

How to Write Effective Survey Questions to Get Useful Data

PRESENTED BY KATHY DEMPSEY OF LIBRARIES ARE ESSENTIAL
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1



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Hi,
I'm Kathy
Dempsey!

Coming to you
from my desk
in New Jersey

2

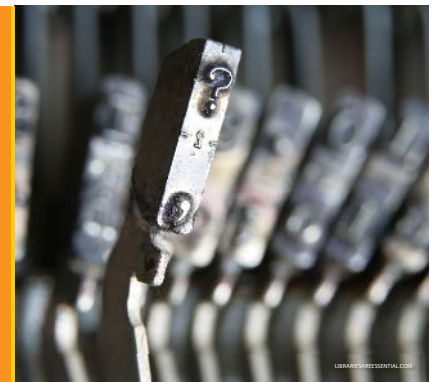
What We'll Cover in this Webinar



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3

Basic Concepts of Effective Surveys



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4

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.



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5



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

**Never guess when
you can ask.**

**Any data is better
than no data.**

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6

Need to convince bosses to try it? Surveys can help make **data-driven decisions** on:



7

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.

You'll save yourself from creating events that attract only 3 people.

Unless you've recently asked, you are only guessing what people like.

People want email if it delivers info about things that matter to them. (<https://www.infotoday.com/mis/mar21/Pike-Yes-Its-Legal-to-Email-Patrons.shtml>)

Plan the questions to provide the precise data you seek.



8

Data is vital for good customer service

RESTAURANT #1



RESTAURANT #2



9

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."



10

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.



11

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.




12

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


See answers on final slide.



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13

Strategies and Examples



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14

Strategy 1 for crafting great survey questions

- Begin with the end in mind.** *Vague questions = vague answers*
- Define your goal for each question: What decisions will it help you make? How do you intend to use that data later?** *Readers' misinterpretations can ruin results.*
- The way your survey looks is a silent indicator of how professional / serious it is. No paper scraps!** *Look "real," get "real" answers.*

15

If your goal is to prove to funders that you need money for more computers, what's the best way to ask a survey question?

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."

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16

Strategy 2 for crafting great survey questions

- Use words and phrases that show the value of library offerings.** *Elicit thoughts and emotions.*
- Eliminate library lingo.**  *Not understanding a question can result in responses that aren't really true.*
- Use words that are part of your target audience's lives.** *Make it easy and intuitive to take your survey.*

17

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

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18

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.



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19

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?"



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20

Strategy 4 for crafting great survey questions

Don't ask about "interest," ask about action.

Responses may not offer useful data.

People are interested in many things, but that doesn't translate to action.



Asking "when" people would participate can aid event planning.

Learn when target audiences are not available to participate.

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21

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

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22

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?

It's dangerous to have surveys (or any important text) be seen by just one or two people, especially those who already have intimate knowledge of a project.

Write, test, tweak, repeat.

Members of the survey's target audience make the best test-readers.

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23

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.



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24



25

Begin With the End in Mind

Use software if possible (SurveyMonkey, Google Forms, or LibQual).

Automatic tabulation makes life much easier!

Check spelling, punctuation, and tone!

Look smart, savvy, and sincere.

Ask the same question in more than one way.

This helps confirm your most vital data points.

Consider the order of questions.

Go from most general to most specific.

26

Pro tips

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



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Use the opportunity to build opt-in email lists.

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

27

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 Lankes

28

Pro tips



<https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2018/03/21/methods-101-video-question-wording/>

Methods 101 series: Survey Question Wording
5:28 min video

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

Courtney Kennedy, Director of Survey Research, Pew Research Center

29

Pro tips







TIP SHEET ON QUESTION WORDING

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

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

30

How to survey people who don't use libraries

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

"Reaching the Elusive Library Non-Users," by Donna E. Fletcher, MLS, Nov/Dec. 2016
<https://www.infotoday.com/mls/nov16/Fletcher-Reaching-the-Elusive-Library-Non-Users.shtml>



Tips for distribution and good return rates

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.

Administer the survey in an active way; encourage completion. Don't just leave it on a table.





Give people time and private space to answer questions.

Understand your target audience to determine what format to use – paper vs electronic. If paper, have clipboards and attached pencils.

31

32

How to encourage people to take surveys

-  Make it easy for them – go where they are, use the format that's right for them.
-  Aim for situations when they'll have time to take the survey.
-  Offer incentives! Give a small item immediately and have a drawing for something big later. Display the incentives prominently to urge participation.
-  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.

33

34

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Quiz Answers

Section 1: B, C, D
 Section 2: A, C, D
 Section 3: A, B, D

 Thanks for watching!



35

36