

Surveys: A Method for Conducting a Needs Assessment

Description

Surveys are one of the most popular methods used for collecting data. A survey consists of a list of questions aiming to gather various data from a target audience (also known as respondents). Surveys can be distributed in different formats, including printed paper, mailed, and online surveys. Mailed surveys were quite popular in previous decades, but online surveys are gaining greater attention today due to their convenience.

Various online tools like Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, Google Surveys, and Microsoft Forms can be used to develop and distribute online surveys as these tools are handy and easier to access. Surveys are mostly used to get feedback from participants about a session or workshop; therefore, it is recommended to encourage respondents to complete the survey immediately after completing certain training or educational programs. Surveys are also used to measure changes in participants' skills, attitudes, and knowledge.

Tips for Survey Preparation and Execution

- Keep the survey short. The survey questions should not be too wordy. It should not take more than 10 minutes to complete the survey.
- The layout (e.g., design, font, etc.) of the survey should be simple and easy to understand.
- Survey questions must be in the proper order, with the most important questions placed at the beginning of the survey.
- Make sure that the survey questions are easy to understand and easy to answer. It is recommended to avoid the double-barreled questions, which asks about multiple issues at once.
 - For example, a question like "How would you rate the training and onboarding process?" is a double-barreled question. If the respondents answered this question, we would not necessarily know if they were responding about the training itself or the onboarding process. So, split up the survey questions into separate questions.
 - Sample questions: Question 1: How would you rate the training? Question 2: How would you rate the onboarding process?
- The survey should be free from any form of bias. Do not show any personal preferences or choices while framing the survey questions. The questions should not force respondents to answer in a certain way.
 - For example, "How amazing was your experience of the Mississippi State University Extension training?" is a biased question, because it assumes that the participants had an "amazing" experience of the Extension training. So, the proper way to frame this survey question would be "How was your experience of attending the Mississippi State University Extension training?"
- Make sure surveys are received and answered by the appropriate target audience. Screening and finalizing the list of respondents, along with their accurate home or email addresses, are necessary before sending out the survey.
- Be sure the survey receives an adequate number of responses to reduce survey errors like a non-response error. Offering appropriate incentives can also be considered to enhance the response rate. Additionally, after sending the initial survey to respondents, you can send out a reminder.

Pros

- Surveys take less time and effort.
- Surveys help save money, as data collectors do not need to travel to gather the required data from respondents.
- Anonymous surveys help maintain the privacy of respondents, allowing them to freely express their feedback.

Cons

- Surveys may not be suitable for all data collection purposes, such as understanding participants' in-depth experiences with a particular program.
- Low response rates can lead to less representative data.
- Printed paper surveys are time-consuming when it comes to entering data manually and analyzing it.

References

Robinson, S. B., & Leonard, K. F. (2019). *Designing quality survey questions*. Sage Publications.

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By **Samrat Sikdar**, PhD Student, Agricultural Science, and **Nesma Osman**, PhD, Assistant Professor, Human Sciences.