

Real, Fast, Feedback: A Guide to Using Survey Websites

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Abstract

This is the second in a series of technology-based factsheets focusing on helpful web 2.0 applications you may not be aware of. To better comprehend the needs of your clientele and colleagues, it is essential to utilize survey websites. Doing so will help you become more efficient in obtaining constructive, timely feedback in order to adjust programming; therefore optimizing the impacts of your educational activities. Referencing the most influential survey experts, this factsheet will teach you how to get started creating successful online surveys. I urge all educators to make use of online survey tools and take advantage of this developing technology.

Introduction

Online surveys are a valuable tool to help discover what your clients think about your programs and determining program impacts. They are currently the most efficient way to acquire data from those you serve in a very timely manner. Getting started and navigating various survey websites can be overwhelming, but the following outline will clearly explain how to move forward so you can confidently obtain the feedback you need to be successful.

Facts & Feelings

We can no longer afford to base our decisions solely on gut feelings. Luckily, we are working in the connected age when more people are using the Internet than ever before (internetworldstats.com,

2011). The technical skill of our nation have drastically increased—signaling that now is the time to start making the most of the inexpensive online survey tools at your disposal (Archer, 2003).

If surveying is not being included in your decision making process, you are guilty of *Truthiness* (2006). This was Merriam-Webster's 2006 *Word of the Year* made popular by comic Stephen Colbert, defined as “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.”

Gone are the days of phone surveys or snail mail surveys. Work time expended and mail-costs are much too high, plus incoming results are too slow in our fast-paced society. Currently, the “best strategy for minimizing the cost of collecting data and maximizing representativeness is to use e-mail invitations” with a link to your online survey (Israel, 2011).

Online surveys are simple, low-cost and an effective way to obtain feedback on your activities. In fact, the response rates of those who trust and work closely with you will be high (Heerwegh, 2005). Receiving prompt, insightful feedback into activities allows you to recognize different perspectives so your program, event, camp or workshop can be adjusted to enhance impact.

Getting Started

The selection process to find the most useful survey website can be overwhelming. Have no fear, start

by following the steps below and you will be on your way to successful surveys:

Survey Steps

1. Define goals and objectives - Brainstorm what you want to learn from the survey you create.
2. Select tools - Examine the points in features section below while considering the cost and service of each online survey application.
3. Draft questions - Use specific questions that are simple and quick to answer.
4. Test-drive survey - Set up the survey and test it out yourself.
5. Distribute survey - Send the survey link in an email.
6. Analyze stats - The survey tool will generate stats for you to review.

Features

Knowing the features a survey website offers helps to determine if your needs can be met.

Start by looking for the features below and ask the following questions:

- How difficult/simple is it to actually create a short survey with 3 to 5 questions?
- What types of questions are available—multiple choice, open ended, matrix etc?
- How many surveys can you create for free?
- Is the number of questions you can ask limited?
- How many responses can be collected per survey?
- What reports are offered? Can you view a summary, or intricate report?
- Will you be able to export the data in the format needed?

Cost

Each survey website will offer a free (and limited) version of their service—however, the free version could do more than you need despite the limitations. Nevertheless, evaluate the pricing structure and find out if the extra features are worth the cost. Test the free version, you can always upgrade later.

The bullet points listed above in the features section are types of limitations found in the *free version* of various survey applications.

If you decide to set-up a paid account, compare payment plans and analyze the following:

- What features are included?
- What are limitations of such plans?
- How long is the agreement period?
- How long can you test-drive the service before you sign-up?
- Is there a 30-day free trial?
- What are the costs of the different plans?
- What discounts are available? Some services offer free upgraded versions for academic customers. Also check retailmenot.com for coupon codes.

Help & Assistance

It is important to know if the survey website selected will be available when needed. Find out what the site is like by sending a quick question via email to the survey's customer support. Some applications even offer an instant chat service, try the chat service and consider the following questions:

- How long does it take for you to get a reply?
- Was the response helpful?

Top-Rated Survey Websites

To help make the selection process easier, listed below are four top-rated survey websites today. Included under each web address are the primary restrictions to the free versions:

www.questionpro.com

- 10-question limit per survey
- 2 survey limit per account
- Unlimited responses allowed per survey

www.surveygizmo.com

- Unlimited questions per survey
- Unlimited surveys per account
- 250 responses allowed per survey, per month

www.surveymonkey.com

- 10-question limit per survey
- Unlimited surveys per account
- 100 responses allowed per survey

www.zoomerang.com

- 12-question limit per survey
- Unlimited surveys per account
- 100 responses allowed per survey

To learn more, search the Internet for other survey tools by pasting these keywords into any search engine bar: “free” and “survey” and “tools”

Survey Guidelines & Tips

T. M. Archer (2003), in his article “Web-Based Surveys,” published by the *Journal of Extension*, provides practical tips for conducting a web-based survey:

- Keep the survey short.
- Make the questions simple and quick to answer.

- Give the survey a natural flow. Transition questions between one thought to the next.
- Test each survey using different web browsers e.g., Safari, Internet Explorer, Firefox.
- Send out a reminder within 8 to 10 working days. Keep invitation and reminder messages short and concise.

In addition to Archer’s advice, in D.A. Dillman’s book, *Mail and Internet surveys—The tailored design method* (2000), we learn essential design guidelines for web-based surveys:

- Send the survey as a link through email; keep the invitation brief and personal.
- Introduce the online survey with a greeting that is:
 1. Motivational,
 2. Highlights ease of response, and
 3. Directs how to proceed to the survey.
- Do not require respondents to answer each question before being allowed to move on to subsequent questions.
- Allow the question to be visible on the screen when drafting a response.

Conclusion

Online survey tools provide extensive feedback to what clients think and how activities are being received. At no significant cost, online surveys can be created for large sample sizes using an easy method of data collection. Identifying client needs and building successful programs just became easier.

Getting started requires outlining the steps, evaluating the features, considering costs and services of a variety of free survey website applications, then jumping right into a free service and test-driving one to see if it meets your needs. After becoming familiar with basic rules and guidelines for conducting web-based surveys, a tool can be selected that will make data collection and analysis simple and easy. You will no longer be guessing what people thought of your events—you

will *know* because an online survey was used to find out.

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