Considerations for Deploying Online Survey Research

Introduction: One should always be careful not to administer online surveys until they are knowledgeable in best practices and other techniques that maximize response rates and quality data.

Below are some compelling topics that, when considered carefully, will help position your research to provide the desired data, while ensuring validity and meaningful relationships with your participants.

1. Choosing the Correct Survey Type

Zarca Interactive offers three distinct types of surveys that cater to different research goals. Choosing among these types of surveys speaks to exactly what is trying to be accomplished with the research.

Private with Unique Key

Private surveys offers the most control over a survey. This survey uses a unique identifier, or password, to restrict each participant to one survey submission. This is useful when survey administrators want to eliminate "ballot-box-stuffing", or the intentional submission of multiple surveys in hopes of skewing the results in a particular direction.

Private Survey Features:
Intelligent reminders - Prompt those who have yet to respond to your survey to do so
Distribution Report - Track participation and monitor real-time response rates
Save and Continue Later - Respondents can complete a portion of the survey, save it, and complete it at a later time

Private with Common Key

This type of survey allows participants to participate in the survey more than once and is good for website polls or group email lists. Everyone taking a Common Key survey has the same key, or password, but anyone with that key can take the survey.

Public without Key

This type of survey provides respondents a short web address (URL) in the invite which allows anyone who reaches the link to participate in the survey. Public surveys also allow for repeated participation and are useful on website posting or bulk email invites.

2. Customizing Survey Invitations

As a best practice, survey administrators should always allocate time to customize their survey invites.

Customizing invites includes a range of actions such as:

- Branding with logos, company color scheme, and other elements unique to the surveying organization
- Crafting persuasive (but not misleading) subject lines
- Writing body copy that communicates research goals and how participants will benefit from their efforts
- Including an Opt-out link with a customized message

The goal to customizing a survey invite is simple: to increase the level of response for that survey. By having an invite with an engaging subject line, appealing look and feel, informative body content and an easy-to-locate opt-out link, those who view the invite will be impressed by the professionalism it exudes and appreciate its thoughtfulness.

3. Launch Date for Surveys

From the time of year, all the way down to the time of day, timing of survey invites has a noteworthy effect on the response rate that will be received for that survey. The key to choosing the best time to launch surveys is understanding the lifestyle of your participants.

Seasonality - Stakeholder groups your organization wishes to survey all have their busy times throughout the year and informed survey administrators will plan initiatives around these periods. For example, Finance managers probably won't have time to complete a survey during the fiscal year's end when all the annual financial reporting is carried out.

Vacations/Holidays - Surveying constituents during peak vacation periods or near holidays should be avoided. For example, launching a survey the Friday before Independence Day Weekend will yield a low response since many respondents will be preparing for their holiday plans. Likewise, sending out surveys in late November, or in the months of December and January, won't produce a high response because there are several holidays during this time of year that are consuming most people's schedules.

Day of Week/Time of Day - Studies have shown that the optimal time to send out online survey invitations is the middle of the day, during the middle of the week. The logic here is that if you send invites toward the end of the week, people are getting ready for their weekend plans. Likewise, if you send invites in the beginning of the week, people are still recovering from their weekend. As far as the middle of the day, studies have also shown that around lunchtime, people tend to be less productive and may do non-work-related things such as checking email or reading news.

4. Choosing the Question/Answer Types

Selecting the type of question that your respondents will answer depends on several factors and can have a big impact on their survey experience. The main idea is that certain question types should be chosen based on the data you desire from your respondents.

Here is breakdown of the information each question type offers:

Date - Asks for a specific day, month or year in various formats; used to extract the dates for particular events (e.g. date of birth)

> " The goal for customizing survey invites is to compel your audience to participate in a survey and increase response rates. Creating engaging subject lines, sharpening the look and feel and communicating your brand effectively, all play important roles in obtaining a positive reaction. "

Numeric Allocation - Allows respondents to enter numeric values and validates total; used when trying to gain insight on the percentage of something (time, money, effort, etc.) That respondents are using in a particular situation (e.g. time spent exercising per week)

Drop-Downs - Save valuable space on a survey with hidden answer options; used when less than 7 answer options except for common-knowledge lists like states, languages, countries and only one is to be selected

Radio Buttons - Lists answers vertically or horizontally; used when fewer than 7 answer options and only one is to be selected

Text Boxes - Allows respondents to give completely open-ended feedback; used when personal reflection or some other verbatim comments are desired (e.g. Comments or suggestions regarding recent visit to a store)

Rating Questions - Measures perceptions of respondents in either a scale or drop-down format and computes a weighted average; used when trying to understand how respondents rate a particular issue (e.g. Rating quality of customer service)

Multiple-Select Questions - Allow respondents to select more than one answer option in a checkbox or listbox format; used when respondent should have the option to choose multiple answers

Grid Questions - Groups individual questions together in a grid format; used when there are questions of the same topic and they have the same answer options

Matrix Grid Question- Allows respondents to answer a series of sub-questions with varying answer options in one, grid question; used when trying to conserve space.

5. Sending Test Invitations

Sending test invites allows survey administrators to catch potential mistakes before they happen. This feature facilitates the best practice of checking work before submitting it. Test invites enable you to see exactly how the invite will appear to its recipients. An objective, fresh look can proactively prevent would-be public relations messes.

6. Spacing Questions

It is important that questions and pages are evenly spaced for increased ease of navigation and to maintain participant interest. Having too many questions on one page can frustrate respondents and make them abandon your survey.

7. Utilizing Anonymity

Some feedback situations are better served by making surveys anonymous. This means that the email and IP addresses of participants are disconnected from responses and no personally-identifiable information is viewable. The only information that can be viewed are the actual responses.

This feature is very useful when survey administrators want honest, direct feedback from respondents who may have an issue with being completely up-front. Employee Satisfaction Surveys and Leadership Evaluations are a couple prime examples of surveys where respondents may feel less inclined to be completely forthcoming for fear that their opinions may be viewed unfavorably by management.