Designing & Formatting Surveys

Law Enforcement Community Surveys Training Module 2

Christian Peterson

Image courtesy of https://www.pexels.com/search/questionaire/

"What should I consider so I have a survey that people want to fill out and complete?"

Design and format impacts the quality of the data generated by your survey questions, the sample size, your response rate, and the eventual success or failure of your project.

These design and formatting elements can be helpful in developing a successful survey:

- **Clarify Your Objectives**
  - Establish clear goals before you start designing your survey.
- **Make it Short (and then shorter)**
  - Your audience is presented with surveys everyday, from supermarkets, coffee shops, to service providers. You want to make the audience want to participate by making the potential value of participating high and the energy to participate low.
- **Make the Survey Easy to Fill Out**
  - Avoid anything that may be confusing or frustrating.
- **Build Commitment to the Survey**
  - Know your audience and give them reasons to want to participate.
- **Pilot Test Your Survey**
  - Every survey designed can always be improved. Make sure you are putting out the best survey possible the first time around.

Clarify Your Objectives
Establish clear goals before you start designing your survey.

What do we want to learn from this survey?
- Write down all of your objectives in the form of research questions.
- Prioritize the list.
- Try to narrow the focus to three to five topics.
- Document the research questions.

EXAMPLE

Police Department A's research questions focus:
- How safe do people feel in our community?
- What crime/public safety issues are of greatest concern to our residents?
- What crime prevention strategies do residents support?

Police Department B's research questions focus:
- How many residents had direct contact with a police officer in the past 12 months?
- Do people feel that they were treated fairly during these encounters?
- Are there racial/ethnic differences in how residents evaluate these interactions?

It should be clear that the final questions asked, the sampling process, and the data analyses for these two community surveys would be quite different.

Evaluate the research questions for:
- Will the questions on the survey result in data that answers your questions?
- Is the proposed sampling process going to get the right people given your objectives?
- **If not**, more work is needed before you launch your survey.

Make it Short

Make the audience want to participate by making the potential value of participating high and the energy to participate low.
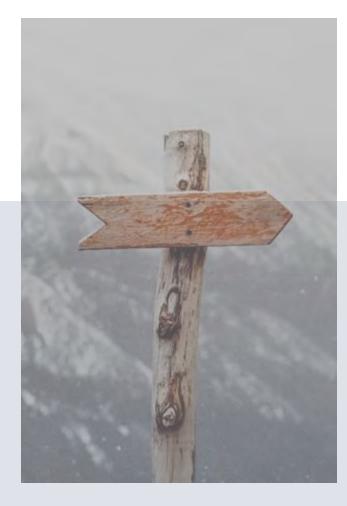
Everyone is doing surveys!

- Visit your local coffee shop and your barista asks you to rate their service on a short questionnaire.

- Get the A/C fixed in your house and the technician gives you a web link to their feedback system.

- Buy something online and ten days later, an email arrives asking you to rate the product.

The competition among people administering surveys is stiffer today than at any time in the past.

DO THIS

Help shift their decision in your favor by keeping the survey SHORT.

- Keep the survey under 15 minutes for the typical respondent.

- Ten minutes is even better unless you have reason to believe that your survey will tap into a lot of intrinsic motivation.

- If necessary, you might need to revisit your prioritized list of research questions and drop some of the items. It usually is better to get valid data on a small number of topics than questionable data on a large number.

Make the Survey Easy to Fill Out
Avoid anything that may be confusing or frustrating.

Key elements to make a survey easier to fill out.

Provide instructions where needed.

- Give simple instructions for anything that might not be immediately obvious to a respondent.

Help people transition from one topic to the next.

- If your survey addresses different topics, provide brief transitions from one section to the next. Sometimes it is also helpful to explain why you are asking certain questions.

Use consistent formatting.

- Try to develop a consistent pattern in the design, formatting, and layout of your survey.

Limit how many open-ended questions you include.

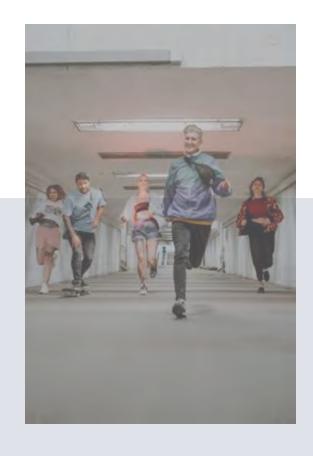- While the information you collect from these items can be extremely valuable, they take people a lot more time.

Use filter questions.

