

Real, Fast, Feedback

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Abstract: *To better comprehend the needs of your clientele and colleagues, it is essential to use survey website applications. Doing so will help you become more efficient in obtaining constructive, timely feedback in order to adjust programming, therefore optimizing the impacts of Extension activities. Citing the most influential survey experts both in and out of the field of Extension, this article explains how to get started creating successful online surveys. I urge all Extension educators to make use of online survey tools and take advantage of this developing technology.*

Introduction

Ever wonder how your workshop was received? Thought about revamping an old program or analyzing a new one? In need of data for a program you developed? Online surveys are a valuable tool to help discover what clients think about your programs and determine program impacts.

The Need for Feedback

Extension programming cannot be based 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 has drastically amplified—signaling that now is the time to start making the most of the inexpensive online survey tools at our disposal (Archer, 2003).

Gone are the days of phone surveys or snail mail surveys. Work time expended and mail-costs are 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 online survey websites" (Israel, 2011).

Online surveys are simple, low-cost and an effective way to obtain feedback on extension activities. 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 events 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 and with trusted friends or colleagues.

5. Distribute survey—Send the survey link in an email, on a website, or social media sites. Also consider embedding the survey code into a website or as a pop-up window; another option could be generating a Quick Response (QR) code.
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 3-5 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 its service—the free version could do more than you need despite the limitations. Nevertheless, review 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. Compare payment plans and analyze the following before you pay for a service:

- 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?
- 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 to the survey's customer support email address. Some applications 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 Services

To help make the selection process easier, listed below are four top-rated survey websites today (Leland, 2011). 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

Search the Internet for other survey tools by using these keywords: "free" and "survey" and "tools."

Tips & Guidelines

In the *Journal of Extension* article, "Web-Based Surveys," Archer (2003) 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 8-10 working days. Keep invitation and reminder messages short and concise.

In addition to Archer's advice, Dillman's (2007) book, *Mail and Internet Surveys—The Tailored Design Method*, recommends essential design guidelines for Web-based surveys:

- Send the survey through an electronic medium—email, website etc. and keep the invitation brief and personal.
- Introduce the online survey 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.

Human Subjects

Using surveys to obtain feedback is not the same as conducting applied research. Federal regulations for guarding research subjects offers fundamental definitions of "research" and "human subjects," which are essential for determining the types surveys subject to regulation and review (Hicks, 2011).

To use the responses of human subjects in published research, approval from your university Institutional Review Board (IRB) is required. A university IRB is a committee designated to review and approve research involving human participants before research starts. The IRB protects the rights and safety of human participants in research (O'Neill, 2004). A researcher is required to complete a form that outlines the basis and methodology of the study, as well as attach copies of the informed consent terms and online research manner used.

Conclusion

Pinpointing client needs and building successful programs just got easier. Online survey tools provide extensive feedback to what clients

think and how programs are being received. At little or no cost, surveys can be created for large sample sizes using an easy method of data collection. Get started by outlining the steps, evaluating the features, considering costs and services free survey websites, then jumping right in and test-driving it. You will no longer be guessing what people thought of your events—you will *know*.

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