Health Outcomes Insights

Getting targeted answers to patient behaviour and outcomes

ONLINE SURVEYS

AN eBOOK
How to get the best out of your online survey

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Introduction

Web-based surveys are having a profound influence on survey methodology and has truly democratised the survey-taking process.

Software, capable of producing survey questionnaires, is available to the general public at an affordable cost, enabling anyone with a web site to conduct a survey without a lot of difficulty. For that reason, the range and the quality of online surveys vary considerably.

Web survey design focuses more on programming ability and web page design rather than traditional survey methodology (Couper, 2001)* and because of this the technology involved in developing online surveys has come from those with a background in technology, rather than the survey methodology professionals.

With so many online survey design services, it is is not uncommon to see such claims as "Get your survey up on line 15 minutes" as part of the draw. Unfortunately, life is not quite as simple as that. Yes, you've got the online software to produce your survey but, it does not stop there.

"Rubbish in, rubbish out" is a well know phrase and is what happens when a survey is designed without skill and experience. Your survey costs time and money but, the results are meaningless.

This eBook outlines some of the key issues that need consideration when designing online surveys.

5 Key steps in constructing your online survey

Constructing a survey whether it's paper, telephone or web based, is more than just writing the questions.

1. The first and most important thing you must do is have a plan based on the following questions you need to ask yourself:

- *Do I have the expertise and resources?*
- *What decisions am I trying to inform?*
- *What am I trying to measure? Attitudes? Experiences etc?*
- *Who is my target audience?*
- *Should I use paper or an online survey?*
- *What kind of statistics do I want to come out of this project?*
- *What will my analysis look like?*
- *How will I communicate the survey findings?*

Based on your answers to the above you now need to focus on the specific elements of the questionnaire in the context of whether it's a paper or web based questionnaire.

Identify research question: This needs to be objective and specific (e.g. Why does practice B have significantly higher missed appointments than practice A?).

2. Operationalise the research question

There are **TWO key** steps in operationalisation the research question:

a. Formulating Concepts into Variables i.e. Define **Variables** that will measure your **Concepts** i.e. *"missed appointments"*

b. Formulating Variables into Measures i.e. Define **measures** for the variables. E.g. *3 or more missed appointments per patient over X period of time*.

5 Key steps in constructing your online survey

3. Identify coverage and general content to answer the specific research question

For example. there might be a difference between patients with chronic and acute health problems in terms of missed appointments. You therefore, need questions in the survey to measure this variable and others related to research question.

4. Construct the survey:

- *Keep the questionnaire as brief and concise as possible – 20 minutes max to complete.*
- *Select the appropriate question format e.g. single and multiple choice, rating, ranking*
- *Place response options in progressive order – from lower to higher*
- *Avoid ambiguity and complex questions*
- *Use filtering questions sparingly*

- *Use open-ended questions sparingly*
- *Divide long surveys into sections*
- *Write an introduction to the survey*
- *Place personal and confidential questions at the end of the questionnaire*

5. Get feedback from the initial field test (pre-test)

Undertake a small field test with typical respondents and revise questions as necessary.

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10 Tips on constructing your online survey

1. Be aware of the reasons why respondents fail to complete online surveys

There are numerous reasons why potential respondents fail to complete online surveys. These range from how well the invitation email has been constructed through to the survey's content and design. When designing your online survey be aware of the following:

- *Over use of open-ended questions*
- *Questions arranged in table format*
- *Fancy or graphically complex design*
- *Pull-down menus,*
- *Unclear instructions*
- *Absence of navigation aids*

2. Use a welcome screen with details of the survey

This is the first interaction your potential respondent has with your survey so it needs to be attractive and motivating.

The welcome screen needs to emphasise the ease of responding, and shows respondents how to move to the next page. The page should also include details about how the information will be used, whether it's confidential or will be shared or anonymised. It should include details of the organisation and contact details if the respondent has any queries.

3. The first question is very important

There is evidence that the first question on the screen can have a significant impact on whether the respondent continues to complete the survey or not. So make it's easy to answer, does not ask for sensitive or embarrassing information and applies to all your audience. and is not a filtering question.

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4. Limit question line length to 20 words

A question comprising about 20 words is good practice. However, it's not just the number of words but, also the number of concepts the respondent has to keep in mind when answering the question.

5. Use conventional format

Avoid fancy or complex graphics and layout. Also the choice of font colour is important. Keep to a black or grey colour font against a white background which will ensure the screen looks clean and tidy but, also is suitable for respondents who are colour blind.

Graphic language – font sizes and variations (bold/italic), boarders and tables

Symbolic language – e.g. arrows to guide the respondent through the questionnaire

Numeric language – numbering questions and response options

6. Keep to one question per screen

Keep to one question a screen as this enables the respondent to focus on one thing and avoids the respondent having to scroll. Having one question per screen also enables efficient use of instructions and question skip logic.

