



## EXTENSION

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**AECL-9821**

# Increasing survey responses for research and program evaluation

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## Introduction

Surveys are one of the most common tools used to gather feedback, evaluate programs and inform decisions. However, low response rates can limit the value of even a well-designed survey. This fact sheet outlines practical strategies to improve response rates.

## Survey design

Survey design strongly influences whether people choose to respond. Effective surveys are clear, focused, easy to complete and respectful of participants' time. Poor design can lead to low response rates, incomplete answers or inaccurate data. This section will give an overview of different survey design considerations to improve response rates.

### ***Keep it focused***

Before writing questions, define the survey's purpose and 1–3 core goals. Ask: "What decisions will I make based on these results?" Use those goals to decide what information is truly necessary. Avoid questions that will not lead to action or insight. Every question should have a clear purpose.

For detailed information on designing surveys and writing survey questions, see OSU Extension fact sheet [AECL-9822, Best practices for developing surveys](#).

### ***Visual appeal***

A clean, simple layout improves response rates over a cluttered or complex one (Dillman et al., 2014). Use readable fonts, clear headings and consistent formatting.

### ***Short and simple***

Short surveys are more likely to be completed. Digital surveys under 10 minutes typically perform best. Long, confusing or complex question format surveys reduce completion rates and response quality (Galesic and Bosnjak, 2009). Every additional question, format change between types of questions or open-ended response request draws from limited participant attention spans and thus reduces willingness to participate. To reduce strain on attention spans, minimize question types by prioritizing the most important questions and use plain, jargon-free language. Group similar questions together and use skip logic where appropriate to reduce respondents answering questions that aren't relevant. Open surveys with a few easy-to-answer questions to help engage respondents.

### ***Make it easy to complete***

The easier the survey is to access, the higher the likelihood of participation, so reduce barriers to participation whenever possible. For example, include a direct survey link in participation invitations rather than requiring participants to go to a separate web-site or platform. As of 2025, 16% of U.S. adults are “smartphone-only” internet users who do not subscribe to home internet, so ensure surveys are mobile-friendly to allow more respondents to complete them on their phones (Pew Research Center, 2025).

### ***Test before launch***

Pilot the survey with a few people for feedback before distributing it widely. Check whether questions are clear, skip logic works properly and the survey displays correctly on phones, tablets and computers.

## **Participant selection and recruitment**

Who you invite and how you invite them can significantly affect response rates. This section will give an overview of different participant selection and recruitment considerations to improve response rates.

### ***Participant selection***

Focus on people with direct experience related to the program or topic. If response rates are low, consider whether the list is outdated, incomplete or targeting the wrong audience. Use updated contact lists and invite enough participants to ensure useful data, since response rates can vary widely.

### ***Recruitment strategies***

Effective participant recruitment is critical to achieving both strong response rates and representative data. Existing relationships, trust in the survey distributor and perceived legitimacy of the survey influence whether people choose to participate in surveys (Groves et al., 1992; Yancey et al, 2006).

Some strategies for recruitment include:

- **Leverage existing relationships:** If the program team has a direct relationship with the target audience, make the ask personally.
- **Use trusted messengers:** Ask, who does the target population know, trust and respond to? Community leaders, organizations or familiar contacts that participants interact with regularly can increase the trust and legitimacy of the survey.
- **Partner with organizations:** Nonprofits, advocacy groups and local institutions may help distribute surveys to the right audience.
- **Recruit at events:** Conferences, trainings and community meetings where the target audience already gathers can offer a “captive audience” of potential respondents to collect responses from on-site using paper copies or mobile devices. A survey can also be sent before the event and then followed up on during the event to remind participants or encourage them to complete it on-site.
- **Use snowball recruitment:** Ask participants to share the survey with others in their network who might have an interest or insight into the topic when working with hard-to-reach groups.

### ***Distribution method***

Match the survey method to the audience. Email surveys often work well for professional or tech-connected groups, while mailed surveys may be more effective for older or rural audiences. Web surveys are inexpensive and efficient to distribute, but may have lower response rates than in-person methods. Think through what your target audience prefers, trusts and will respond to.

## **The pitch**

The invitation to participate can determine whether someone responds. A strong pitch is brief, clear and explains why their feedback matters. Before deciding to participate, most people want to understand why they are being asked specifically and how their feedback will be used. A well-crafted, respectful introduction or pitch, can be the difference between someone clicking “start” or simply deleting the message.

