



Postal Surveys

What are... postal surveys?

Postal surveys come in the form of a set of questions set out in a questionnaire which aim to ascertain people's opinions on particular topics. The questions are usually set out so that a respondent chooses their answer from a list of pre-determined answers however they can include opportunities to make open comment. The usefulness of this method depends on asking the right questions and response choices. Responses are normally chosen from a suggested range.

25% of market research surveys are completed by postal method. These are used when the views of a large population sample are required and where questions are simple and lend themselves to self-completion. They are unsuitable where the range of issues or questions are very involved, or where there is a high risk of non-completion without interviewer help.

The issue of non-completion can affect the validity of results if the final views are not representative of the population. If this occurs there is a requirement to undertake additional qualitative work or fieldwork in the areas of shortfall.

Why use this technique?

They provide a means of gathering a snapshot on the views of a large number of people. The results can be coded, analysed and summarised in the form of numbers, percentages and sample statistics, which allow responses to be expressed as quantified measures.

When should you use it?

This technique should be used when:

- Looking for broad measures of current performance i.e. current satisfaction
- Eliciting people's perceptions of issues
- Identifying priorities for future service delivery
- Developing issues raised through focus groups or other workshops
- Seeking quantifiable views on current issues
- Where statistical reliability is required

What type of information does it produce?


Predominantly quantitative where respondent is choosing from a range of responses although some open-ended questions will also generate qualitative data.

What are the advantages?

- Results are easy to assimilate and communicate
- Results can be presented in different formats
- It allows comparisons with previous exercises and exercises undertaken by others, if questions & samples are consistent.
- It can incorporate several issues in one survey (related issues best)
- It can provide baseline data for something you may wish to pursue
- Large numbers of people can be contacted, either targeted or at random, at relatively low cost
- The sample can be statistically accurate
- Respondents can fill out the questionnaire in their own time, which may lead to more considered responses

What are the disadvantages?


- Poor response rates particularly postal surveys (may need incentive, or reminder)
- Sample bias if too small and/or unrepresentative; is it a true snapshot of current opinion?
- It involves a lot of administrative work
- Poor design can produce misleading results
- It produces shallow qualitative data

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- It does not engage respondents in any discussion or dialogue
 - You cannot validate responses without further follow up and there is little control over who fills in the questionnaire so results may not be representative
 - It is difficult to ask questions relating to awareness
 - Questionnaires need to be kept short or they will put off respondents from filling them in

What are the costs?

- You may require research expertise in survey design & compilation to ensure validity
- It can be expensive in terms of the time to administer, in postage and in capturing and analysing data

What are the practicalities?

- You should pilot the questionnaire before distribution i.e. around the office, with a small user group
 - Clearly identify your target population
 - Ensure good response by keeping questionnaires relatively short and simple and making it easy to reply through e.g. pre-paid envelopes, incentives etc.
 - You need to assure people about confidentiality and data protection
 - You need a mix of closed questions where people choose an answer and open questions where people can provide reasons
 - Ensure you are asking the right questions by conducting some investigative work through focus groups or interviews
 - Think about your target respondents – Is English appropriate? Are literacy levels high? Are they available in Braille?
 - Think about how the responses will be analysed.
 - Do not make your questionnaire too long. Remember, a 30 question questionnaire with 500 responses requires the analysis of 1,500 pieces of data! This is often overlooked at the planning stage
 - It can be relatively easy to manage if framework is set up properly.
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Response Rates

These can vary between 20-50%. It would be sensible to expect an average of 1 in 3 using a standard 30-40 point questionnaire without a completion incentive. If wording is cumbersome or the questionnaire lengthy, response rates can be well below 20%.

How to increase response levels/returns:

- a) Make questionnaire more user-friendly
- b) Increase sample size
- c) Issue questionnaire with covering letter
- d) Translate into local languages
- e) Offer incentives or a competition

It is also possible to increase response rate by up to 15% via the use of Enumerators. These drop off/collect forms on a door to door basis giving advice/assistance.

