

Creating a Killer Market Research Survey

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Categories : [A Comprehensive Guide to Market Research](#)

Sometimes the best way to discover what your target market really thinks of your business is simply to *ask it*. If you've been in business for more than a couple of hours, you know that consumers have strong opinions. Offering a market research survey means giving them a formal channel to *express* those opinions. It keeps you in touch with the "real world"... or at least with that *segment* of the real world that most matters to you.

[Market research surveys](#) can be used for an enormous range of business queries: [identifying overall customer satisfaction](#), discerning prospects' expectations, deciding how to position new products, determining whether there's even *demand* for those products, discovering how customers use your product, learning about consumers' purchasing processes, [determining how effective your messaging is](#). How's your website performing? What do customers think about your return policy? At what price point would your customers likely leave you for your competition? What feature highlights will work best in your next advertising drive?

You get the point. *Any* question you might have about "the four P's" of your business (product, price, place, and promotion), your target market has answers to.

Before You Start Your Market Research Survey

There are some conditions for which market research surveys make a lot of sense. They're great when you're looking to measure something objective about your market. (We'll discuss *quantitative data* a bit more below; but we're talking data that can be analyzed through statistical methods.) They're *also* great when you have something specific in mind to measure: If you're still exploring what your survey should *ask*, [go back to your SWOT analysis](#) and [identify where your work is](#). Surveys aren't for "feeling out" the topic your *next* survey should be about.

Finally, surveys will only be valuable if you've got a relatively large sample to query. Granted, "relatively large" is... well, a relative term. The sample number you choose will depend on the size of your target market and your accepted margin of error. To state the obvious, the more responses you *get*, the more representative the patterns will *be*... though you'll eventually hit a point of diminishing returns.

[CheckMarket offers a useful sample size calculator](#) for determining the number of respondents

you'd need for a given survey. Just enter your population size, your acceptable margin of error, and your confidence level (how certain you can be of the margin of error), and the calculator will determine the number of people you should invite to participate. We've seen 300-500 respondents as a general rule of thumb; but this is hardly law. If only 25 customers respond to your pricing survey, and 24 of them say they'd stick with you if you raised your prices by 3%, but they'd leave you for your competitor if you raised them by 5%, customer 26 probably won't offer much more clarity on the topic.

So before you sit down to write your market research survey, ask yourself these questions:

- What's the purpose of this survey? What do I hope to understand about my target market through it?
- Who is the survey targeting? What market segment will best answer these questions, and give me the most reliable insight?
- Why would those respondents go through the trouble of taking my survey? What's their stake in the game? What's in it for them?
- How many respondents (or responses of a certain kind) would I need to be able to close the survey and move forward with my market research?

If you don't already *have* an engaged audience to survey (an active social following or a sizable email list, for example), there are platforms out there that allow you to pay for responses from opt-in survey-takers that fit your parameters. [Zoho Survey](#), [Google Surveys](#), [SurveyMonkey Audience](#), and [AYTM](#) allow you to choose the demographic you're targeting (by age, gender, income, etc) and create a survey to fit your budget.

Distribution Channels for Your Market Research Survey

Until not so very long ago, surveys were primarily paper forms with restricted methods of distribution: You likely used to get them in the mail, with self-addressed stamped envelopes for return post. Of course, you *can* still contact your target market via snail mail, though it's one of the more expensive ways of doing so now... and unless you're dealing with an older demographic, it may be seen as a little out-of-touch with your recipients.

You can also get in touch with participants over the phone or in person (we'll discuss [market research interviews](#) in the next section), or hand out a paper survey in your brick-and-mortar shop. The most popular channel is email, with hundreds of online platforms out there to organize and automate your surveys and [analyze your survey data](#). Surveys can also be sent via SMS or QR code to be answered on a mobile browser. The QR code might be printed on customers' receipts, for example, along with instructions on how to access the survey... or you might print the URL for

them to type in to their phones once they've left your store.

