



## Designing a Community Survey

### Description:

This tool offers a list of steps to create effective surveys.

### How it can be used:

Conducting community surveys can be an effective way of gathering information from a large group of people. However, creating an effective survey that collects the type of data you are seeking can be tricky. Follow these basics to help you write effective survey questions.

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Written surveys (or online versions of surveys) are very common when doing community assessments and planning. Understanding the benefits and limitations of surveys is important, as this is one approach (among several) that you will use to collect information from your community, partners, and stakeholders.

### The Pros and Cons of Surveys

#### Pros of written/online surveys:

- Large numbers of people can give their input
- Low cost
- People can respond at their convenience
- Avoids interviewer bias
- Provides a written record
- Easy to list or collate responses
- Wide range of respondents
- Minimal training needed

#### Cons of written/online surveys:

- Often has low return rate
- Responses may be limited if not including open-ended questions
- May not truly represent of the whole group
- Respondent may skip sections

### How long should your survey be?

When determining the length of your survey, remember that less is more. The longer it is, the less likely it is that people will take the time to do it. People get bored with long surveys, and usually won't even bother to look at a survey that is more than a page and a half long. Also, requiring long answers may lose your audience. Try to keep your survey down to one page.





## How to create a great survey

### 1. Define a clear goal for your survey.

If you want to understand why community members aren't attending activities you're providing, then a goal could be *"We want to understand the key factors that are causing people to not attend our activities"*. This is preferable to *"We want to have better programs"* (although that is a good overall goal, it might be too broad for a short survey). Once you have your goal, you can use it as a reference point to prioritize the questions you want to ask.

### 2. Design your survey.

A critical component to good survey design is how you make the survey look and feel for your respondents. The better the visual design of your survey, the easier it is for your respondents to complete your survey (and the more data you have to make decisions).

When designing your survey, your primary goal should be to get meaningful insights from your survey. Aside from trimming down your question set to the most critical questions, you also need to think about how to compete for your audience's attention. While you may be tempted to make your survey colorful or your typeface large and bold to stand out, you'll be better off if you consider the following best practices:

- Context is important – depending on the topics or content, consider the types of colours or fonts that you use. For example, you'd use a playful font and colour when surveying your staff on potential social club activities. Compare that to the font and colours you'd use for a survey on health services your community needs. Does the survey represent the importance of the content?
- Make your content easy to read – Allow the content to be the "star of the show". Make the text easy to read (black or dark grey text) and keep background colours to a minimum. Shorter questions are more likely to be completed.
- Give indications of where they are in the survey – if your survey is longer, it's good to manage respondents' expectations. Tell them upfront how long the survey should take. For online surveys, add a progress bar so respondents can see how far along they are in the process.

### 3. Ensure your questions are clear.





Clarify all terms and explain anything that could be interpreted differently. Stay away from jargon and acronyms. Use the same language in different questions, for example, if you use the term “*clients*” in a question, don’t use “*patients*” the next time (if you’re referring to the same group).

4. Focus on using closed-ended questions.

For most (or all) of your survey, use questions that offer pre-populated answer choices for the respondent to choose from – such as multiple choice, checkbox questions, or a Likert scale (explained at the end of this tool). These types of questions are easier for people to answer and provide you with quantitative data. Also use words instead of numbers. For example, use “*highly likely*” and “*not very likely*” as opposed to “*2*” and “*4*”.

Using open-ended questions asks for feedback from respondents in their own words. These take longer to answer and to code in your analysis, so try to include one or two maximum, and place them at the end of your survey.

5. Keep the more personal questions to the end.

Treat your survey like a conversation. Keep your early set of questions light and straightforward, and then slowly move towards more personal questions.

6. Don’t let your survey get too long.

You’ll be rewarded with a higher completion rate as well as more thoughtful responses for the questions you include.

7. Don’t ask leading questions.

In other words, try not to put your own opinion into the questions. Doing so can influence the responses in a way that doesn’t reflect respondents’ true experiences. For example, instead of asking: “*How helpful or unhelpful were our friendly staff?*” Ask: “*How helpful or unhelpful were our staff?*”

8. Be careful about using absolutes in your questions.

Absolutes like “*every,*” “*always,*” “*all,*” in the questions make the respondent either agree or disagree with a strongly worded question without allowing for more nuanced opinions. For instance, if the survey asks:

“*Do you **always** eat breakfast?*”

- a. Yes
- b. No





Your respondents might eat breakfast most of the time, half of the time, or on occasion, but you wouldn't know the difference once the responses come back.

9. Stay away from asking double-barreled questions.

Double-barreled questions are when you ask for feedback on two separate things within a single question. For example:

*"How would you rate the quality of our programs and our support?"*

How would the respondent answer this question? Would they address the quality of the programs or the quality of support? Maybe they'd skip the question or leave your survey altogether. You can fix this by choosing one or breaking it into two separate questions.

10. Consider including a survey incentive.

Incentives can help get more responses. Potential incentives range from entering respondents into a draw to giving respondents a gift card if they answer all of your questions.

11. Preview your survey before you send it.

This is a key step. It's important to review all the questions through the lens of your survey goal. Have you covered the key elements you need? Do the questions make sense? Share it with others to get their feedback first before sending.

### **Using the Likert Scale**

Likert scales are quite popular because they are one of the most reliable ways to measure opinions, perceptions, and behaviors.

Compared to binary questions, which give you only two answer options, Likert-type questions will get you more detailed feedback about whether your program was just *"good enough"* or (hopefully) *"excellent."*

This method will let you uncover degrees of opinion that could make a real difference in understanding the feedback you're getting. And it can also pinpoint the areas where you might want to improve your program or service.

An example of a question and potential responses using a Likert scale would be:

*How satisfied were you with the parenting program?*



- a) *Very satisfied*
- b) *Somewhat satisfied*
- c) *Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied*
- d) *Somewhat dissatisfied*
- e) *Very dissatisfied*

