

Little feedback, the wrong sample size and poorly designed surveys all lead to low response rates

FINDING A CURE FOR SURVEY FATIGUE

A downward trend in survey response rates is often blamed on the fact that people simply become tired of taking surveys. But there are ways to avoid the malaise setting in, says Angela Sinickas, a key one being making sure that people feel their opinions are actually being listened to. Here she shares three common causes of survey fatigue and how to deal with them.

There are three situations that are most likely to create plummeting survey response rates:

- 1) When a group never hears the findings of past surveys, or any resulting changes, they begin to think their opinions don't matter. If their past opinions were valued so lightly, they feel less urgency to share further opinions.
- 2) When the group being researched is relatively small, researchers typically need to poll the entire group on each survey rather than querying a random sample. For example, if you have 1,000 employees, you would need to obtain 259 responses to have results accurate within a margin of error of 5 percentage points. If the company is typically receiving a 25-percent response rate on surveys, that means that all 1,000 employees need to be invited to participate in the survey to get about the minimum necessary number of responses for a sufficient level of accuracy. Unfortunately, even for larger groups, researchers sometimes survey the whole group on every survey instead of identifying the right size random sample.



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- 3) When surveys are badly designed, respondents quit them midway through. The respondent's feeling is: "If the company can't be bothered to design a good survey, I'm not going to waste my time taking it." Some major survey design flaws include questions that are difficult to understand, questions with insufficient or inappropriate response options, or questions that seem to have little relevance for the respondent. Other major design turn-offs are surveys that are too long or that are composed mostly of open-ended essay questions, both of which take too much time to answer. Finally, asking too many demographic questions, especially at the beginning of a survey, compromises respondents' sense of anonymity and kills their desire to answer even the first real question.

The following steps will help overcome these three problems.

Coordinate surveys

To avoid asking the same people to respond to too many surveys within a short time, coordinate all employee or customer surveys through a clearing house so that the timing of surveys doesn't overlap and you don't ask questions for which answers are already available.

Send the survey to only a sample of the audience (although you'll need a statistician's help in selecting a sample of the right size). If you know several surveys will be administered about the same time, pick mutually exclusive random samples at the same time so that no one person receives more than one survey during that period.

Use short surveys

The shorter the survey, the more likely people are to give you their time. If you have 100 questions that must be answered, break them into three separate surveys of about 33 questions and administer them to three, mirror-image random samples. You'll be surveying more people, but each participant's time commitment will be relatively minor.

Also consider doing very short "stealth surveys" by phone, for which you don't obtain advance permission. People might not even know they've been surveyed. As you (and a team of volunteers) have these conversations with respondents, you would record their answers on a questionnaire.

Connect research to results

Some companies have a long history of not communicating results or outcomes of previous surveys. If that's true of your organization, try these two techniques:

- On a regular basis, when announcing changes the company is making, connect the changes with related survey results – even if a change wasn't made solely because of the research. Your audience will get the message that stakeholder opinions are a regular factor in the way management makes decisions.
- In the invitation to a new survey, begin with key findings and changes that were made based on a similar past survey, and ask respondents to let you know through the new survey if the company is still on track. This way your potential respondents hear that completing surveys does result in changes – at the very moment they're determining if your latest survey is worth their time. scm