You can also share links to your survey on social media—or on online forums—using the platforms we just mentioned. If your market research concerns your website, consider a popup survey ([Qualaroo](#) and [Zoho Survey](#) both offer popup options) with questions about how your site could be made more user-friendly. If your research concerns your [content marketing strategy](#), you could embed your survey on the sidebar of your blog.

You might also explore kiosk-based tablets—from mobile survey apps like [QuestionPro](#)—to collect responses from your target audience while they're in your store, or at a business event.

Once you've chosen your channel (or channels), consider user context: Where and when might users be completing your survey? Are they at the office or at home? What device/s are they on? Are they on the move? How much time do they have? How many distractions are they contending with?

Their context will determine your survey questions (both [the type](#) and the *number* of questions you'll ask). They'll also help determine what time you'll send your survey out. If you choose an email survey, you probably won't send it out at 4:45 on a Friday when your demographic has finished checking their email for the work week... but that might be *exactly* when you post your survey's URL to Facebook. After all, you want the largest possible sample size to respond.

Tackling Your Market Research Survey Questions

Given the range of topics a market research survey can cover, we won't give you examples of "best survey questions" here. But that doesn't mean we don't have lots of tips to share! Before we dig in, however, it's worth distinguishing between two question types: *quantitative* and *qualitative* questions.

Quantitative v. qualitative survey questions

For practical purposes, the difference between quantitative and qualitative questions is that the former can be fed into a spreadsheet and quickly analyzed. Quantitative questions ask for input from a fixed set of answer options. (Think yes-or-no questions, scaled ratings, multiple choice questions, or "select all that apply" questions.) Their responses are necessarily uniform. Quantitative questions are easy for users to answer and don't require much thought... which means surveys with these questions are more likely to be completed and submitted.

Qualitative questions, on the other hand (more familiarly known as open-ended questions), ask for information that can't be measured. Questions like "Do you have any suggestions about how we could improve our product?" or "Why would you recommend our service?" have a nearly unlimited set of possible answers. The *advantage* of qualitative questions is that you're not trying to

anticipate what users will say, which leaves you open to surprising insights about your business.

Aside from this wealth of new insight, the answers to qualitative questions will help you learn more about how your target market speaks—what specific language they use. This can do wonders [for your SEO](#) and your [overall marketing strategies](#).

Pro Tip: Where your survey poses qualitative questions, make the size of the text box the same size as the length of the answer you're hoping for. A one-line text box will naturally get you a terse answer. Bigger text boxes will prompt more detailed, comprehensive responses.

The ratio of quantitative-to-qualitative questions you pose on your survey will be a matter of what your market research project is. If you're looking to uncover what your market thinks of your brand, you'll *have* to pose qualitative questions. *If*, on the other hand, you want to find out how a price increase might affect sales, you could ask more quantitative questions. (Will they *still* buy from you, or *won't* they?)

We understand why it may be tempting to pack your survey with qualitative questions: You want deep insights into your market's thoughts, after all. But the more qualitative questions you ask, the more likely users will be to skip them... or to abandon the survey altogether. So ask these questions sparingly.

Our suggestion is to *begin* with quantitative questions, so that it looks to users like completing the survey will be an easy task (which it *should* be!). Use qualitative questions as follow-up questions to the quantitative ones. This way you can still derive meaningful trends from your survey thanks to the quantitative questions... but you'll also derive meaningful *insights* from the qualitative ones.

Writing your best survey questions

As we've mentioned, there *are* no hard-and-fast rules that define what the "best market research survey question" is. It'll be a matter of the nature of your inquiry, your market, and your survey channel. Hopefully you'll test your survey out on friends—or, more ideally, on a handful of prospects and customers—before you send it out into the world.

