Best Practices in Survey Administration

The success of a survey is strongly influenced by the way in which it is administered. Survey administrators must consider many factors when determining the best strategies for optimizing the number of response rates and the experience of respondents. This document discusses the administrative considerations that should be considered before administering a survey, during the survey administration time period, and after the survey closes.

Pre-launch administration

Survey testing

All surveys should be tested before being launched. It is advisable to ask individuals who are unfamiliar with the survey (i.e. have not been involved in the survey design process) to test the survey by taking the survey several times. These test participants should be asked to explore all the options in the survey, especially if the survey has display or skip logic, by selecting different responses to the questions each time they take the survey. In other words, they should try to 'break' the survey by uncovering any weaknesses in the survey logic that may not be readily apparent to the survey designer or administrator.

Once the testers have taken the survey several times, the survey administrator can download the data captured through these tests and examine it for inconsistencies, gaps, or other problems. Such an analysis can reveal several problems with the survey design, including (but not limited to):

- Questions where multiple responses are desirable but only a single response is allowed (and vice versa)
- Questions that are not displayed to some respondents, even though they should be (and vice versa)
- Questions where a logical response option (such as "other" or "not applicable") is missing

Most importantly, these test responses can reveal parts of the survey where the responses being provided are very difficult for the survey analyst to interpret or examine. When survey testing is conducted before a survey is launched, the survey administrator can adjust problematic questions to ensure that data analysis is possible and/or more efficient. However, if an administrator makes any significant changes to the survey as a result of this testing, it is advisable to retest the survey in order to ensure that the changes do not create other issues.

IRB approval

Generally speaking, surveys sent to students on the UW-Whitewater campus must receive Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before the survey is launched. The IRB approval process ensures that human subjects are treated ethically when they are the focus of research activities – including the deployment of measures to ensure respondent confidentiality and the protection of personal data collected through surveys.

Upon review, IRB is likely to grant most surveys sent to students on the UW-Whitewater campus exemption from IRB oversight. However, it is for the IRB board (rather than the survey designer or administrator) to determine if a survey qualifies for exemption. All survey administrators are advised to contact the UW-Whitewater Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP)[1] 6 – 8 weeks *before* they plan to administer a survey to determine if IRB approval is required.

In order to grant IRB approval, the IRB office will request (among other things) a copy of the survey as well as information on how the survey administrator plans to maintain the confidentiality of respondent information and ensure data security. In addition, a plan for informed consent must be devised and articulated. Informed consent materials are usually 300 – 500 words in length – and while it is common for academic studies to place all of the informed consent materials on the first screen of the survey, these materials are technical and are frankly off-putting to most participants.

In order to streamline the survey and thereby facilitate higher response rates, it is advisable to request IRB permission to provide informed consent documentation via pre-survey communication and through the survey invitation, as well as through hyperlinks in the survey itself. The survey will still begin with a gateway question requiring the participant to indicate that they understand the informed consent materials and that they agree to participate. If it is allowable, it is better from an administration perspective if the introduction to the survey described the survey itself, rather than to require potential respondents to read a page of informed consent materials that can be provided in alternative venues.

Determining survey population

The survey designer should have a strong idea of the population to whom the survey is to be administered. However, it is often the role of the survey administrator to identify the specific members of that population and to determine the best methods by which to distribute the survey. Survey administrators are advised to work with the survey designer to ensure that the exact parameters of the target population are clearly understood before the dissemination method is determined.

Determining survey distribution method

From an administrative perspective, the most effective dissemination method is through email distribution using a contact list.[2] The contact list is constructed along the lines of a spreadsheet that contains the email address, first name and last name of each potential respondent in the survey pool (and possibly other information). When email distribution is used in Qualtrics, the software generates a unique link to the survey for each potential respondent. The benefits of using a contact list are three-fold:

1) It allows the survey administrator to personalize correspondence with each potential respondent, which may result in higher response rates;
2) It allows the survey administrator to track individual participation in the survey and to send reminder email only to individuals who have not completed the survey (as well as thank you email only to individuals who have already completed the survey);
3) It allows survey administrators to include additional fields of information (such as major or gender), which can be associated with the respondent's submissions and used for post-administration analysis – without having to ask the respondent for this information.

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[1] For more information, please visit the ORSP website: http://www.uww.edu/orsp/research-compliance/human-subjects

[2] Formerly known as a survey panel.

