Ways To Improve Response Rates for Electronic Surveys

Electronic surveys provide an excellent alternative to mail or telephone surveys. In general, they can be much less expensive. Companies like SurveyMonkey [http://surveymonkey.com] make creating web-based surveys easy for novices and fairly affordable. Research has provided some insight into best practices for electronic surveys.

1. Carefully consider how the choice of electronic survey may affect response rates. Some groups, like employees in an organization with Internet access, members of professional organizations, or listserv participants may be computer-oriented and may prefer electronic surveys. Others may have limited use of technology or choose not to use it.

2. Use the general principles of administering surveys described on page 11 in Figure 2. Send a preliminary, personalized cover letter, alerting respondents to the coming web-based survey. If possible, make sure the letter comes from someone they trust or like and make sure the respondent can see the name without opening the email (such as in the "FROM" or "SUBJECT" field.) If people do not recognize the sender of an email message, they may not open it.

3. Keep the survey as simple as possible so that it will load quickly.

4. Start with a simple, interesting question. Use recognizable formats (two-option questions; rating scales) that look like questions respondents have seen on print surveys. Be sure that the respondent can see each item and related responses on one screen.

5. Use question formats similar to those seen on written surveys.

6. Do not have items that force respondents to answer before they can move on to the next item. Such items frustrate respondents and could cause them to stop before finishing.

7. Give instructions for the respondents with the least amount of computer experience. Some people may not understand how to scroll for more questions, how to use drop-down boxes, etc. If you find that the instructions take up too much space, consider different formats for respondents with different levels of computer experience.

8. Use grouping mechanisms (like color or boxes) to help respondents connect questions and responses.

9. Give participants an indication of the survey's length. When possible, put all questions on one screen so respondents can see the length of the survey. For short surveys, put all questions on one page. For surveys with multiple pages, use a "progress bar" available in many online survey software packages or notations like (Page 1 of 6) on each page. In the introductory screen, give information such as the number of total questions, number of screens, or estimated time to complete the survey. If respondents tire of answering questions and see no end in sight, they are likely to quit before finishing.

Source: Dillman DA., Tortora RD, Bowker D. [4]