

The Savvy Survey #4: Details in the Design¹

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As part of the Savvy Survey Series, this publication provides an overview of important facets of the survey process. Topics covered include modes for collecting responses, strategies for contacting clients and personalizing contacts, and tips for using incentives. The ability of a survey to gather accurate and useful information for assessing program needs or evaluating program outcomes is greatly influenced by the survey's design. Careful attention to detail is essential.

Modes for Collecting Responses

With the expansion of web access and the development of new communication technologies, Extension faculty now have more options than ever before for conducting surveys. Many types of surveys exist and can be conducted in a variety of situations. There are two basic types of surveys: interviewer-administered and self-administered.

Interviewer-Administered Surveys

Interviewer-administered surveys include:

- Face-to-face interviews with clients to collect in-depth evaluation information or with key informants to identify local needs and assets
- Telephone interviews with clients or a sample of a population

Interviewer-administered surveys give the interviewer the advantage of being able to clarify questions and check the respondents' understanding. On the other hand, interviewers can intentionally or unintentionally influence

respondents and introduce bias in the collected data (see Loosveldt 2009 for more information).

Self-Administered Surveys

Self-administered surveys include:

- Paper and pen questionnaires distributed to clients attending a program to obtain feedback and customer satisfaction
- Paper and pen questionnaires mailed to a sample of a population in a county, region, or state (see, for example, Gaul, Hochmuth, Israel, and Treadwell 2009; Israel, Easton, and Knox 1999)
- Online surveys to capture information on knowledge, attitudes or behaviors (see Lamm, Israel, and Diehl 2013)
- Mixed-mode surveys using email and mail to contact clients about knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors (see Israel 2010; 2011; 2013)

Self-administered surveys cost less than interviewer-administered surveys because of the reduced time and labor. In addition, web and mixed-mode surveys can be less expensive than mail surveys because of avoided postage costs. On the other hand, some clients do not have access to the web or choose not to use it; therefore, web-only surveys should be avoided unless there is universal access (see Israel 2010). For follow-up surveys with clients, universal access would be indicated by 90–95% having provided an email address. As discussed in The Savvy Survey #1: Introduction, coverage error becomes a bigger concern as an increasingly

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larger proportion of the target audience is excluded from the survey.

Self-administered surveys rely on the ability of respondents to interpret questions correctly without the help of an interviewer, which makes it especially important to construct these surveys carefully. Detailed information about writing items for a questionnaire and formatting a questionnaire to aid in respondent completion is available in publications #6a–e and #7 of The Savvy Survey series. Furthermore, additional considerations for using the various survey modes can be found in the following Savvy Survey publications:

- The Savvy Survey #10: In-person and Group-administered Surveys
- The Savvy Survey #11: Mail-based Surveys
- The Savvy Survey #12: Telephone Surveys
- The Savvy Survey #13: Online Surveys
- The Savvy Survey #14: Mixed-mode Surveys

Contact Procedures

One of the principles for conducting a high-quality survey and getting useful data is to make multiple contacts. For a telephone survey, it is common to make 6 or 8 calls to the same number, and some important surveys (such as those conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics) make 30 or more calls in attempting to complete a survey (Sangster and Meekins 2004). Mail and mixed-mode surveys typically use 4 or 5 contacts (see Dillman, Smyth, and Christian 2009). Regardless of which survey mode is selected, multiple contacts have been shown to increase the number of completed questionnaires.

For each survey mode, the contact procedures are tailored to the situation, as recommended by the Tailored Design Survey Method (Dillman et al. 2009). Table 1 shows a typical contact procedure by survey mode. For face-to-face interviews, contact to set up an interview is by telephone call (typically one or two calls). In comparison, a telephone survey will start with an initial call and then include 5 or more calls at different days/times to reach those who did not complete the survey.

For mail surveys, a pre-letter is often used to alert potential respondents to the survey, followed by the survey packet a few days later. Online surveys often include the link to the survey in the initial contact because of the ephemeral nature of email messages. Because the lifespan of email messages is short, reminders for online surveys should be sent more frequently than those for mail surveys (e.g., after

4 or 5 days as opposed to a couple weeks). Finally, the most effective mixed-mode procedures emphasize responding via the web first and then by mail (Israel 2013; Messer and Dillman 2011; Millar and Dillman 2011).

Personalizing the Survey Process

Research shows that personalization has a small but significant effect on increasing response rates (Dillman et al. 2009). Personalization helps to connect the respondent to the survey. Personalize for each respondent by:

- Using the client's name in contact messages (e.g., Dear Joe Client), or using a group name with which clients identify (e.g., Dear Jackson County Cattlemen)
- Individually signing letters in blue ink for postal contacts (which shows the importance of the survey to the respondent)
- Using logos, pictures, or graphics on the questionnaire that are tailored to the targeted group to increase the salience of the survey

Adding individual names and other information to contact messages is fairly easy and fast. Spreadsheet files containing names and addresses can be used with word processing applications to do a mail merge to produce a personalized letter or email message for a client (See The Savvy Survey #11: Mail-based Surveys and The Savvy Survey #13: Online Surveys for examples).

Incentives

Besides the number of contacts, incentives have been shown to increase the number of completed surveys more than any other tactic. Of these, monetary incentives of \$1 to \$5 delivered with the request to complete the questionnaire are the most effective because they build trust and invoke a norm of reciprocity (Dillman et al. 2009). Unfortunately, monetary incentives are often unavailable or impractical for Extension faculty. When they are feasible, monetary incentives can increase response rates between 9 and 20% for surveys of Extension audiences (Israel, Wilson, and Haller 2013; Wilcox, Guilliano, and Israel 2010). However, nonmonetary incentives have also been used (such as bookmarks, pamphlets, and fact sheets), but these tokens of appreciation are less effective.

In Summary

This publication in the Savvy Survey Series has introduced modes for collecting responses to a survey, described the importance of tailoring the contact process to the survey situation while making multiple contacts to maximize the

number of completed surveys, and reviewed techniques for personalizing a survey. It also provided information about whether to use an incentive with the survey. Attending to these details of the survey process can significantly impact the amount and quality of data collected and, in turn, its usefulness in assessing needs or evaluating program outcomes.

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Table 1. Typical contact procedure by mode.

Contact	Face-to-face interview	Telephone survey	Paper and pen survey for groups	Paper and pen survey by mail	Web-hosted survey	Mixed-mode survey
1 st	Call to set up interview	Initial call for interview	Verbal introduction of survey and administration	Pre-letter alerting person	Email message with link to URL of the survey	Either mailed pre-letter or emailed message with link
2 nd	Call if necessary	Call to non-respondents		Survey packet: cover letter, questionnaire, and return envelope	Email message with link to URL of the survey to non-respondents	Email message with link to URL of the survey to non-respondents
3 rd		Call to non-respondents		Reminder post card	Email message with link to URL of the survey to non-respondents	Email message with link to URL of the survey to non-respondents
4 th		Call to non-respondents		Survey packet to non-respondents	Email message with link to URL of the survey to non-respondents	Survey packet to non-respondents
5 th		Call to non-respondents		Survey packet to non-respondents	Email message with link to URL of the survey to non-respondents	Survey packet to non-respondents
6 th or more		Call to non-respondents				