

Steps in Preparing an Online Questionnaire – How to Effectively Conduct an Online Survey

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So, you've decided to conduct an online survey. There are a few questions in your mind that you would like answered and you are on the lookout for a fast and inexpensive way to find out more about your customers, clients etc. The first and foremost thing you need to decide what the objectives of the study are. Ensure that you can phrase these objectives as questions or measurements. If you can't, you are better off looking at other means of gathering data like focus groups and other qualitative methods. Online Surveys tend to focus in on more on "Quantitative" data collection.

1. Review the basic objectives of the study. What are you trying to discover? What actions do you want to take as a result of the survey?

This helps you double check the validity of the data collection mechanism. Online Surveys are just one way of collecting and quantifying perspectives.

2. Visualize all of the relevant information items you would like to have. What will the output report look like? What charts and graphs will be prepared? What information do you need to be assured that action is warranted?
3. Rank each topic in items 1 and 2 according to the value of the topic. List the most important topics first. Revisit items 1 and 2 again to make sure the objectives, topics and information you need are appropriate. Remember, you can't solve the problem if you ask the wrong questions.
4. How easy or difficult is it for the respondent to provide information on each topic? If it is difficult, is there another way to obtain the information by asking another question?

This is probably the most important step. Online Surveys have to be Precise, Clear and Concise. Due to the nature of the "Web" and the fickleness associated, if your questions are too complicated and are not easy to understand, you will have a high "drop out" rate.

5. Create a sequence for the topics that is unbiased. Make sure that the questions asked first do not bias the results of the next questions. Sometimes providing too much information, or disclosing purpose of the study can create bias.

Once you have a sequence of topics, you can have a basic layout of a survey. It is always prudent to add an "Introductory" text to explain the project and what is required of the respondent. It is also professional to have an ending "Thank You"

text as well as information about where to find the results of the survey, when they are published.

6. Determine the type of question that is best suited to answer the question and provide enough robustness to meet analysis requirements. This means do you use open-ended text questions, dichotomous, multiple choice, rank order, scaled, or constant sum (ratio scale) questions. There is a fine line you need to walk here – Generally tougher analysis requirements will lead to more complicated questionnaire design. However there are a couple of tools available to make life easier: -
 1. Page Breaks – Avoid having a huge scrolling survey. Introduce page breaks as necessary. Please also refrain from just having one question per page. This increases the time to complete the survey as well as increases the chances for ‘drop outs’.
 2. Branching – Use Branching and Skip Logic to make your surveys “Smart”. Avoid using text like, “If you answered No to Q1 then Answer Q4” – this causes respondent frustration and increases the “drop out” rate. Design the survey using Branching Logic so that the correct questions are automatically routed based on previous responses.
7. Write the questions. You may need to write several questions for each topic, selecting the best one. You might also be better off dividing the survey into multiple sections.
8. Sequence the questions so that they are unbiased.
9. Repeat all of the steps above to find any major holes. Are the questions really answered? Have someone review it for you.
10. Time the length of the survey. A survey should take less than five minutes. At three to four questions per minute, you are limited to about 15 questions. One open end text question counts for three multiple choice questions. Most online software tools will record the time taken for the respondents to answer questions.
11. Pretest the survey to 20 or more people. Obtain their feedback... in detail. What were they unsure about? Did they have questions? Did they have trouble understanding what you wanted? Did they take a point of view not covered in your answers or question?
 1. An easy way to do this is to create another survey, with a few “open ended” essay questions along with your main project. Let’s call this the “feedback survey”.
 2. Email the “Project” survey to your test group and then email the “feedback” survey also after that.

3. In that way, you can have your test group send you comments regarding the functionality as well as usability of your “Project” survey by using your “feedback survey”!

12. Revise your online questionnaire using incorporating the feedback that you got.

13. Send the Survey out to all your respondents!

Online surveys are a great alternative to expensive mail or telephone surveys. There are a few caveats to online surveys however that you must be aware of. If you are trying to survey a representative sample of the general population, please bear in mind that not everyone is online. Moreover, not everyone is receptive to online survey also. Our research has shown that the demographic that responds to online survey invitations is generally biased towards younger people.

QuestionPro employs an easy to use Wizard interface to author and deploy Web Based and Email Surveys. No knowledge of HTML or programming is required. A comprehensive suite of analysis tools, ranging from Simple Frequency, TURF Analysis, and Trend Analysis to Conjoint, are also provided for data analysis. In addition, QuestionPro.com provides seamless integration with SPSS and Microsoft Office products.

QuestionPro also licenses its software free to Students and Researchers in the academic community. The projects have to be strictly academic in nature and should not be part of any other funded research or consulting.

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