Association Metrics

Member Surveys: Getting Back to Basics

by

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Over the years of presenting research workshops to association executives, the same basic questions seem to be raised in almost every workshop. This article provides answers those commonly asked questions.

What size sample do I need?

Researchers will draw a sample, instead of contacting each member of the population, when they want to save time and/or money. When using an online survey, we recommend contacting the entire population, since the time and money involved are the same for the entire membership as it is for a sample. Surveying all members gives everyone the opportunity to offer their opinions, exposes all members to the marketing effects of the survey, and produces more completed surveys. When you contact all members you eliminate sampling bias and eliminate the need to oversample small segments of your membership.

If you are collecting data via telephone and you have no experience from previous telephone studies, start with an estimated response rate of 50%. If you are planning a mail survey, use an estimated response rate of 10%.

How many completed surveys do I need for statistical significance?

The confidence level that is typically used in social science research is 95%. A level of precision of +/- 5% at 95% confidence can be achieved with 383 responses, if you have 100,000 members or more. Smaller associations would need fewer completed surveys to achieve the same level of precision (example: 357 completed surveys are needed for an association with 5,000 members).

When analyzing responses by demographic characteristic, 30 respondents per segment are recommended.

How long can my survey be?

Survey length is critical, because the longer the survey, the more likely it is that respondent fatigue will set in, resulting in less thought being put into questions later in the survey, and increasing the likelihood that respondents will abandon the survey. A rule of thumb is that it should take no longer to complete a survey than it takes to drink a cup of coffee. Ideally, surveys should be able to be completed in ten minutes or less. This applies to paper surveys as well as online surveys. Telephone surveys can generally be a little longer because of the ability of the interviewer to engage the respondent.

You can increase the completion rate on longer surveys by using questions that require less mental processing. It is easier for a respondent to choose an alternative from a closed ended question than to provide a written response to an open ended question. If you are asking questions about numerical amounts (e.g. income), allow respondents to select from ranges of numbers rather than requiring them to provide an exact amount.

When faced with a long survey, eliminate questions that do not specifically address the objectives of the study. Resist the temptation to ask questions that would be "nice to know".

For online surveys, respondents will be more willing to complete a longer survey if there is a progress meter on each page that allows them to estimate how much more time it will take to complete the survey.

How can I shorten the survey without sacrificing information?

You can eliminate some of the demographic questions in the survey if you can retrieve this information from the respondent's membership records. By capturing the respondent's member identification number or some other identifier (e.g. email address) in the survey, you can append information from your internal database to members' survey responses.

In some cases, questions can be combined. For example, instead of asking respondents if they have ever attended the Annual Convention (yes/no), and then follow up an affirmative response with a question regarding when they last attended, simply ask respondents when they last attended the Annual Convention and include the alternative "Have never attended".

Survey questions should not be combined if two separate factors are being rated. For example, do not ask members to rate the feature on your association website that allows members to register and pay for events online. Registering and paying are two different factors, and members may want to rate these two factors differently. In general, if a survey question contains the word "and", it is probably combining two separate factors and the question needs to be broken into separate questions.

Should I offer an incentive, and if so, what kind?

We recommend using an incentive in order to generate a higher response rate. This helps to ensure the representativeness of the survey participants, the larger number of completed surveys provides for a higher level of statistical precision, and more completed surveys enable more segmentation analyses.

Some researchers prefer to give a small incentive to every participant. We have found that a sweepstakes drawing of three to five larger prizes provides more of an incentive, limits the financial liability to only those items, provides for more manageable fulfillment, and is less likely to encourage individuals to repeat the survey in order to get multiple incentives.

The incentives can be cash based (e.g. $100 gift card), merchandise based (iPad), or association based (free annual membership renewal). The key to any incentive is that it has to have sufficient value to the member to encourage participation, without breaking the bank. We recommend the cash based incentive, as some individuals will likely already have the merchandise being offered, and some members have their memberships reimbursed.

Does the order in which the questions are presented in the survey make a difference?

As you arrange your questions, think of a funnel – wide at the top and tapering to a narrow spout at the bottom. Your survey should start with general questions, and then get more specific as the survey progresses. Keep in mind that any information revealed in early questions will influence the respondents' frame of mind for later questions. Asking members to rate the value of their membership early in the survey will produce different results than asking them to rate the value of their membership after they have been asked to rate the association's member benefits, advocacy efforts, meetings, educational programs, and website. We prefer to ask members to rate the value of their membership early in the survey for a top-of-the-mind unbiased opinion.

We also recommend that overall rating questions be asked before detailed rating questions. Therefore, ask members to rate educational programs overall before asking them to rate your specific educational programs, overall website before details of the website, and so on.

The questions that are more personal in nature, such as demographic questions, should be placed at the end of the survey. Respondents are less likely to abandon a survey when faced with personal questions once they have invested several minutes in taking the survey. Only the demographic questions that are used as qualifiers for skip patterns should be used early in the survey.

We use different scales for our questions. Do the scales matter much?

Researchers who studied scales concluded that the optimal number of scale points is five to seven. A scale with five data points provides sufficient discrimination for statistical analyses, and seven data points is typically the most that individuals can process. Researchers concluded that participants who are presented with a ten point scale tend to use the lower part of the scale if they are somewhat pessimistic by nature, and focus on the upper end of the scale if they are generally more optimistic.

While a 7 point numeric scale (1 – 7) may be simple to administer, the underlying problem with any numeric scale is that respondents are free to define each data point, i.e. the respondent decides what constitutes a rating of 5, compared to a rating of 6. Researchers have found that labeled scales (e.g. excellent, very good, good, fair, poor) provide more reliability than numeric scales and are more consistently interpreted.

What is the purpose of asking demographic questions?

The demographic information of each respondent needs to be collected for two reasons. First, demographic information allows for segmentation analyses of responses. In addition to understanding how all participants as a group responded to a particular question, it is also valuable to know where there are significant differences by member segments (e.g. type of member, age, gender, geographic region, certifications held, professional specializations, etc.).

Second, by comparing the demographic characteristics of the respondents to the demographic characteristics of your entire member population, you can determine the representativeness of the survey participants and determine if weights need to be applied, and how to apply them. (Weights are used by researchers to ensure that results are not influenced by underrepresented or overrepresented segments of the membership.)

What is wrong with presenting research results as averages?

An average is an appropriate statistic for questions regarding amounts (e.g. income, length of membership, time spent on website, etc.). Presenting the results of attitudinal questions as averages is misleading. If one member rates an educational session as excellent, and another member rates the session as poor, the average would show that you have two members who rated the session as average, which is not the case. Remember that when using averages, high responses and low responses offset each other.

A better statistic for presenting attitudes and opinions is the Top 2 rating. This simple statistic uses a five point labeled scale (excellent, very good, good, fair, and poor) and presents the cumulative percentage of those who gave an excellent or very good rating.

Conceptually, this can be thought of as the percentage of members who gave a grade of A or B.

If you would like answers to your research questions, or would like copies of the author's research papers at no charge, visit www.associationmetrics.com.

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