The Savvy Survey #4: Details in the Design¹

Glenn D. Israel and Jessica L. O’Leary²

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, & Treadwell, 2009; Israel, Easton, & Knox, 1999)
- Online surveys to capture information on knowledge, attitudes or behaviors (see Lamm, Israel, & 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

¹ This document is AEC394, one of a series of the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date October 2013. Revised December 2016. Visit the EDIS website at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu.

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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 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 & Meekins, 2004). Mail and mixed-mode surveys typically use 4 or 5 contacts (see Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014). 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., 2014). 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 & Dillman, 2011; Millar & Dillman, 2011).

**Personalizing the Survey Process**

Research shows that personalization has a small but significant effect on increasing response rates (Dillman et al., 2014). 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., 2014). 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, & Haller, 2013; Wilcox, Guilliano, & 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.

References


Table 1. Typical contact procedure by mode.

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