

How to build response rates for online surveys

Follow these guidelines to increase the response rates to your online surveys.

Following a few simple guidelines could see response rates to your online surveys improve dramatically. There are two key strategies for increasing response rates: first, you need a well-composed email (or link on a website) that makes potential respondents click through to the survey in the first place. Second, your survey needs to be designed so it is easy for respondents to get through and click on the Submit button. These are our 10 top tips for better response rates:

- 1. Use appropriate incentives:** Remember that the incentives for taking part in your survey need to reflect the type of respondent you are trying to attract – and it's not always material things that will appeal. Prize draws, such as winning a cash prize or store voucher, are often used but you need to be careful about any ethical or legal requirements if you're using them (for instance, some countries require you to register prize draws). If you are looking for more altruistic respondents you might consider incentives such as making a donation to a charity for each response. Another common inducement in the business-to-business arena is to give respondents privileged access to a report on the findings from the research.
- 2. Put a prominent action point in your email or website link:** The wording of an email invitation (or a link on your website) should be concise and to the point. Clearly spell out the incentive or benefit from taking part in the research, then get to the action point. Maybe restrict yourself to one or two sentences and then a "CLICK HERE TO TAKE OUR SURVEY" action link. It is essential that any reminder emails have different wording from the original, otherwise people may have assumed they've read it before and bin it.
- 3. Watch out for spam triggers in emails:** The subject line of an email has to show benefit or value to the respondent, but be careful not to word it so that it gets trapped as spam. You may want to search online for lists of "Spam trigger words". These will often include words like "Free, win, offer and save \$". "Can you help us research opinions about XXX?" may get greater response than "Win a free XXX from our prize draw!"
- 4. Plain text emails or HTML emails?** A plain text email with a few sentences and a simple link to the survey can get your message across very effectively. However these days, when brand image is important, HTML emails are often required. But it's important to remember that email readers, such as Outlook, have user-defined settings to prompt for image downloads. Therefore, it's best NOT to use an image as the only link to a survey (with a CLICK HERE instruction in the graphic) as respondents may have images turned off in their email reader.
- 5. Consider survey fatigue among respondents:** When sending emails out to your lists, be aware of overkill and the possibility of survey fatigue. If panellists are asked to contribute too often, without clearly defined benefits, they will unsubscribe from your list and may be lost to you forever. It's a good idea to send out email invites to subsets of lists to avoid over-contacting panel members. Using our Panelwise technology, you can send out emails to sub-sets of your panel or mailing list. Subsequent emails will ignore those already contacted.

6. **Spend time thinking about your survey structure:** When it comes to designing surveys that will improve your response rate, well-structured surveys always win out. Just throwing a few questions together, or adding them haphazardly as you think of them, is going to create chaotic questionnaires with low response. Remember to "top and tail" your survey – briefly tell them what it's about and how long it will take on the first page, and thank them and alert them to submit their answers on the final page.
7. **Break your survey into bite size chunks (and time it):** It is best to have just a few questions on a single theme per page, which helps them focus on the topic. Long pages with many questions or very long questions will look like too much hard work and have a fall-off in response levels. Better to break it up into small bite-sizes of one or two questions, with a progress bar. Timing the length of a survey is also important. Make sure you work out an average time for your survey, and get colleagues to test it to confirm this. Generally, anything longer than 5-10 minutes to complete, is going to have a measureable fall-off in response.
8. **Use interactive tools to keep surveys cutting edge:** It's time to move on from the "tick box mentality" of paper surveys. A survey that is as fun or as interesting as a tax return to fill out will seriously depress response rates. The internet offers a whole new range of question interfaces (sliders, images maps, ranking questions, embedded audio and video) that will engage respondents, aid memory and get great data. Having said that, we should add a word of warning – use these new options sparingly, unless your respondents are part of a committed supporters group or panel. *With Demographix multimedia toolsets it is easy to add video and audio files into surveys (shown above). Image hotspots also add interactive variety. No programming needed!*
9. **Speak in a language they can understand:** Scripting a survey is a science in itself. Questions need to be clear, concise, unambiguous and unbiased towards suggesting an answer. Avoid jargon at all costs, and speak in a style of language that suits your audience. Do you have a full range of possible answers in single or multi-choice lists? Nothing undermines respondent trust more than questions that miss out an obvious answer. Demographix allows you to create frequently-used lists that can be inserted with one click – ensuring you include all the options, correctly spelt, every time.
10. **Make your survey as short as possible for ALL respondents:** The level of response to a survey will generally be proportional to its length. By careful use of conditionality and internal self-selection, surveys can be built to be variable in length depending on how relevant the questions are. For instance, you might want to ask some general questions of all your respondents, but in the same survey ask more in-depth questions of those who fulfil certain criteria. Thus, you only show pages of questions depending on how respondents answer a question or multiple questions (e.g. all females, aged 30-45, in this region).

