

Making Empathy Practical

Surveys: Structured Insights at Scale

Surveys collect structured information from many stakeholders through standardized questions, enabling both quantitative analysis of trends and qualitative insights through open-ended responses. This method extends your reach beyond what's possible with in-person research methods alone.

Goal

This tool helps education and nonprofit leaders gather data efficiently from many stakeholders, identify quantifiable trends and patterns, compare experiences across different groups, and establish baselines before implementing changes.

Advice

- Be ruthless about relevance—include only questions that directly serve your objectives
- Keep surveys short to improve completion rates
- Use simple, direct language and avoid jargon or complex sentence structures
- Test your survey with a small group before full distribution
- Include both closed-ended questions (for quantifiable data) and open-ended questions (for rich insights)
- Consider the accessibility needs of diverse respondents
- Provide clear instructions about purpose, time needed, and confidentiality
- Look for patterns that vary across different stakeholder groups



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What It Is

Surveys collect structured information from many stakeholders through standardized questions. This method enables quantitative analysis of trends and patterns while also gathering qualitative insights through open-ended questions, reaching more people than interviews or focus groups alone.

When to Use It

- To gather data from many stakeholders efficiently
- When you need quantifiable metrics or trends
- To validate patterns identified in qualitative research
- For comparing experiences across different groups
- When anonymity might encourage more honest responses
- To establish baselines before implementing changes

Process

Before the Survey

1. **Define clear objectives:** Determine exactly what you need to learn.
2. **Identify your respondents:** Consider who has relevant experiences and perspectives.
3. **Choose appropriate question types:**
 - Multiple choice for clear categories
 - Rating scales for attitudes or satisfaction
 - Rankings for priorities
 - Open-ended questions for elaboration
4. **Craft effective questions:**
 - Use simple, direct language
 - Ask about one concept per question
 - Avoid leading or biased phrasing
 - Include "Other" options where appropriate
 - Consider demographic questions carefully

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Process, cont'd

Before the Survey, cont'd

5. Structure the survey thoughtfully:

- Start with engaging, straightforward questions
- Group related questions together
- Place demographic questions at the end
- Keep length reasonable (5-10 minutes optimal)

6. Test your survey: Pilot with a small group to identify problems.

During the Survey Administration

1. Provide clear instructions: Explain purpose, time needed, anonymity level.

2. Choose appropriate distribution channels:

- Email
- Text message
- Paper forms
- Online platforms
- In-person administration

3. Set reasonable time-frames: Allow enough time for response while maintaining momentum.

4. Send reminders: Increase response rates with gentle follow-ups.

5. Monitor responses: Track completion rates and preliminary patterns.

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Process, cont'd

After the Survey

1. Clean your data: Remove incomplete or clearly erroneous responses.
2. Analyze systematically:
 - Calculate percentages, averages, and other relevant statistics
 - Compare responses across different groups
 - Code open-ended responses into themes
 - Look for correlations between different questions
3. Create visual representations of key findings.
4. Share appropriate results with stakeholders.
5. Consider follow-up research to explore surprising findings.

Tips for Success

- **Use branching logic:** Create custom paths through the survey based on previous answers to improve relevance.
- **Consider mobile-first design:** Optimize surveys for smartphone completion to increase response rates.
- **Use interactive elements:** Incorporate sliders, drag-and-drop ranking, or other engaging question types when appropriate.
- **Build in validation checks:** Include questions that help verify consistent and thoughtful responses.
- **Avoid absolute frequency terms:** Use specific time-frames ("weekly" vs. "frequently") for more accurate self-reporting.
- **Provide estimated completion time:** Set clear expectations at the start and include progress indicators throughout.
- **Provide value:** When possible, share insights gained with respondents.

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Ethical Considerations

- Clearly communicate how data will be used and protected.
- Make participation truly voluntary.
- Provide options to skip sensitive questions.
- Be transparent about anonymity levels.
- Consider cultural and linguistic needs of diverse respondents.
- Avoid unnecessary collection of personally identifiable information.

Analysis Questions

- What patterns emerge from quantitative responses?
- How do responses vary across different stakeholder groups?
- What themes appear in open-ended responses?
- How do survey results compare with insights from other research methods?
- What questions raised more questions that need further exploration?
- What findings were surprising or contradicted your assumptions?