Naturally, the email distribution method also has disadvantages and limitations. For example, it can only be used if the survey administrator has a well-defined survey population and has access to accurate email contact information for each member of the respondent pool. In a university setting, this is usually not an issue. At UW-W, survey administrators are advised to contact the Registrar's Office if they are interested in distributing a survey to a significant number (more than 100) of students in order to request permission and current email contact information for the students in the target population. The Registrar may also be able to provide some demographic information on individuals in the target population, so long as that demographic information is not identifying.[3]

In the university setting, the most significant disadvantage of email distribution is that it eliminates anonymity. Survey designers and administrators are often eager to reassure participants that their responses to the survey will remain anonymous. However, this is not the case if a contact list is used. A more extensive discussion of the issue of anonymity versus confidentiality is articulated below.

Not all surveys can be distributed using email distribution. If the survey administrator does not have an identified survey population and/or does not have email contact details for that population, alternative means of distribution must be utilized. The most popular alternative is a generic link to the survey. Qualtrics can generate a unique link to the survey that can be used by anyone, and distributed through a newsletter or other electronic media. This method has several limitations:

- The survey administrator must rely on the survey respondent to 'take the initiative' by either typing in or clicking on the link to the survey;
- The survey administrator must send reminders to the entire survey population, as it is not possible to determine who took the survey;
- The survey administrator cannot prevent one respondent from taking the survey more than once (also known as 'ballot stuffing')[4];

However, if it is not possible to obtain accurate email contact information on the survey population, or the survey population is not well-defined, a generic survey link is the most effective means of distributing the survey.

Pre-survey communication

The successful administration of a survey can be greatly enhanced through thorough and thoughtful pre-survey communication. Survey administrators are advised to prepare the survey population for the

[3] In this context, 'identifying information' is considered demographic information that, when used in conjunction with other information, is likely to apply to a very small number of students on campus (i.e. less than 10 students). For example, given the small number of students on the UW-W campus who identify their ethnicity as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, information on ethnicity in and of itself may be identifying; given the small number of women who are majoring in Physics, gender in conjunction with major, may be identifying. Survey administrators that are requesting demographic information in conjunction with student names and email addresses are advised to consult with the ORSP regarding the IRB implication of this request, before contacting the Registrar.

[4] From a data integrity perspective, ballot stuffing denigrates the veracity of the data collected through the survey, which assumes that each response represents the unique opinions and perspectives of one individual. In most cases, respondents do not have much incentive to take the survey more than once. However, sometimes individuals forget that they have already taken the survey – and (unlike a personalized link) a generic link will not prevent this individual from taking the survey again. In addition, if taking the survey is associated with an incentive program (such as a raffle), respondents may have an incentive to take the survey multiple times in order to increase their likelihood of winning the raffle.

launch of the survey by providing this population with information about the survey. This type of communication increases the likelihood that a potential respondent will recognize the invitation to participate in the survey when it arrives, and that s/he will feel informed enough about the purpose and content of the survey to decide whether s/he wishes to participate.

As the name suggests, pre-survey notification should take place before the survey is launched – ideally, 3 – 7 days before the invitation to participate (containing the link to the online survey) is scheduled to be received. The pre-survey notification should contain the following information:

- the purpose of the survey (what the survey is about and how will the information collected be used)
- the survey population (who is receiving an invitation and why)
- the survey administrators (who is sending out the survey and why)
- administrative information – specifically:
    - how long with the survey take to complete (approximate duration in minutes)
    - how will respondent information be handled (see discussion of anonymity versus confidentiality below)
    - who the potential respondent can contact if they have questions about the survey

At the same time, the notification should be concise and written in a way that encourages participation – for example, by emphasizing the importance of the information being collected, and how individual participation may help survey administrators improve programming.

Pre-survey notification is particularly helpful in legitimizing a survey. The notification should contain information that a thoughtful individual might want to know before they agree to share personal information and opinions in an online survey. It also is the ideal venue in which to provide links to additional information about the purpose and the individuals behind the survey.

If IRB approval for the survey requires that potential participants receive an informed consent form, the pre-survey notification email is a good place to provide the informed consent material, and to prep potential respondents before they are required to consent to participate at the start of the survey.

Anonymity vs Confidentiality

One issue that must be addressed in the pre-survey notification (as well as other communication associated with the survey) is that of anonymity versus confidentiality. Most survey administrators instinctively desire to reassure survey participants that their responses will remain anonymous. However, as discussed above, any survey distribution method that relies on unique identifiers (such as email address) and any survey that collects identifying information (either through a single or through a combination of demographic questions) is not truly anonymous. In most cases, it is more accurate (and frankly more truthful) for the survey administrator to indicate that the information collected in the survey will remain confidential – i.e. individual responses will not be shared with those who are not administrating the survey and that administrators will only use the information gathered to make policy changes (and not to target individuals). In addition, the survey administrator should indicate that, when the results of the survey are made public, all data will be aggregated, so that individual responses cannot be identified.