- Some of the questions that you want to ask may not apply to all respondents.

DO THIS

Were you contacted in the past 6 months?
❑ Yes…(Continue to next question)
❑ No….(Skip to Question 8)

Build Commitment to the Survey

Know your audience and give them reasons to want to participate.

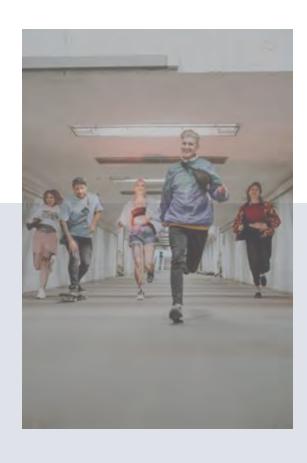**Key goal in doing surveys is to maximize your response rate.**

Provide a cover letter or introduction to the survey.

- A well-designed cover letter builds commitment by engaging their interest and, in some cases, by appealing to their sense of civic responsibility. **At a minimum, your cover letter should answer the following questions:**

1) **Who** is conducting the survey, 2) **What** you are asking them to do, & 3) **Why** you want them to participate – how will your agency use the data.

*Note: **Who** is conducting the survey: Someone known and respected in the community should sign the cover letter.*

Make the survey look professional.

- Avoid disorganized and unprofessional designs and formats.
- Avoid spelling errors, major grammatical issues, formatting inconsistencies (e.g., font, font size, margins, spacing, numbering, etc.), and poorly articulated questions.
- Take the time to get feedback, revise, and improve your form before you distribute it to survey participants.

Build Commitment to the Survey (con't)
Know your audience and give them reasons to want to participate.

Key goal in doing surveys is to maximize your response rate.

Make it interesting.

- Crime and public safety are topics that most people find interesting and personally relevant. Try to capitalize on this interest in your cover letter. Likewise, the initial questions you ask should be the most engaging and relevant items from the survey.
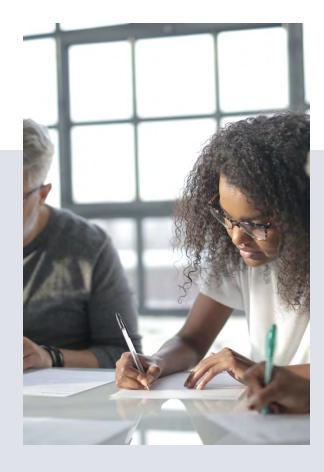
Be as neutral as possible.

- People are highly attentive to the tone of communications. Even a hint of your opinion on a given topic may be enough to lead a person to reject your survey.

Save difficult, upsetting, and controversial questions for the end.

- Once people have invested a certain amount of time in a task, they are more likely to complete it, even if it involves a little discomfort.

Do not ask for anything you do not need.

- Carefully review the draft of your survey and ask whether each question is really needed. Is it critical to answering your top research questions? If not, you should delete the question.

Image courtesy of Photo by cottonbro from Pexels

Pilot Test Your Survey

Every survey designed can always be improved. Launch the best survey possible the first time around.

Test to optimize, make user friendly, and avoid headaches down the road.

Tips on piloting your survey

- Conduct a pilot-test before you distribute the form to your full sample.

- Testers can be people at work, family, friends or even a small community group to fill out your survey and provide feedback.

- Check how long it takes them to complete the survey.

- Get feedback on the cover letter, instructions, layout, formatting, wording of questions, and response formats.

- Practice entering the data from the pilot test into a computer or download the data into MS Excel if you are using an online survey program.

- Does the survey design facilitate accurate data entry?

- Does the export from your online system go according to plan?

- Are you able to run the analyses needed to answer your primary research questions?

A wise man said…

"Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try."
— Atul Gawande

Do Not Re-invent the Wheel

- Some, even most, of the topics you want to include in your survey may have been covered in prior surveys.

- Look for other community surveys on the Internet, as many other agencies and cities have surveyed their communities about crime and policing.

- Search academic literature using an online tool like Google Scholar (Can come with a lofty fee if you're not within academia or with an academic partner).

Additional Resources

- Dillman, D. A. (1991). The design and administration of mail surveys. Annual Review of Sociology, 17(1), 225–249.

- Fanning, E. (2005). Formatting a paper-based survey questionnaire: Best practices. Practical Assessment Research & Evaluation, 10(12), 1–14.

- Sills, S. J., & Song, C. (2002). Innovations in survey research: An application of web-based surveys. Social Science Computer Review, 20(1), 22–30.

Source & Acknowledgements