Every invitation should answer four questions:

1. What is the purpose of the survey?
2. Why was this person selected?
3. How will the feedback be used?
4. How will participation benefit them or their community?

Also, include the estimated completion time and thank participants for their time.

### ***Personalize the invitation***

Personalized invitations improve response rates (Heerwegh et al, 2005). Survey software like Qualtrics can automate name personalization with email lists. Similarly, people are more likely to respond to someone they know, so use the names of the program team and organization in outreach. If possible, reference a specific program, event and interaction to emphasize the connection and trustworthiness of the survey invitation. For examples of pitches, please see Appendix 1.

## **Timing and reminders**

When you send your survey and how often you follow up can make a difference in response rates. This section will give an overview of different timing and reminder considerations to improve response rates.

### ***Pre-notifications***

Let participants know in advance that a survey is coming. A brief mention at the end of an event or a short email reminder before sending can increase trust and response rates.

### ***Send at the right time***

For program evaluations, send surveys within one week of the event. For all surveys, avoid Fridays and holidays when possible. For digital surveys, invitations sent between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. or 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. may perform better because people are more likely to check their email during those times.

### ***Reminders***

Many people intend to respond but forget. Sending 1–2 reminders a few days apart can improve response rates (Deutskens et al., 2012). Keep reminders brief and include the survey link. Be careful not to send too many reminders. Response rate returns diminish with each subsequent reminder. Most people who will respond do so after the first few contacts.

### ***Incentives***

Incentives can encourage participation, especially for longer surveys or hard-to-reach audiences (Sauermann and Roach, 2013). Even small rewards, such as stickers, seed packets or pens, can help. Drawings for small amount gift cards (\$10–25), raffle entries or discounts for future events are also common approaches. Clearly explain how incentives will be distributed upon offer and whether responses will be anonymous or confidential.

## **Survey panels**

Survey companies such as Qualtrics offer access to survey panels: pre-recruited participants who regularly complete surveys. Panels can help target specific demographics or geographic areas to create representative and relevant samples. This service can be useful when organizations do not have their own contact lists. Panel response costs vary depending on factors like the number of responses, targeting criteria and timeline, but typically range from \$5 to \$15 per completed survey. For projects heavily dependent on survey data, budgeting for panel recruitment may help ensure enough responses are collected.

## Analyze, act and share back

After analyzing results, identify key actions and share findings back with participants in plain language to maintain the relationship and encourage participation in future data collection. For example: “Based on your feedback, we are offering more advanced gardening classes this fall.” This simple act of closing the loop not only demonstrates transparency but also builds trust and engagement for future efforts. Whenever possible, thank participants publicly to acknowledge their contribution and reinforce the value of their input.

Maximizing survey response rates requires more than distributing a form. Clear survey design, thoughtful recruitment, appropriate timing and meaningful follow-up all contribute to stronger participation and better data for informed decision-making.

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## Appendix 1

### ***Example survey invitation pitches***

#### **Example 1: Agricultural workshop participant**

Subject: Please share your feedback on the OSU Extension Forage Futures Workshop

“Dear Maria,

I’m reaching out because you attended the OSU Extension Forage Futures Workshop this spring, and we’d love your feedback about the program! We’re gathering input to understand what worked, what could be improved and how we can better support producers like you in the future.

Your responses will help us tailor upcoming workshops and report back to our funders on the impact of these programs. By sharing your experience, you’re helping ensure the content remains practical and continues to meet the needs of Oklahoma producers.

The survey takes about 5–7 minutes to complete.

Thank you for helping us make our programs stronger, your opinion really matters.”

[Survey link]

## Example 2: Youth program parent

Subject: Quick survey about your child's experience with the STEM Summer Exchange

"Hi James,

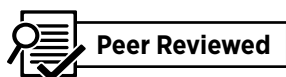
Your child participated in the 4-H STEM Summer Exchange this year, and we're hoping you would take a few minutes to share your perspective of the program. We're collecting feedback from families to evaluate how well the program supported learning, inclusion and engagement for their youth.

Your responses will guide improvements to the program and help ensure that next years' experience is even better. This information also helps us advocate for funding that keeps programs like this accessible for all youth.

The survey should only take about 5 minutes.

Thank you for your time and for supporting your child's participation!"

[Survey link]



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