In addition to ensuring the confidentiality of the substantive responses to the survey, the survey administrator is advised to reassure survey participants as to the measures that s/he has taken to safeguard the personal data associated with the survey (including name and email address). In order to make such assurances, survey administrators must also put in place protocols to ensure that the data collected in the survey will be stored securely and that access to the data submitted in the survey is limited to administrators.

Personalization

If the survey administrator decides to use a contact list for survey distribution, s/he may decide to increase participation in the survey through personalization. Personalization – namely, the inclusion of identifiers such as first name – is an automated process that utilizes data included in the contact list to individualize communication with potential survey participants. The main means of personalization is through piped text in automated communication with the survey pool. Piped text can be inserted in pre-survey communication, survey invitations, reminders and thank you messaging. It can also be used in the survey itself, since the individualized link produced through email distribution links the survey respondent to their contact list information. If, for example, a contact list includes information on a participant's major, then the survey administrator could use piped text to make a reference to the participant's major in a survey question. For example:

> Q: Are you still majoring in <<piped text>>? [Y/N]

Display logic and piped text linked to responses in the survey can further enhance personalization in the survey itself.

This type of personalization is helpful in two ways: it increases the respondent's engagement in the survey, and it allows the survey to be more concise – in other words, it eliminates the need to ask respondents "What is your major?" and to ask them to select from a long list of possibilities, especially if you already have this information. However, the use of personalization precludes anonymity – in other words, when an administrator uses personalization, it is clear to the potential respondent that the administrator can identify him/her. If the data collected on the individual is inaccurate – i.e. the survey administrator has old data on majors, and the respondent has changed his/her major, then personalization can be alienating – especially if the survey does not allow for mistakes to be corrected.

End of survey message and options

Survey administrators can enhance a survey's success by including optional communications with respondents as part of the survey administration process. It is strongly recommended that the survey administrator utilize the 'end-of-survey' message option at the close of the survey. This message is displayed once the final question of the survey is answered and all the survey responses provided by the respondent have been submitted. The end of survey message can simply say, 'Thank you for completing this survey.' However, it can also contain useful information – such as a link to where the results of the survey will be posted, contact information for the survey administrator(s), or additional instructions related to survey completion.

Additionally, it is possible to set up the end-of-survey message to provide the respondent with a copy of their responses to all of the questions in the survey. This feature is particularly useful when a survey is used to gather information from individuals participating in an upcoming event, for example.

Similarly, survey administrators may wish to send a thank you message to everyone who completes the survey. This message can include the same information indicated above. It can also be used to provide respondents a document confirming that they have completed the survey (should such documentation be required). However, this option is only available when email distribution is used.

Technical consideration

People – and especially students – receive a great deal of unsolicited electronic communication. Most people utilize a spam filter to minimize unwanted emails. At UW-Whitewater, even legitimate surveys sent by university administrators, faculty and staff can inadvertently be tagged as 'spam', if precautions are not taken. The first precaution is to ask ICIT for the survey to be white-listed. The white-listing process ensures that UW-Whitewater spam filters are calibrated to recognize the communications regarding your survey as legitimate communications.

Since many students use alternative email software to view their UW-W emails, it is also recommended that additional precautions be taken when formulating survey communications. Specifically, it is best to:

- be very specific in the subject line of email communications
- use excellent grammar, spelling and punctuation in your communications (bad grammar and spelling are hallmarks of spam emails)
- do not use special characters, images, and attachments in your email communications
- ensure that the reply-to address in email communications is a legitimate and personal email address (rather than a donotreply@ … address)
- include the "click here to opt-out of future communications" link at the bottom of all email communications (the absence of this option is a key way that some spam filters identify spam email)

Administration while survey is open

Survey invitations

Regardless of the administration method utilized, a survey invitation should be sent to the survey population when the survey is launched. The purpose of the invitation is multi-fold: first, it provides the survey pool with an awareness of and access to the survey – whether that be through a personalized link to the survey or the provision of a generic URL for the survey.

Second, it provides information on the survey itself. The survey invitation should include the following information:

- information on the subject matter and purpose of the survey;
- an indication of who is administering the survey, and contact information for an individual that can answer questions about the survey, should they arise;
- a statement indicating whether participation in the survey is voluntary (and if it is, then reassurances that failure to participate will not negatively impact the potential respondent);
- information on how information gathered through the survey will be used and safeguarded – including information on whether the results of the survey will be published, how sensitive information will be handled, whether the survey is anonymous, and if individual responses will be kept confidential.

