpreted?
Write, test, tweak, repeat.

Quiz Question for the End of Section 2

The most important survey strategies are:
Choose 3
A) Begin with the end in mind
B) Only use words at or below the eighth grade level
C) Find out what patrons want
D) Ask about timing as well as topics

See answers on final slide.
**Tips for Survey Success**

**Begin With the End in Mind**

- Use software if possible (SurveyMonkey, Google Forms, or LibQual).
- Check spelling, punctuation, and tone!
- Ask the same question in more than one way.
- Consider the order of questions.

Automatic tabulation makes life much easier!

Look smart, savvy, and sincere.

This helps confirm your most vital data points.

Go from most general to most specific.

**Pro tips**

Study professional surveys carefully. Look at the order of their questions, wording, number of questions, and repeated questions.

Use the opportunity to build opt-in email lists.

Take advantage of “branch logic.” (If NO, skip the next question)

**Pro tips**

Don’t ask people what they want from your library – they don’t know. Instead, ask what challenges they have in their lives. Then it’s your job to match their challenges with your products and services.

Dr. David Carey

**Pro tips**

“Writing clear, neutral questions is actually a lot more difficult than it might seem.”

Courtney Kenny, Director of Survey Research, New Research Company

**Pro tips**

In rating scales, having 5 or 7 options is best. Having a “neutral” (neutral) option enables better data.

https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/files/psr/files/PSR_QuestionnaireTipSheet_0.pdf

**How to survey people who don’t use libraries**

1. This vital audience needs different questions, since they’re less familiar with offerings.
2. Multiple choice answers will help them.
3. Leave your own building, website, and social media pages to find them.
4. Influential community members can help build participation.

**Tips for distribution and good return rates**

1. When emailing a major survey, publicize it ahead of time. Do an email blast telling folks to watch for your survey; announce it via the local press & social media. Tout any incentives or prizes.
2. Administer the survey in an active way; encourage completion. Don’t just leave it on a table.
3. Give people time and private space to answer questions.
4. Understand your target audience to determine what format to use – paper vs electronic. If paper, have clipboards and attached pencils.

**How to encourage people to take surveys**

1. Make it easy for them – go where they are, use the format that’s right for them.
2. Aim for situations when they’ll have time to take the survey.
3. Offer incentives! Give a small item immediately and have a drawing for something big later. Display the incentives prominently to urge participation.
4. Explain how taking the survey will benefit them (not the library).

**Quiz Question for the End of Section 3**

How can you help ensure your survey success?

Choose 3

- A) Have other people read your text to make sure it’s clear
- B) Use email lists to help get your survey to as many people as possible.
- C) Directly ask people what they want from your library
- D) Take your survey outside of your library environment to reach non-users

See answers on final slide.

**Quiz Answers**

Section 1: B, C, D

Section 2: A, C, D

Section 3: A, B, D