

[Partners in **Change**]



Survey:	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Excellent:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Good:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Fair:	<input type="checkbox"/>
Poor:	<input type="checkbox"/>

Partners in Change **SURVEYS 101**

We all carry out surveys – they are an essential part of finding out what our customers think about our services. It is important that they tell you what you really want to know and that they are value for money and fit for purpose. This briefing note has been designed to guide you through the process of deciding what the right type of survey is for you.

1: How ‘scientifically’ accurate do you want your survey to be?

A lot of the time we want our survey information to be demonstrably representative of the views of tenants as a whole. To make sure this is the case we need a big enough sample size and the sample is purely random – in other words every member of the population to be surveyed has an equal chance of being part of the sample. This is called ‘**probabilistic**’ sampling.

Sometimes, though, we do not need to be this accurate. It may be that we want a quick and general assessment of people’s views. An example of this could be a quick assessment of how a change in service has been received by customers. In this situation, you could survey the first 100 people who visit the office. This group may not be representative of your customers as a whole, since it only covers those who visit the office on a particular time and day – this means the sample is ‘**non-probabilistic**’. The information, though, will still be useful.

You have now decided that you want reliable survey information that is representative of your customers as a whole. The next question is:

2: How big does the sample need to be?

We often want our information to be representative of the general population with a degree of accuracy of $\pm 4\%$. The size of the sample will depend on the total population to be surveyed and there are simple ways of working this out. For instance if there is a total population to be surveyed of 2000 households, then a responses from 500 will give you accuracy of $\pm 3.8\%$ with a 95% confidence level – i.e. 9 times out of 10, the information will give you this degree of accuracy.

If you want information on a sub-group of the population, however – e.g. older people – then you will need to boost the sample to make sure the views are as representative as possible of the sub-group as a whole.

3: We now know the number of responses we need to get, how many people do we need to approach to get that level of response?

Response rates vary and you need to make a judgement on this. With a single postal survey sent out without reminders, you can usually expect a response rate of around 25% to 35%. With a couple of reminders, the response rate can rise to 40% to 50%. If you expect a response rate of 50%, then you will need to send out 1000 survey forms to get 500 back.

You will need to decide what sort of survey you want to carry out. There are four main types:

- Face to face
- Postal
- Telephone
- Email / electronic

What are the pros and cons of each?

4: Face to face surveys – what are the pros and cons?

Face to face surveys are effective and in some situations there is really no alternative. They give the opportunity for open and probing questions and you can provide the information to make sure that respondents can give informed views. They can provide a much richer picture than self-completed surveys.

Another advantage comes with face to face contact. It is a good way of making contact during major projects such as regeneration schemes – response rates are usually good. If you are looking for resident volunteers to get involved, then they are much more likely to respond positively to a personal approach.

Their chief drawback is cost and for large surveys, they are often impractical. They also need to be well-organised. If you need to spend 30 minutes going through a questionnaire with each respondent, then you want to plan the survey effectively in order to make efficient use of yours and the respondents' time. Making appointments for the interviews is a good approach.

Quick 'doorstep' surveys can also be very effective, particularly if you want to get a 'snapshot' picture and start engaging with customers.

5: Postal self-completed surveys – what are the pros and cons?

We are all familiar with postal surveys – they are probably the most commonly used. The reason for this is that they are straightforward to produce and organize and can be carried out at relatively low cost. They are invariably used for large surveys. They are best when used with closed or ‘tick box’ questions and very useful for tracking opinion over time in a rigorous way.

Their chief drawback is they are not good if you want to ask open questions or probe issues in depth. They are not much good if the respondents need to be well-informed about an issue before they can come to an opinion. Finally, response rates can be low and to ensure a reasonable high rate, reminders may well have to be sent out.

6: Telephone surveys – what are the pros and cons

Telephone surveys can be seen as a bit of a halfway house between face to face and postal surveys. There is personal contact so issues can be explained and open and probing questions asked.

On the other hand, respondents will not want to spend long on the telephone so surveys need to be fairly short. There are also difficulties with finding enough landline numbers. You will always need to write to potential respondents beforehand – no cold calling. Like face to face surveys, there is a cost associated with using surveyors, although this will be less.

7. Email / electronic surveys – what are the pros and cons?

These are really alternatives to postal surveys, but they are cheaper and more efficient. Not everyone has email or access to the internet, of course, but you may be surprised with how many of your customers have. There are now web-based organizations like Questback that will not only handle your electronic surveys, but provide an automatic analysis as well.

We have worked out our sample and decided the methodology for our survey, so what else do we need to think about?

There are three key areas where errors can occur: random error, sample error and question error.

8: What is random error?

If it is large enough, you will expect your random sample to be representative of the population you are surveying as a whole. Sometimes, though, this will not be the case – purely because of random error. For instance, you would normally expect a coin tossed 20 times to come down roughly 10 times heads and 10 times tails. This is not always the case and on rare occasions it may come down heads 20 times. Random error is often seen during times when there are lots of surveys such as pre-election opinion polls. One or two polls may show results significantly different from the rest and these are known as ‘rogue polls’. Opinion pollsters usually reckon on one in twenty polls being rogue because of random error.

Random error is also why we always refer to the ‘95% confidence level’ – i.e. if you can expect the stated level of accuracy 19 times out of 20.

You can do something about it by including ‘control’ questions where you know the answers, such as house type, to check whether the proportion responding matches the proportion you know. You can also boost the sample if the results do not correspond with what you expect.

9: What is sample error?

Sample error can occur when the methodology you use to select the sample means that it is not representative of the population as a whole. For example, if one group of the population such as people with an ethnic minority background is concentrated in a particular part of the area and you then choose to select a random sample evenly from across the whole area, then the BME population will be underrepresented in that sample. You can get around this by boosting the sample in areas where there are particular concentrations of specific groups that you want to survey.

10: What is question error?

Finally, question error is where the questions you ask do not provide you the information you want. This might be because the questions are not easily understood or cannot be answered because the respondents' do not have the relevant information.

We hope you have found this note on surveys useful.

If you would like further information about carrying out surveys and the most appropriate strategy for your needs, please get in touch with us at Partners in Change.

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