Cleo D. Redline and Don A. Dillman, 1999. "The Influence of Auxiliary, Symbolic, Numeric, and Verbal Language on Navigational Compliance in Self-administered Questionnaires.

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7. Give an estimated time to complete survey

This does not have to be accurate but, be realistic. When using one question per screen, the respondent has no way of knowing how long the survey will take. Providing a realistic time prior to the survey is a useful guide for the respondent. Don't under estimate the time to complete the survey. You will lose your respondents if they are still completing the questionnaire 10 minutes after they should have finished.

8. Insure the survey takes no longer than 20 minutes

A 20 minute survey is about the maximum you can expect respondents to adhere to before survey fatigue sets in. Building in the ability to save the survey at anytime and return later to complete will help minimise respondents abandoning the survey altogether if the survey is going to take longer.

9. Provide a progress bar

Over the past few years, the progress bar has become an important addition to motivating the respondent to complete the survey. Adding over the bar "you've almost completed the survey' or a percentage count will also add additional feedback. The progress bar serves to keeping your respondents engaged with your survey. Continually updating the respondent on the distance they have progressed through the questionnaire makes them feel more and more committed to completing the survey. However, progress bars can only be shown with a one question per screen arrangement..

10. Provide motivating cues

In addition to the progress bar, additional statements on the screen that encourage respondents to continue can do no harm in helping the respondent to continue to complete the survey.

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10 Tips for writing great questions for your online survey

Questionnaire deign is both an art and skill requiring much work and time. Poorly designed survey questions will result in "rubbish in" and "rubbish out."

1. Ensure your questions are specific

How would you rate your general practice? This is very unclear what the question is asking. Is it about accessing your GP services, ease of making appointments, waiting times? Be specific in what you are asking. How would you rate the time you have to wait for an appointment to see a doctor?

2. Avoid loaded and leading words

Do you agree the NHS is severely underfunded? Should smoking in carsd be prohibited? Biased or strong words can make a lot of difference in how informants respond to a question.

3. Avoid double-barrelled questions

How would you rate the friendliness of your doctor and practice nurse? The question should be split into two.

4. Confusing or unfamiliar words

At what time do you normally eat dinner? Understanding of the word dinner can vary across different parts of the country. Dinner can be understood as either the meal at lunchtime or the meal eaten later in the evening.

5. Ensure response options are mutually exclusive

Responses options should not overlap making the choice difficult for the respondent. E.g. Age: 15-20, 21-26, 27-32 years.

6. Avoid long questions.

Questions should not have more than around 20 words.

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7. Balanced and unbalanced scales

Unbalanced scales (where the majority of the response options are either positive or negative) are suitable in some cases where for example, respondents are more likely to have a particular view. However, balanced scales (where equal and negative responses are provided) should be used in general.

8. Misplaced questions

Whenever possible group questions together when they relate to a specific topic e.g. smoking behaviour.

9. General questions before specific questions

How would you rate overall, the impact of the treatment you are currently receiving on your life style? Followed by: How would you rate your ability to eat what you like due to the treatment you are currently receiving?

10. Ensure your response options are exhaustive

Are you providing all the response options to answer the question correctly? If not you will need to do a pre-test using the "Other" category to identify those options which need to be included.

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11 Easy ways to improve response rates to your online survey (1)

Low response rates is always a problem for survey practitioners. However, there are a number of things you can do to improve response rates to your online survey.

1. Contacting your audience

You need to use different approaches including, email, blog posts of the forthcoming survey. You will also need to think about the different outlet channels your particular audience has access to. Letting your potential audience know in advance can raise interest and the arrival of the survey does not come as a surprise.

2. Personalise your survey invite

f you can personalise your invite email this can result in a 4%-5% increase in survey returns.

3. Ensure the first question is easy to understand

There is evidence that the first question on the screen can have a significant impact on whether the respondent continues to complete the questionnaire or not.

4. Keep your invitation email short

First the email must look professional and you will need to provide some information about the survey, how the person was selected, what are the benefits of the survey including benefits for the respondent, approximate time to complete, confidentiality and a contact name if the respondent wants to check anything out. This should be followed by a simple link to the survey and a "Thank you."

5. Use a welcome screen that is motivating

The welcome screen needs to emphasise the ease of responding, and shows respondents how to move to the next page. The page should also include details about how the information will be used, whether it's confidential or will be shared or anonymised.

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11 Easy ways to improve response rates to your online survey (2)

6. Use a welcome screen that is motivating

The welcome screen needs to emphasise the ease of responding, and shows respondents how to move to the next page. The page should also include details about how the information will be used, whether it's confidential or will be shared or anonymised.

