

Five Common Survey Mistakes

1. Failing to Plan the Analysis When Writing the Questions

How are the answers going to inform you? How do you plan to use the answers? One example is demographics. Often, we feel obligated to ask about age, sex, education, zip code, and others. But, how is it going to impact my program to know that males with a college education eat more apples than males with professional degrees? If it will, ask it! If not, consider removing it to reduce the response burden and support anonymity.

2. Double-Barreled Questions

“Do you agree that double-barreled questions are common and frustrating?” If you answered yes, I don’t know if you think they’re common or frustrating or both! One thing to look out for is using two adjectives. The solution is to decide if you need both answers or just one. If both, you’ve got two questions.

3. Asking Too Much of a Respondent (Responder Burden)

Most survey software will tell you how long it will take for the respondent to complete your survey. But, they don’t say how long is appropriate (and I won’t either). Think about who your audience is. Are they a group of people that you’ve never talked to and that don’t know you? Keep it short. Are they a group you meet with monthly or your organization provides a stipend? Add a few more. Put yourself in the shoes of your (potential) respondents.

4. Failing to Follow Up

Back in our respondent shoes. You got a survey this morning right as you were walking into a big meeting. You want to provide feedback, but the timing is bad. You think, “I’ll do this after the meeting.” Two hours and seventeen emails later, the survey is buried. Luckily, the survey planners knew this might happen and will send you a reminder seven days later and again ten days later. Three total emails with the following subject lines: “Feedback Requested,” “Reminder: Feedback Requested,” and finally, the day before you close the survey, “Due Tomorrow at 5 p.m.”

*Most survey software will allow you to track who has responded so you don’t inundate those who already responded.

5. Scales

Survey scales are popular for great reasons, however, they are often misused, causing your final data to be less accurate than you hoped. Survey scales should be continuous and linear, laid out in the same order for the whole survey, and never more than seven options. There is a debate about whether even or odd scales are better, and it appears to me that odd has a slight edge, but, ultimately, it comes down to whether you are okay with a neutral response.

Bonus Tip: Send the survey from an email and name the responder will recognize.

Other Non-KC Resources That We Use:

1. [Likert Scales](#) (Clemson University)
2. Survey [Do’s](#) and [DON’TS](#) (American Association for Public Opinion Research)
3. [CDC’s Recommendations](#) (I’d be a bad public health professional if I didn’t cite this)