

## **Newsletter # 18: “Considering Online Surveys”** July 8, 2009

A retailer asking for customer service feedback, a membership survey from an association – these days we seem to receive more and more requests to fill out online surveys. Not surprising, really. They are quick and inexpensive compared to mail or phone surveys, and they can provide valuable information when used correctly. Unfortunately, when used inappropriately, they can be a waste of time for both the respondent and the surveyor.

### ***How do you know if an online survey is the right solution for you?***

#### **To start, here are five questions you should answer when doing any type of survey:**

- 1) **What is the purpose of the survey?** Why are you doing it and what will you do with the information you receive?
- 2) **Who is going to receive the survey?** Do you already know specific individuals, or will you have recruit or purchase names?
- 3) **How many responses do you need?** Do the results need to be projectable to a larger population, or are you more interested in individual responses?
- 4) **How can you best reach your respondents:** in person, by phone, by mail or by e-mail? Do you already have the contact info, or will you have to research and/or purchase it?
- 5) **How can you get them to respond?** Are the topic and questions easy to relate to and understand? Or is the subject matter sensitive, unfamiliar or irrelevant? Will you need to give respondents an incentive?

Your answers to these questions will help determine whether an online survey is the best methodology for you. ***Here are some tips to help you decide:***

#### **Online surveys work best when:**

- Your survey is not more than 20-25 questions.
- Most questions are multiple choice, not open-ended (you want finite answers; you don't need to probe for nuances).
- Respondents have a reason to respond (e.g., they know you, or you give them a good “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me?)).
- The questions are, for the most part, not difficult to answer (if they are, a high percentage of respondents will not complete the online survey).
- And of course, you must have a “good” (accurate) e-mail list.

### **If an online survey suits your situation, how can you boost your response rate?**

- Certainly, it helps if there a connection between the recipient and the sender, or at least some recognition of who the sender is.
- A tangible “carrot” helps: to be entered into a drawing, or given something for free.
- At the very least, there should be a “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me?) stated up front.
- Of course, the survey should not be an overt sales pitch.
- The shorter the survey, the better. Consider telling respondents at the outset how many questions there will be, or how long it will take to complete the questionnaire.
- Limit the number of surveys you send out to the same group.
- It goes without saying that you must pretest the survey before it goes “live.”

**One last consideration:** Don’t get “sloppy” with your surveys just because online survey software programs make them relatively easy to implement. First, make sure that an online survey is appropriate. Second, take care in developing the questionnaire – or have a professional do it for you. Remember: you don’t get a second chance with your respondents to “get it right”!

*Have any comments about this or previous articles (they are archived on my website, [www.LindaRink.com](http://www.LindaRink.com))? I’d love to hear from you at [lrink@LindaRink.com](mailto:lrink@LindaRink.com)!*