

Writing Good Survey Invitations

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Let's say that you have decided to use an electronic survey as a data collection method. How much thought have you put into the email you will send to your potential respondents? It is an often overlooked, but important, step in the assessment process. With the amount of email people receive these days and the number of survey requests in those emails, you really have to make your invitation stand out from the crowd to increase the likelihood that someone will click on a link and spend time answering questions.

Some of the information covered in this podcast comes from *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys* by Dillman, Smyth, and Christian. They provide good tips about the entire survey process. Their survey invitation philosophy revolves around increasing the perceived rewards, lowering the perceived costs, and establishing trust between you and the respondents.

To increase the perceived rewards, you definitely want to provide information about the survey itself. What is it about? Who will see the results? How will the results be used? Why should the respondent care? The more you can make a connection between the respondent and the topic, the more likely the person will respond. In addition, you want the email message to be as brief as possible to increase the likelihood of it being read.

Rather than just asking for someone to take a survey, ask for their input or advice. In general, most people are willing to help someone else out when asked, especially if it is easy for the respondent to help. You might think about wording in the email subject line: instead of saying "Take this Survey," say something such as "We Need Your Valuable Input." If you have the information, provide how past input has made a difference. When people see examples that feedback has actually been used for improvement, they will take the survey more seriously.

Just like your mom taught you, say “please” and “thank you.” That shows positive regard for the potential respondents because they understand you are asking them to do something that you appreciate. You might say something to the effect of, “We would appreciate your input about our program,” and “Thank you for taking a few minutes of your valuable time to let us know how we are doing.”

Support group values and group membership. If you can relate your request to recognizable social values, such as selfless service, respondents may feel a commitment to participate. In addition, for example, if you are asking a relatively small number of people to participate, you can explain that their input is even more important to represent people similar to themselves. If you have the ability to do this, you could explain that people like them have participated and have taken X minutes to respond.

To reduce the perceived cost of participating, here are a few tips. As best you can, you want to make it easy to respond. With an electronic survey, include the survey link directly in the email, so participants can get to the survey in one click.

Use language that respects the participant. Your communication should invite the respondent in, rather than coercing them to take the survey. You certainly don’t want to sound condescending or subordinating. Remember, the respondent is doing you a favor.

If possible, reduce the requests for personal or sensitive information. Some survey platforms allow you to preload demographic or other data so you don’t have to ask respondents to answer. That also helps shorten the survey. If you do need to ask personal questions, explain how their answers will help you. Only ask questions that you know you will need, not just because they might be interesting.

Before you send out a survey invitation, look at the calendar to send out an invitation at a time that will be convenient and least burdensome to your respondents. For college students, you might not want to send something out during final exams or other major campus events. Think about the days of the week and times of the day that will be most convenient for your audience.

When you send out the email, be sure to include a deadline for participants to respond. That may encourage them to complete it, rather than putting it off until later. If you have the ability to send

reminders to non-respondents, you can continue to reinforce that the deadline is quickly approaching. If you cannot personalize reminders to non-respondents only, you can send a reminder to your whole group, thanking those who have participated and reminding others that it is not too late.

To establish trust with your respondents, have the communication come from a known person or office. Seeing a legitimate authority in the “from” line will increase the likelihood that respondents will open the email and take the request seriously. Be sure to include contact information if someone has questions about the survey or the topic, so they don’t see the email as spam.

If you have the ability, personalize the communication with the individual’s name and/or something about them that made them part of the sample. For example, you could create an opening such as “Howdy Hannah, Thank you for attending the Career Exploration Workshop on January 25th.” That tells the respondent that they were chosen for a particular reason.

Tell participants the level of confidentiality or anonymity and how results will be reported. Some people are comforted if they are told that their responses will be reported in aggregate and no individually identifiable information will be shared.

As with any communication, you will want to have one or two people proofread your work before sending it out. Ideally, have someone who is similar to the group you will be sending it to review it for appropriate language and formality.

Thanks for listening to today’s podcast. Please let us know if this was helpful or if you have additional questions. You can contact us by calling 979-862-5624, emailing sls@tamu.edu, or coming by 222 John J. Koldus Building. Check out our website at studentlifestudies.tamu.edu for more resources and information. We hope to hear from you.