

Attributes of Surveys

Written surveys and questionnaires

Surveys may be conducted by mail, by email, or using a web-page. They also may be used to gather data from a group of individuals in attendance at an event. Surveys are useful tools to gather information for your needs assessment when your goals require:

1. A cost effective method to collect responses from a large number of individuals;
2. A method to collect responses to a fairly large number of specific questions;
3. A method to reach either random respondents or respondents who are unknown to the investigator;
4. Data that is easy to summarize and report;
5. Results that can be evaluated through the application of statistical measures;
6. A method that allows a degree of anonymity for respondents, presumably resulting in more candid responses;
7. A formal process with a permanent record of stakeholder input.

Surveys may have some shortcomings when your interests include:

8. Gathering information in an unstructured manner, such as open-ended questions;
9. Gaining insights and details from your respondents beyond those specific questions articulated in the questionnaire;
10. Collaboration and dialogue among respondents;
11. Achieving a high rate of response may require a significantly larger investment for written surveys.

Oral surveys and telephone surveys

An oral survey is similar to a written survey in that a survey instrument (questionnaire) is first prepared. However, for oral surveys, the questions are read to the respondent in-person or over the phone, and the answers are recorded by the interviewer.

In addition to the attributes for written surveys, telephone and in-person oral surveys have added benefits including:

12. Trained volunteers can reach a large number of people at relatively low cost (depending on the length of the survey).
13. Very high rates of return (completed surveys per stakeholder surveyed).
14. Responses can be entered directly into the database by the interviewer (especially for telephone surveys).
15. Opportunity exists for the interviewer to note emphasis or additional information offered by the respondent.
16. Respondents have opportunity to ask for clarification.
17. Many people express themselves better orally than in writing.
18. Oral surveys are not as strongly biased when audiences have mixed literacy skills.

Oral surveys may have some additional shortcomings including:

19. The opportunity for the interviewer to influence responses or to introduce bias.
20. A tendency for respondents to tell personal stories or to vent about an issue.
21. It is difficult to gather insights and details from your respondents beyond those inquiries articulated in the questionnaire.
22. Answers to open-ended questions are very difficult to record and analyze;
23. Too many answer categories or choices are difficult for the respondent to remember during an oral survey; true/false and yes/no questions are ideal.
24. Collaboration and dialogue among respondents does not occur.