

Tip #4

IMPROVING YOUR SURVEY RESPONSE RATE

“Stop asking my opinion when it’s so painfully obvious from the results of the last two surveys that you don’t want to fix what we’re telling you is wrong.”

Many organizations are concerned about getting a high response rate to their employee survey. After all, getting a poor response makes it harder to generalize the results and make informed decisions. It causes management to question the data and often de-rails any action planning activity that might benefit the organization. So why did your survey response drop? Check out these common mistakes.

1. **Nothing happened last time.** Reports were read and then put on shelves. Results were never made public. No action was taken (or none was communicated to employees). Things went on pretty much the same as always.

A huge predictor of participation is how well the organization responded to the last survey. Employees notice lack of follow-through and it makes them cynical about taking the time to participate in the process. As one employee wrote on a survey, ““Stop asking my opinion when it’s so painfully obvious from the results of the last two surveys that you don’t want to fix what we’re telling you is wrong.”

2. **The survey wasn’t designed for the audience.** Poor design can manifest itself in two ways: survey content and survey format.

Common format problems include having too many questions or lots of open-ended questions (sort of like taking an essay test!). Some organizations forget to check literacy levels or ESL proficiency. If a large proportion of your employee base reads English with difficulty, it may be worthwhile to have your survey translated or have an oral option. People can’t respond accurately to a survey they don’t understand.

It’s also important to make sure the content is meaningful to employees. Employees respond more readily to surveys perceived as dealing with issues relevant and important to them. This is not the place to ask questions about issues that only impact a small segment of employees, unless they are part of a supplemental section that only those employees see.

3. **The process made it hard for people to participate easily.** Scheduling is the major culprit here. For most organizations, there is no “perfect” time to schedule a survey, because there is never a time when activity is at a standstill. However, common sense would tell us not to schedule during the holidays or the company’s annual “busy” season. Make sure the administration window is long enough so people don’t have to drop everything to complete the survey. Avoid the period right before union negotiations or the announcement of a major organizational change like a merger or layoff. Employees may be suspicious of your motives and hesitant to participate.

One reminder mid-way between your start and end dates can increase participation by 20-50%.

Your response may also suffer if you choose the wrong methodology, e.g., administering an Internet survey to employees without offices or computers. If employees have to take the survey on their own time, use their own PCs, or provide their own return postage, they may feel it's too much of a hassle to participate.

4. The survey took people by SURPRISE!

No one told employees in advance that the survey was coming. This lack of advance communication makes people think that the decision to survey was a last-minute one, possibly not well thought-out, and definitely not important. The survey becomes an interruption instead of an opportunity.

When surveys are sent without advance notice, you also run the risk of having people either delete them as spam (internet surveys) or toss them as junk mail (paper surveys). Neither does your response rate any good!

- 5. Announcing the survey was confused with promoting it.** You told employees the survey was coming – a month in advance. Then communication disappeared. No one reiterated the goals of the survey, or explained how employees would benefit, or how results would be used. No one mentioned it in the weekly newsletter or at the company meeting. So employees forgot about it – and we're back to #4 (above).

One of the most important factors in increasing response rates is repeated communication. Any advertising agency will tell you that running a commercial only once doesn't do the trick. The same is true with pre-survey communication. Things that are important get talked

about. Foster a sense of ownership and value – remind employees that they have a vested interest in the survey outcome. And remember that communication is two-way – if you are sending a message but employees are not hearing it, you are not communicating.

6. There were no high-level sponsors.

Every important initiative that an organization undertakes has a champion among senior management. Surveys are no exception. If senior management isn't personally involved or committed, that attitude will trickle down to the average employee, who will then feel free to say, "If they don't care, why should I?"

Involve senior management from the beginning of the process. Have them play an active role in announcing and promoting the survey. Once it is known that they are on board, it becomes harder for others to disparage or ignore the process.

- 7. There were no reminders.** Once the survey was sent, that was it. No postcards went out, no e-mails were dispatched. Pretty soon the survey became buried under a pile of papers or lost in an overcrowded inbox, and even employees with good intentions soon forgot about it.

One reminder mid-way between your start and end dates can increase participation by 20-50%. If you have a longer administration window (three-to-four weeks or more), have two reminders spaced at least a week apart. But don't overdo it; more than two reminders have little effect and may irritate people.

8. Employees worried about their anonymity.

Organizations can inadvertently thwart anonymity in several ways:

- By tracking individual participation. This often happens if employees are being paid to take the survey on their own time – a common case with frequent travelers (sales, drivers) or those who work off-site. The loss of anonymity cancels out the positive of being compensated for many people.
- By holding mandatory meetings onsite where employees are required to take the survey. Attendance is tracked via sign-in sheets. Employees have been known to come to these meetings because they were required, sit there for a few minutes, and then hand in a blank survey.
- By not explaining the use of coding (including passcodes for Internet) and demographic questions. The organization must make clear why codes are used, why personal questions (like gender or age) are asked, and what will be done with the information. This is especially

important if demographics are being back-loaded from an HRIS file instead of asked directly on the survey.

- By not having rules around reporting such as reporting aggregate data only, or needing a minimum number of responses to run a report. Questar recommends requiring no fewer than five people to be in any group before data can be displayed. Once you make your decision on the minimum number for reporting, communicate it to employees and don't allow deviations.

9. Incentives were expected to carry the day.

That pizza party or drawing was supposed to create excitement around the survey. But incentives work not because of their reward value, but because they create a sense of “guilt” among recipients, who feel awkward about accepting something and returning nothing. They're more successful with customers and consumers than with employees, who feel they “give” a great deal daily. You can try them, but don't depend on them.