Third, the survey invitation articulates a motivation for taking the survey. Specifically, it should indicate how the respondent's participation will benefit him/her directly or indirectly (i.e. by helping university administrators improve programming). For surveys that rely on voluntary participation, administrators must consider the best ways to motivate participation – whether that be through incentives or by appealing to a potential respondent's sense of solidarity with his/her community.

Regardless of the specific content, the survey invitation should be concise and easy to read. The hyperlink to the survey should be easy to find within the invitation (i.e. bolded/centered/in a larger and/or colored font). Survey communications via email should also be tailored so that they appear to be sent from an actual email address (rather than a generic survey email 'donotreply@' email address).

If IRB requires that you provide informed consent materials to potential respondents, it is advisable to provide a link to these materials in the survey invitation. This ensures that potential respondents have a secondary means of reviewing these materials, once they have started the survey.

Reminders and thank you messaging

Reminding potential survey respondents to complete a survey is a key method of ensuring survey participation. There are several strategic considerations related to survey reminders, including:

a) how many reminders should be sent;
b) when reminders should be sent; and
c) the content of each reminder message.

The number of reminders sent depends in part on the length of the period in which the survey will be open to respondents and the distribution method. If the survey is open for a very short period (one week or less), one reminder should be sufficient. If a survey is open for several weeks or a month, then two or three reminders may be appropriate. The survey distribution method impacts the method through which reminders are distributed as well. If the survey is distributed through a contact list, survey administrators can use the list to send reminder messages to only those potential respondents who have not completed the survey. In this scenario, it may be more appropriate to send an additional reminder message, since it will only be received by individuals who have not completed the survey. It should be noted that, in Qualtrics, reminders can be scheduled at the same time as the survey invitation is sent, if a contact list is used for distribution.

In contrast, when a survey is distributed through a generic link, all reminder messages must be sent to all members of the survey pool, regardless of whether the individual has participated in the survey or not. In addition to annoying those respondents that have already participated in the survey, sending numerous reminder messages to the entire survey population can have an additional negative side effect: namely, encouraging multiple responses from the same individual – who may have forgotten that they have already participated in the survey. This can have a negative impact on data quality, especially since there is no administrative way to determine which entries are from the same individual (unless, for example, a unique pin is used to access the survey, for example). For this reason, it is advisable to send out fewer reminders if the survey was distributed using a generic link, and for the wording of the reminder to be crafted in a way that attempts to mitigate the likelihood that an individual will inadvertently complete the survey multiple times.

The timing of the reminders is also at the discretion of the survey administrator. It is considered good practice to send out reminders closer to the close of the survey, rather than at evenly spaced intervals. For example, if a survey is open for three weeks, the survey administrator may schedule the first reminder to be sent out seven days after the initial invitation was sent to potential respondents, the second reminder to be sent three days before the survey closes and the last reminder to be sent twenty-four (24) hours before the survey closes. In conjunction with strategic content, this type of reminder schedule can create a sense of urgency that may increase participation.

To that end, the content of the reminders should reflect the timing of their mailing. In the example above, the first reminder may begin, "A week ago, we sent you an email asking you to participate in our survey. This survey will only be open for two more weeks…" followed by additional information about the survey. In contrast, the second and third reminders would emphasize the fact that the survey is about to close, and that this represents the individual's last opportunity to take part in this important survey.

It is important to remember that the reminder emails should contain all of the essential information contained in the original email, albeit in condensed form. This includes links to additional information about the survey as well as informed consent information (if required) and the name and contact details of an individual who can answer questions potential participants may have about the survey. *The survey administrator should not expect the potential respondent to have kept the pre-notification or original invitational email.*

In addition to reminder emails, thank you emails can bolster participation over the long term – especially for surveys that are administered to the same survey population by the same individual, office or institution. Thank-you emails can only be sent out if a) a contact list was used to distribute the survey or if b) a current email address was requested from participants as part of the survey. In the first scenario, the survey administrator can set up the survey to automatically generate a thank you note each time the survey is completed. In the second scenario, it is necessary for the survey administrator to download the results and send out thank you emails to the email addresses captured in the survey using his/her office email program.

In either case, the thank you message can be formatted in a variety of different ways, depending on its purpose. In addition to thanking the participant, the language of the thank you message can be tailored so that the recipient can utilize the survey as a document confirming completion of the survey. Alternatively, it can be used to promote other surveys or events, or activities that may be of interest to the respondents. For example, a survey sent to individuals who participated in a professional development event on campus could ask the respondent to rate the event, and then follow up the submission with a thank you note promoting upcoming events. Similarly, the invitation email for this same survey could include information (such as documents or a copy of the PowerPoint Presentation from the event) that was promised to event participants. In other words, the post-survey communication with the survey pool can serve many purposes.

