

The Seven (7) Deadly Sins of Surveys

To conduct an effective and meaningful survey, you must be sure to avoid the seven deadly sins of surveys. These seven deadly sins include the following:

1. Not making sure that your sample is both representative and random

If you only randomize your sample, it may not reflect the unique characteristics of your population. For example, if your membership contains an equal number of males and females, by selecting a random sample you may by chance end up with a sample containing 20% males and 80% females. Because the proportion of males to females is skewed (distorted) in this sample, it is unlikely that you can extrapolate the results from this sample to your population. So it is vitally important that you stratify (organize) your sample to reflect the proportions of the unique characteristics of your population before you make your random selection. Proceeding in this way, you will be able to make statistically meaningful statements about your population from the sample you selected.

2. Not involving both members and staff to validate and proof your survey

One of the best ways to validate your survey questionnaire is to solicit feedback from a sampling of your members, who will be responding to the survey, when you develop it. Involving staff in developing your survey is important for another reason. Surveys will always involve making some changes to better meet your members' needs, and implementing these changes will undoubtedly fall to your staff. So involving staff in developing your survey questionnaire helps ensure that you gain their commitment to implementing the results. Involving both members and staff in developing your survey questionnaire, therefore, not only helps validate the survey but also helps ensure that everyone is committed to implementing the changes that need to be made.

3. Not using the survey format that is most appropriate for your members

At this time, the electronic medium is popular, so it is hip to use electronic surveys almost exclusively. This perspective, however, violates a basic tenet of surveying: it is vitally important to use a survey format that fits your members to get reliable results. For example, we find that a significant proportion of members in some associations are less likely to use the internet, so they cannot be surveyed effectively through the internet. If a significant percentage of your membership, therefore, is not familiar with, or does not use the internet, your results will be skewed (distorted) using only electronic surveys. So it is critical that you assess your membership before you decide on which format, or formats, to use to survey them. Doing this ensures that you will receive meaningful feedback from all your membership.

4. Not maximizing your response rate by setting specific timelines and using reminders

Your prospective survey participants need to know that there is a deadline to get their completed surveys in. If you do not specify a deadline date, then completing the survey anytime is satisfactory, which practically means you will obtain a poor response rate. The deadline, by the way, should be set for no more than a couple of weeks after the prospective survey participants receive the survey. To leave the deadline too long, again negatively affects the response rate. In addition to setting a deadline to return the completed survey, it is also important to send reminder notices. Everyone is busy these days so they need prompting to meet deadlines. Usually two reminder notices will suffice and will generate a significantly better response rate.

5. Not anticipating and preparing for potential problems in your survey process

Surveys can be, and have been, plagued with problems that have compromised the integrity of the survey results. If you use a paper survey, for example, it is important to weigh the packages you send to your prospective survey participants, and also to weigh the return package these prospective participants will be mailing back. Survey packages have been held up and returned to the sender because they exceeded the weight for the stamp that was used. With electronic surveys, for example, it is important to proof them before they are distributed to prospective survey participants. It is not uncommon, unfortunately, to observe electronic surveys that have not been proofed, resulting in making it difficult for prospective participants to complete the survey reliably. Besides being embarrassing, these situations compromise the survey results and can cost significant money and time to correct. It is vitally important, therefore, to prepare and plan for surveys so that everything works smoothly to achieve credible results.

6. Not following up with a portion of your non-respondents

Even with the best planned surveys, a 50% response rate is an exceptional rate. This result means, however, that you do not know how half of those you tried to survey would respond. Statistically this is a cause for concern. The history of surveys is filled with the stories of the mishaps that have occurred when important decisions have been made without obtaining feedback from non-respondents. An excellent way to gain insight into how non-respondents would respond to a survey is to conduct a mini survey. To do this, phone a sampling of your non-respondents and ask them key survey questions. Try to keep these key questions to no more than five, which means it should take your sampling of non-respondents only about two minutes to complete. Usually these key questions are scaled questions because they indicate whether the non-respondents are significantly different from the respondents on key survey

variables. Determining how your non-respondents would respond to key survey questions helps confirm the reliability of your results and makes the survey recommendations that much more credible and reliable.

7. Not following up on your survey results

The greatest deadly sin of surveys is not using your survey results to demonstrate your commitment to meeting your members' needs. It is the step in the survey process that is consistently underrated. Through your survey, your members have told you how to better meet their needs. If you communicate regularly and consistently about what you are doing to better meet their needs, you earn your members' commitment and loyalty. Committed and loyal members are not only more likely to stay with your association but they are also more likely to encourage their colleagues and friends to join. Further, as you engage your members in a dialogue following up on your survey results, they will inform you about what additional services and products you could offer that they would buy. Using your survey results to earn your members' loyalty and commitment is the best marketing strategy you will ever use.