Here are some guidelines worth following—and some things to ask your "survey testers" to keep an eye out for:

Start simple

Ask questions that won't require much (or *any*) *thought early on*. Once they've started, respondents

will be more likely to see the task through; so when the more complex questions show up toward the end, you'll still get your answers.

Aim for simplicity throughout

"Simplicity" means many things. Your questions should be short and clear. Ditch all technical language and industry jargon. Avoid words that are abstract, vague, or easily misinterpreted. (One person's "occasionally" is another person's "often"). The moment they don't understand one of your questions, respondents will drop off.

"Simplicity" also means sticking to *one topic* at a time. Questions like "On a scale of one to ten, how important is it that your service be prompt and friendly?" isn't going to get you good data. Those who care *a lot* about prompt service but less about friendliness may give you a "5," whereas if you'd asked two *different* questions, you'd get a "10" and a "3." This might make a world of difference to your branding strategy and your business's priorities.

Avoid leading questions

You want respondents to tell you how they *really* feel, not how you *want* them to feel. A question such as "Based on your experience, are you more likely to choose Brand X over others?" is virtually *asking* for a positive response. If participants respond positively because of the way you phrased the question—and *not because they actually feel that way*—you're going to end up working off of skewed data. Instead, try "Based on your experience, *how likely is it* that you'd choose Brand X over others?"

Avoid assumptive questions

"What did you enjoy about the last agency you worked with?" assumes your participants *did* enjoy something. Even a simple insertion of the phrase "if anything" ("What, *if anything*, did you enjoy...") keeps users from feeling like *they had to have enjoyed something*, and ensures you're not receiving made-up answers.

Order the questions logically

"Logically" means at least four things. First, it means to start general and move toward more specific questions. Let users slowly wrap their minds around the topic you're approaching before you ask them to get introspective. Imagine it like a first date: You'd *probably* ask "What do you do for work?" before you asked "Do you feel as though the line of work you're in is fulfilling you on both an interpersonal and a spiritual level?"

Second, "logically" means you should group your questions around topics. Don't ask what other restaurants users frequent in town, then ask about *your* menu, then turn back to your competitors

again. It has the psychological effect of making users feel like they're backtracking... which is *not* a feeling you want them to have. Third, "logic" means that if you include "optional" questions in your survey (let's be honest; they're *all* optional), you should place them in a clearly-demarcated section: "If you have a few more minutes, your answers to these last three questions would help us [benefit X]."

Finally, "logic" can mean customizing users' paths through the survey based on their answers. (Of course, you can only do this with online surveys.) This is called "[skip logic](#)," "branch logic," or "conditional branching." It allows you to hide questions that become irrelevant when respondents answer a question in a particular way, or to take them down paths with deeper question sets. In other words, the survey becomes *responsive*... and respondents stay engaged, because *every* question is relevant to them.

Include demographic questions

You'll hear equally compelling arguments for why these questions should be placed at the *beginning* and why they should be placed at the *end* of your survey. You might try an A/B test—such that 50% of respondents receive a version with demographic questions at the beginning, and the other 50% receive a version with the *same* questions at the end—to see which works best for you.

The *point* is to confirm your participants' age, gender, income, region, or whatever other details you need to know. If you're already sending your survey *out* to a particular demographic, this might not be as important... but then again, the information they give you on the survey might be fresher than the information you've got logged into your [CRM](#)... so this is a great chance to update those details.

Keep it as short as possible

Notice we didn't say "keep it *short*." If you follow the above (and below!) best practices, many respondents *will* likely finish your survey once they've started it. *We'd* keep it short of the 10-minute range... but if your respondents have stakes in the game, you can certainly make it longer.

The takeaway here is to omit any information that isn't pertinent *to this particular inquiry*. If you've designed your survey to take the temperature on a new product, don't *also* ask respondents about how they perceive your brand image. *That's* for another survey altogether.