7. Avoid multi question screens

Keep to one question a screen as this enables the respondent to focus on one thing and avoids the respondent having to scroll. Having one question per screen also enable efficient use of instructions question and skip logic.

8. Avoid the over use of graphics

Graphics and internet features can distract from the content and purpose of the survey. Keep things simple.

9. little things really do matter in survey design

Pay close attention to physical layout and what might appear to be trivial issues, i.e., the placement of skip or filtered questions, overly-crowded design, visual and graphic images, and the misalignment of response boxes.

10. Send email reminders. Some respondents respond by return and hopefully, your survey returns will rise as time passes however, if your returns are flat lining or there's a point at which you see a decline in responses, this is the time you will need to send a reminder email. This is usually around two weeks. The email should include a summary of the first email, including benefits and confidentiality. Also stress that everyone's responses are important to the survey. How many reminders should you sent?

11 Easy ways to improve response rates to your online survey (3)

Probably two reminders, as evidence shows there is little increase with more than two. Take time in writing both the first and reminder emails as theses can significantly impact on response rates. Also make sure you are not sending reminders to those who have already responded or declined or do not wish to be contacted.

11. Promise to publish your survey results

It's often the case that respondents contribute to a survey and hear little more afterwards. With the increasing amount of online surveys, potential respondent are more and more reluctant to participate, unless they see some value in the survey either for themselves or others. It's also unprofessional to expect someone to give 20 minutes or so of their time not to receive any feedback what so ever – even a "thank you."

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When should I send out a reminder to my online survey?

Response rates to surveys can be notoriously low and is one of the most significant problems affecting the validity of the survey results. However, there are number of things that can be done to improve the chances of getting a good response to your survey, which really starts at the design stage of the questionnaire.

One important approach is sending out reminders to your online survey. The question is when and how many times do you send a reminder? If the questionnaire has been well designed, and your invitation email has been properly constructed etc. you see an increasing response for about two-weeks which then begins to flatten out. If no action is taken by the researcher, the response rate will then decline until it's no more than a trickle.

So when should the first email reminder be sent?

To determine this, daily returns need to be logged and plotted as a graph. Once a plateau is beginning to be seen that's the point at which your email reminder is sent. See as how to construct a reminder email. This is can be around two weeks from the launch of the survey.

It's worth noting that the intention of the reminder is not to convince those not interested in participating but, as reminder for those not having had time or have put the survey to one side to complete later.

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# How do I calculate the response rate to my online survey?

A not uncommon mistake in calculating response rates is to work it out as the number of returned questionnaires in the case of paper as a percentage of questionnaire sent or handed and for online questionnaire, the number completed as a percentage of invitations sent out via email. This is an incorrect approach and as a result the calculated response rate will be lower.

	N %
Email invite to complete online survey	N=150=100%
Out of scope	
(i) Invalid email address	N=10
(ii) Should not have been included:	N=5
Total out of scope:	N=15=10%
Remaining in scope:	N=150=15=135=100%
Total non response	N=15=10
(i) Deleted email:	N=5
(ii) Survey not completed:	N=5
Total non response:	N=10 (7.41%)
Final response rate:	100% – 7.41% = 92.59%

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DON'T HAVE TIME OR EXPERTISE TO CREATE YOUR ONLINE QUESTIONNAIRE? LET US HELP YOU.

TALK TO US TODAY

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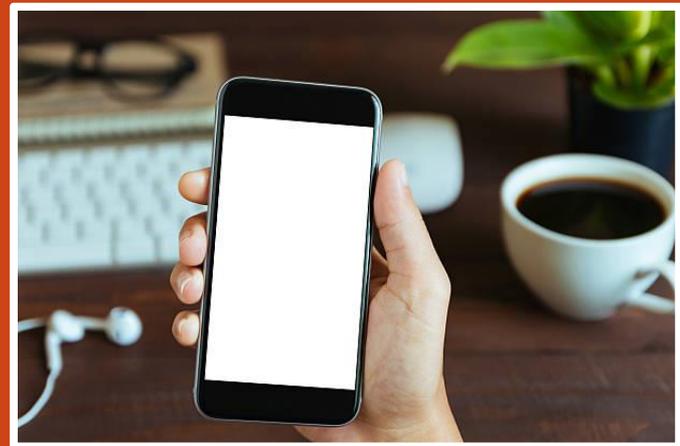
About Health Outcomes Insights

Health Outcomes Insights help healthcare agencies and pharmaceutical companies across a range of conditions including diabetes, get targeted answers to patient behaviour whenever health outcomes are part of your programme.

Our services include:

Clinical Questionnaire Design Services

Market & Forecasting Survey Design for the Pharmaceutical Industry

Clinical Outcome Assessment (COA) Development

Improving Patient Recruitment and Retention in Clinical Research

Consulting and training

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