

Survey Design Essentials

Tips for making an effective survey for addiction and mental health researchers

1



Purpose

- Define the research objective
- Explore whether similar research has been done in the past
- Consider how the data from the surveys will be used

2



Sample

- Determine who can address the objective
- Consider respondents' locations, ages, education, and languages spoken
- Consider incentives (such as cash, prizes)
- Consult with best practices involving [Indigenous Peoples](#) and other [marginalized populations](#)

3



Questions

- Ensure that questions are specific and measurable, easy for respondents to understand, and comfortable to answer
- Consider types of questions that might be used:
 - Open ended - require a written answer
 - Closed ended - answers are based on fixed choices

4



Format

- Keep the survey brief and relevant
- Use headers and bold font to distinguish survey sections
- Put important questions at the start of the survey, and more sensitive questions towards the end
- Determine whether the survey should be on paper, online, or a mix
- Finish by thanking the respondent for their time

5



Testing

- Pilot the survey to assess reliability (its consistency), validity (whether it measures what it is intended to measure), format and length, and its overall effectiveness
- Revise as needed and plan for future quality checks along the way

Instead of this...

...Do this

Using acronyms, double negatives, and complex words



Keep it simple and aim for a 7th grade reading level

Asking two questions at once ("were staff approachable and helpful?")



Ask one question at a time ("were staff approachable?" and "were staff helpful?")

Offering too many or too few answers to choose from when using Likert Scales



Consider offering 5-7 answers to choose from when using Likert Scales

Offering an unbalanced scale of answers with no middle point (such as a scale of 1 to 4)



Offer a middle answer choice (such as a "3" on a scale of 1 to 5)

Leading the respondent to an answer (such as "how inaccessible was the service?")



Word questions neutrally (such as "how would you describe the service's accessibility?")

Using a complicated layout with too many fonts and text sizes



Create a simple layout using fonts and text sizes consistently for headings and body text

Assuming respondents have the resources they need to do the survey



Determine whether respondents may need computers, internet access, pens, etc.

Paper surveys

vs

Online surveys

Easy to develop using basic computer software

Development

May require staff with computer programming expertise to develop

Not susceptible to technical difficulties

Technical difficulties

Can be susceptible to technical difficulties

Can reach respondents who may not have internet access

Internet access

Some respondents may not have internet or be comfortable using it

Response rates can be high, especially if administered face to face

Response rates

Response rates can be low, especially if survey is sent by mass email

May need a trained interviewer to administer the survey

Administration

Can use automated skip patterns to make the survey easier to follow

Take more time to distribute and complete

Time

Can be distributed and completed quickly

Responses need to be entered manually for analysis

Analysis

Responses can be directly downloaded for analysis

Generally higher cost

Cost

Generally lower cost

References

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