

Approaches to survey design and implementation

FAST FACTS

Advantages of using surveys to collect quantitative and qualitative data include:

1. Surveys can reach a wide population and are therefore able to achieve a high level of representativeness.
2. Questions can be asked in the same way for all respondents.
3. Surveys can be administered in many modes (i.e. paper-based, telephone, online or face-to-face) with relatively low cost.
4. Depending on the mode of delivery, surveys can ensure participant anonymity.

Steps in survey design:

1. Determine survey purpose and target population.
2. Consider methods.
3. Develop and pilot questions.
4. Ethical considerations.
5. Launch survey and monitor response rates.

The content of this fact sheet stemmed from a Family and Child Evaluation Community of Practice session. It focuses on some of the key steps involved in designing and administering surveys, with tips relevant to each step.

1. Determine survey purpose and target population

Firstly, consider the purpose of the survey to help you determine the type/s of information you need to collect. Issues to consider may include:

- What do you need to know and how will survey information contribute to your evaluation?
- Who will be using the information you gather and for what purpose?
- Who will your target population be and what criteria will include or exclude people from completing the survey?

2. Consider methods

There are a number of different methods to consider for survey implementation. Each has advantages and disadvantages which may vary with the target group. You should select the survey method that is best suited to your needs, giving consideration to:

- the purpose of the survey and how sensitive the topic will be
- time restrictions
- team capacity
- experience in survey design and delivery
- resource availability.

It is also worth considering which may be the most effective method/s for your target population, particularly when considering geographical restrictions, language or cultural differences and literacy levels. The following table provides some common options for survey methods.

EVALUATION FACT SHEET



Survey design

	Online	Telephone (or CATI)	Face-to-face
Expense	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires minimal staff time or training Generally the least expensive option 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less expensive and quicker than face-to-face More expensive than online, particularly if targeting a large sample 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally more expensive than other approaches
Pros	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful for reaching large, dispersed populations Provides immediate results Responses can be kept anonymous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Allows team to have some control over delivery and obtain additional information or clarification of responses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Capacity to answer respondents' queries or concerns, and detect and resolve potential respondent errors Capacity to read non-verbal cues Generally achieves high response rates Allows interviewer to build rapport with respondents and assure confidentiality of responses
Cons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not be practical or culturally appropriate for some groups May be perceived as impersonal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be time-consuming for participants and requires them to be available at time of call Training is required for survey administrators 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires staff training and resources – poor interviewer skills or lack of consistency across interviewers can introduce errors Time-consuming to administer
Example application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful for targeting young people with access to the internet and mobile apps or those who are busy and want to respond in their own time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful for targeting a population that has phone access and are likely to be available during business hours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Useful for exploring sensitive topics or complex questions that need to be clarified, particularly where gender, literacy and cultural considerations should be taken into account



Survey design

3. Develop and pilot questions

The type and content of questions you ask should reflect the purpose of your survey. The following section provides some tips on designing questions.

Types of questions

Closed-ended questions provide a fixed set of responses and are generally quick and easy to answer and analyse.

These can be useful when you need to compare results across respondent groups or want to limit the time contribution of respondents.

Open-ended questions may be time-consuming for participants and analysis. However, they can result in more in-depth information about responses you may not have previously considered.

Accordingly, these may be more useful for exploratory studies.

The type of questions you are able to ask will also depend on your choice of methods:

- Will you be asking sensitive questions that would be better suited for face-to-face?
- Do you need to go into a lot of detail about responses/questions? How complex will they be?
- Are screening questions needed to determine whether the respondent is qualified to answer the question?

Language

When designing your questions, you should reflect on your target population and the method you have selected.

If using complex language, questions or terminology, respondents may not be able to or willing to provide answers.

Writing well-structured questions requires you to keep the purpose of the survey in mind (i.e. not asking questions purely for interest, but rather consider how answers will be used).

When phrasing questions, you should:

- use plain English and avoid jargon
- use phrasing appropriate for your target group
- provide clear instructions for both respondents and interviewers if using face-to-face or CATI
- think about the logical ordering of questions (introducing non-threatening/sensitive questions first), and allow respondents to skip questions they don't feel comfortable answering
- be sure response categories are relevant to questions and are exhaustive/don't overlap
- avoid double-negative, double-barrelled and leading questions
- limit questions to keep the survey short, while ensuring you gather the information you need.

Piloting

Surveys should be piloted with a small sample of the target group, or similar group, and questions should be refined accordingly.

Piloting surveys will provide guidance on whether terminology is understandable, whether the flow of questions and responses is logical, the mode of survey delivery is appropriate, and the estimated time for survey completion.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Better evaluation provides a list of resources for different types of survey methods and advice for planning and designing surveys.

<http://www.betterevaluation.org/en>

Queensland Government Statistician's Office can assist agencies with designing and conducting their surveys.

Email: govstat@treasury.qld.gov.au

<http://www.qgso.qld.gov.au/about-us/our-services/surveys/index.php>



Survey design

4. Ethical considerations

As best practice, researchers should seek to ensure:

- Respondents are informed of the purpose/value of the survey and why they have been invited to participate.
- Respondents are given an opportunity to consent to participating, and they understand that participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw at any time.
- Confidentiality and anonymity is maintained.
- If the survey poses any risks or addresses any sensitive topics, respondents should be made aware of the supports available and be provided with contact information if they have any concerns or queries.
- Data security is maintained.
- Results are fed back to respondents.

Additional resource: Australian [National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research](#)

5. Launch survey and monitor response rates

Securing a high response rate can be hard to control, particularly when using less intimate methods of survey administration (i.e. self-completion/online). Response rates can be a source of bias and large non-response rates can be misleading if the data is only representative of people with certain characteristics.

The following tips may help to increase response rates:

- Write a good survey that is easy to complete and tailor administration to respondents (should be concise and easy to understand).
- Provide an introduction or cover letter to explain to the respondent why their participation is valuable or benefits them in some way.
- Clarify length of survey and approximate time taken to complete.
- Ensure participant anonymity.
- Advertise survey purpose and administration details in advance.
- Monitor data regularly.
- Carefully document who receives and completes surveys.
- Follow-up respondents and send reminders.
- Consider using appropriate incentives to acknowledge respondents' time.