Best Practices for Market Research Surveys

You've got best practices for your survey *questions* down; now what about the survey *as a whole*? Here are our top tips:

Give your participants context

When we talk about survey context, we *don't* just mean the environment participants are *in* when they're filling it out. Respondents want to know *why* they're filling it out. What difference will their answers make? What changes are at stake for them? How might this survey make a difference in the work you do? Let them know in an introductory statement—even if it's only a sentence or two long. Offer to share the results with them. Those respondents who are deeply invested in your business will want to know!

Consider incentives

Granted, a better business may very well be incentive *enough* for your participants; but if your respondents *aren't* already customers—or if your survey is detailed enough that participants will require some motivation—the right incentive will see a good ROI. (On the other hand, *too much* of a good incentive might mean respondents won't give you the negative feedback they'd otherwise give you, thus skewing the data... so find an incentive that will keep your participants honest.)

Incentives can include cash, gift cards, product discounts, entries into a prize drawing, or one month free on your subscription service. The incentive you choose will be directly tied to the relationship participants have with your business. That said, *do* be careful around cash incentives. While they'll certainly drive response rates up, you ultimately want respondents to participate *because it strengthens their connection to your brand—not* so they can walk away with cash and never have to encounter your business again. So if you can figure out a way to tie incentives to your product, do so.

Call it something *other* than a survey

We know: *It's a survey*. And frankly, your participants will know this, too. But there's a psychology here that may be worth experimenting with. No one *wants* to take a survey. But they *probably* want to "tell you their opinions," "give you advice," or even "take a quiz." And *their* wanting means more data for *you*.

Set expectations up-front

No matter how long your survey is, participants should be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Tell them in your introduction how long the survey should take to complete. If it's an online survey, give them a progress bar so they know how far along they are. This strategy will ultimately lower your survey abandonment rates.

Be conversational

Consider this a dialogue between you and your target market. Write your survey in the language *they* would use, and in the same way you'd pose those questions in a face-to-face conversation. Sound human. Use their first names. Include humor. They'll feel spoken to, and will be all the more likely to respond.

Don't be afraid to follow up

Once your first wave of responses has started to abate, send out a (courteous!) reminder email (these can be [automated](#)), repost the link to social media, or send out a follow-up SMS. Recipients who didn't initially respond may simply have forgotten in the midst of their inevitably full lives.

"Following up" might also mean a follow-up phonecall to get more details from respondents. Consider including a question toward the end of your survey asking if participants would be willing to discuss these topics further with someone from your team. You may be surprised at the number of respondents who'll be willing to.

Analyzing Your Market Research Survey

As we mentioned above, using a survey platform will save you a world of trouble when it comes to analyzing results. As far as quantitative questions are concerned, the platform will tabulate responses, calculate averages, and analyze trends and outlying responses *for* you. It'll also present this data in easy-to-digest formats, such as graphs, tables, and pie charts.

Survey analysis for *qualitative* data will require a more human approach. Categorizing your comments by topic will help you identify trends. Keep an eye out for "keywords" that show up again and again. It might even be helpful for you to distill every open-ended response you get down to a one-sentence summary.

While qualitative data might be more cumbersome to work with, it'll be *more* valuable than quantitative data in some ways. In the first place, participants who are willing to invest the time in answering those questions are probably more invested in your *business*; making decisions based on *these* responses means catering to your most dedicated consumers. In the second place, qualitative responses will give you language for SEO, excerpts for [testimonials](#), and quotes for future advertising campaigns.

Now, put that data collection to work! Your market research survey isn't just a formality to make your target market *think* you're interested in their opinions. You've got to be willing (and humble enough) to really *hear* respondents when they speak to you. You *may* be the authority in your field; but let your market teach *you* something, too.

There may be market research queries for which surveys simply can't dive deeply enough—or for which you need more intimate insight into your prospects, customers, and market. If that's the case, [one-on-one interviews or focus groups](#) might be your best bet. In the next section, we dive into the details of these two primary market research strategies.