Response rates

The percentage of people who respond to a survey is called the response rate, this rate is important, and shouldn't be left to chance. High survey response rates help to ensure that survey results are representative of the target population. A survey must have a good response rate in order to produce accurate, useful results. While you can use formulas to determine the number of responses you must have before you can put faith in the results, you want the largest number of people possible to respond.

Obtain the response rate by dividing the number of people who submitted a completed survey (80% or more of questions answered) by the number of people you attempted to contact.   If you asked 185 participants to complete the survey and 107 responded, the response rate is 107/185 or 58%.

$$\frac{\text{\# of completed surveys}}{\text{\# of people contacted}} = \text{Response Rate}$$

Determining an acceptable response rate

Several factors determine an acceptable response rate:

Research purpose

Response rates are more important when the study's purpose is to measure effects or make generalizations to a larger population, less important if the purpose is to gain insight.

Type of statistical analysis

Some statistical procedures require a minimum sample size, so understand the requirements associated with the statistical calculations you intend to use.

How the survey is administered

Acceptable response rates vary by how the survey is administered:

- Mail: 50% adequate, 60% good, 70% very good
- Phone: 80% good
- Email: 40% average, 50% good, 60% very good
- Online: 30% average
- Classroom paper: > 50% = good
- Face-to-face: 80-85% good

How close you are to your respondents

Generally, the better your respondents know you, the better your response rate. Respondents who you know by name or have regular contact with will be more likely to respond to your survey than respondents you do not know.

Guidelines for maximizing response rates

- Request participation from respondents in advance (when possible) and provide information about the purpose of the survey, how the results will be used, and the terms of anonymity and confidentiality.

- Give respondents a sufficient amount of time to complete the survey.
  - For online surveys, 7-10 days is sufficient.
  - For mail surveys, provide a self-addressed stamped envelope and allow for transit time.
  - For in-class surveys, provide 1 minute per question and allow a longer response time for open-ended questions.

- Provide clear instructions on how to complete and submit the survey when it is administered

- Design the survey so it is easy to read and follow.

- For mail or online surveys, send reminders during the survey period thanking the respondents who have completed the survey, while reminding others about the deadline for completing the survey. For online surveys, always provide a link to the survey and send a reminder a day before closing the survey.

- Offer an incentive for participating.

Additional information

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