



## Designing a Survey to Increase Response and Reliability

### How long can a survey be and still expect to get a good response rate?

To motivate respondents to agree to answer a survey and to complete it accurately, survey research demonstrates that the length of a survey is not as important as design. Particularly important when a respondent first views a survey is that it looks EASY to do; when a respondent is answering a survey the most important factor is CONSISTENCY in the directions.

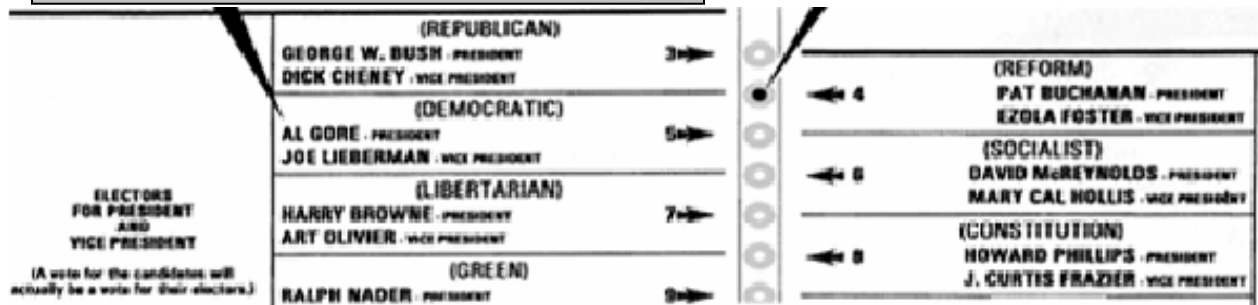
However well intentioned, Florida's butterfly ballot (see below) violated both of these principles. The designer compressed all presidential choices (answer categories) into one opening (page), resulting in an overload of information and a lack of consistency in the directions. Citizens were asked to indicate choice for some candidates on the right side of their name but choice for other candidates on the left side of their name.

### Confusion at Palm Beach County polls

Some Al Gore supporters may have mistakenly voted for Pat Buchanan because of the ballot's design.

Although the Democrats are listed second in the column on the left, they are the third hole on the ballot.

Punching the second hole casts a vote for the Reform Party



To format a survey to maximize response, integrate a few simple formatting principles that give visual signals that the survey is easy to complete. Think of yourself as an architect and create a sense of space in a survey. To do this:

1. Eliminate lines. Don't use lines in the following situations:
  - as a separator between survey sections
  - as a place to check next to an answer
  - in an answer grid as seen on the next page



**A  
V  
O  
I  
D**

Mark how important it is for you as a citizen in Smith Township to recycle each item below:

ITEMS	NOT	SOMEWHAT	MODERATE	VERY
NEWSPAPERS				
GLASS BOTTLES				
CARDBOARD				

- A grid for answers like the one above can evoke two other negative response patterns that can decrease the reliability of answers. Respondents tend to put checks in the wrong box. Persons coding or loading the data on the computer tend to make eye errors as well. Avoid an answer grid. Use words in small caps.

**U  
S  
E**

Circle how important it is for you as a citizen in Smith Township to recycle each item below:

NEWSPAPERS      NOT      SOMEWHAT      MODERATE      VERY

GLASS BOTTLES      NOT      SOMEWHAT      MODERATE      VERY

CARDBOARD      NOT      SOMEWHAT      MODERATE      VERY

- Where lines are needed under an open-ended answer, shorten and center the line. Long lines across a page under questions conjure up visions of work for respondents, making them less likely to answer. A four-page survey with lots of white space makes a survey look easier than a one-page survey completely filled with print and lines.
- Eliminate all unnecessary marks, even periods after the question number.
- Continue your architectural prowess by creating more space. Avoid placing answer categories horizontally, across the paper. Not only does the survey look congested, this format creates confusion about which line goes with each answer, thus reducing reliability of your results.



**A  
V  
O  
I  
D**

*As a result of this program, how likely are you to recycle your newspapers in the next six months?(check answer)*

\_\_\_\_\_ *Not Likely*    \_\_\_\_\_ *Somewhat Likely*    \_\_\_\_\_√\_\_\_\_\_ *Moderately Likely*    \_\_\_\_\_ *Very Likely*

- In contrast, center the answer categories for a simple question vertically, under a question. Such formatting creates space on the page on each side of the answer categories and it reduces confusion over how to indicate the answer choice. Vertical categories also provide space for other important answer categories (see below).
- Contrary to what is recommended in other contexts, capitalize the answer categories to help draw the eye of the respondent down the page and create a sense of accomplishment. Use “small caps” on your computer and bold either the question or the answer categories.

**U  
S  
E**

*As a result of this program, how likely are you to recycle your newspapers in the next six months? (circle answer)*

1. **NOT LIKELY**
2. **SOMEWHAT LIKELY**
3. **MODERATELY LIKELY**
4. **VERY LIKELY**
5. **ALREADY RECYCLE NEWSPAPERS**
6. **DON'T REGULARLY HAVE NEWSPAPERS**

Other valuable ideas can be found in: Salant, P. & Dillman, D.A. (1994). *How to conduct your own surveys*. New York: Wiley, John & Sons, Incorporated.

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, [nekiernan@psu.edu](mailto:nekiernan@psu.edu)

The reference citation for this Tipsheet is: Kiernan, Nancy Ellen (2001). *Designing a Survey to Increase Response and Reliability: Tipsheet #53*, University Park, PA: Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Available at: <http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/pdf/TS53.pdf>

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