

Tools of the Trade:

TYPES of SURVEYS

If a decision is made to go ahead and conduct a survey, two more questions then emerge - What type of survey should be used, and, should the survey be of the entire population or a sample of the population being studied?

We are going to take a look at four different types of surveys - mail, group-administered, telephone, and face-to-face interviews - and discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of each one.

Mail surveys are those conducted by mailing a questionnaire to a selected group of respondents and requesting completion and return of the questionnaire. Group-administered surveys are questionnaires completed in group settings, such as at a screening clinic or in a classroom. Telephone and face-to-face interviews take place on a one-on-one basis.

MAIL:

ADVANTAGES - It is easy and relatively inexpensive to let the post office do the leg work; mailing costs are geographically uniform; special mailing lists, i.e., doctors, nursing homes, are available.

DISADVANTAGES - Historically low response rates; questions are open to misinterpretation; mailing lists may be dated; the poorer, less educated are less apt to participate; time-consuming.

GROUP-ADMINISTERED:

ADVANTAGES - Large group can be surveyed at one time; anonymity may provide more honest answers to sensitive questions; costs are low; less staff is needed than for personal interviews; controlled situation where staff can answer questions and address concerns that also ensures a high response rate.

DISADVANTAGES - Not practical for most populations being studied; members of the group are not independently chosen.

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW:

ADVANTAGES - Central location allows for close supervision of interviewers and, therefore, a high degree of quality control; questions can be repeated and interpreted; lower costs than face-to-face interviews; random-digit dialing sampling can be used.

DISADVANTAGES - Households without phones are excluded; some resistance to intrusion via telephone; inability to use visual aids, such as flash cards.

FACE-TO- FACE INTERVIEW:

ADVANTAGES - Controlled situation; very good response rate; individual behavior can be observed; allows exchange of material/information between interviewer and respondent.

DISADVANTAGES - Very expensive; time-consuming since travel is usually involved.

Traditionally, the face-to-face interview has been considered the most reliable method of data collection, especially when attitudinal behavior is of concern. Unfortunately, it is the most expensive.

Lately, there have been studies conducted claiming that interviews done by phone are fairly equivalent in quality to face-to-face interviews, and in some ways better. People are sometimes unwilling to open their door and start answering questions from a total stranger, yet, via a phone, may be willing.

Group-administered questionnaires are generally regarded as a middle-of-the-road compromise between mail surveys and personal interviews - retaining some of the advantages of both while overcoming some of the disadvantages of each. Lower cost, compared to face-to-face and telephone interviews, is a major factor for seriously considering group-administered procedures, where practical.

Mail surveys are often avoided unless some circumstance such as a legal requirement can guarantee a high response rate. Some organizations have developed methods which they claim have resulted in high/successful mail survey response rates. These methods include multiple mailings, telephone reminders, and the introduction of a "social reward" if the questionnaire is completed and returned. These "social rewards" include explaining the personal/practical uses of the survey results, being extremely polite and thankful, using personalized letters, and even offering rewards ranging from copies of the results to money. However, the additional cost of these methods may price the mail survey out of the low cost category.

Deciding on which type of survey to use is your first major step in the active survey process. You may even decide to use more than one type at different stages of the process. It is very important that you review closely the pros and cons of each type of survey in regard to your particular needs. This article has only highlighted some of the many advantages and disadvantages. Talk to others you may know who have conducted different types of surveys. Some private firms offer consulting services on this subject.