In addition, it should be noted that Qualtrics allows the 'end of survey' message that appears once a respondent has completed the survey to be tailored – it can be personalized, or even list all of the respondent's responses to the survey questions. This 'end of survey' message is a great space in which to include details regarding the survey – such as a link to more information about the survey, or contact details for survey administrators.

Retakes and administrative contacts

When using a contact list to distribute the survey, it is possible that a respondent may contact the survey administrator in order to request a survey 'retake'. This will occur when the survey administrator has configured the survey to prevent ballot stuffing, and it is especially likely if the survey is not configured to allow individuals to stop a survey and restart it again at another time. A personalized retake link is available next to the entry for each submitted survey. The survey administrator can copy this link and send it to any individual that has requested a retake. By using the personalized link, the software will still know that this individual took the survey, and it will replace the initial submission with the new information, thus eliminating the possibility of the individual responding to the survey multiple times with different responses (which would otherwise lower the quality of the data).

As mentioned various times above, it is advisable to provide all potential respondents with administrative contact details that will allow potential respondents to contact the survey administrator with potential questions. Ideally, this information should be provided at every point of contact, including all correspondence with potential respondents, and as part of the survey itself (for example, in the introduction to the survey and the end-of-survey message). The provision of a link to a website containing information about the survey is a nice addition, but it does not replace the need for a contact for questions.

Survey lifespan

When using an electronic survey, survey administrators must decide when to open the survey (i.e. make the survey available for completion) and when to close the survey (i.e. prevent the survey from receiving further submissions). The ideal lifespan of the survey – i.e. the length of time in which the survey is available for submissions – depends heavily on the survey administrator's expectations regarding the survey population, the effort associated with completing the survey, whether or not the survey pool is somehow compelled to respond to the survey, and external factors (such as holidays, final examinations, etc.). Generally speaking, it is common for a survey sent out to a general population to be open for three to four weeks. That said, some surveys are open for 5 – 7 days, and others are never closed, as data is being collected on a rolling basis.

It is helpful to close a survey when the data gathered in the survey is time-specific, and when the data gathered is intended to be utilized in reporting. Closing the survey allows the survey analyst to determine the survey response rate as well as the demographics of the respondent population – both of which are key metrics in survey analysis. The survey administrator can easily adjust the lifespan of a survey administered electronically, if, for example, response rates are lower or higher than expected. Therefore, while the survey lifespan should be preliminarily determined before the survey is launched, it is acceptable to adjust the lifespan to accommodate unexpected developments in data collection. However, any change should be noted and communicated to the survey analyst, as extending or cutting short the survey lifespan may impact the quality and nature of the data collected through the survey.

Post-survey administration

Partial responses

Once a survey is closed, it is important to consider how best to handle partial responses to the survey. Partial responses occur when a survey participant decides to discontinue participation in the survey after answering at least one survey question but before completing all survey questions. Surveys can be set up so that such respondents can return the survey at a later time and start again where they left off in the survey. For that reason, partial responses are not included in the data until the survey is closed.

In some surveys, it is very important that all questions be answered; if the data collected through partial responses is not usable because the respondent did not complete all sections of the survey, it may be best to discard partial responses. However, most well-designed surveys are structured so that even partial responses contain data that can be analyzed and provide useful insights into the issues addressed in the survey. In that case, it is often prudent to save all partial responses, and then determine which ones to discard on a case-by-case basis. For example, partial responses in which the respondent only answered the preliminary or gateway question can often safely be discarded. However, if the gateway question provides information – such as, "Are you 18 years of age or older and therefore able to participate in this survey?", the data on the number of respondents who answered "No" and were therefore sent to the end of the survey is valuable information, and should be included in post-survey administration analysis.

Determining response rate

A key metric in most survey analysis is the survey response rate. This is usually presented as a percentage – namely, the number of complete (and in some cases partial) responses to the survey divided by the number of people in the survey population. If the survey population is known – i.e. the survey was sent out to a contact list of individuals or sent out as a generic link to a defined group of individual (such as the chairs of each department, or all students in the Economics Department), it is relatively easy to determine the survey population. However, if survey participation is promoted through another means – for example, through a generic link on a website or on a poster/flyer – determining the likely number of people who had the option of participating in the survey but chose not to is much more difficult. The importance of determining a response rate should be taken into consideration when determining the survey distribution method that best suits the project.

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