DODGING SURVEY RESEARCH POTHOLES: IS IT TIME TO TEST NEW ROUTES?

Survey research isn't for the faint of heart—just when you dodge one research pothole, another one appears. And yet, demand for high-quality insights keeps rising. As the [International Journal of Market Research](#) put it:

> "Academic and applied marketing researchers will need to adapt their surveys to an evermore challenging respondent environment characterized by low participation rates, shortened attention spans, fraudulent responses, server farms, and 'bot' respondents."[1]

On top of that, AI-driven FUD (fear, uncertainty, doubt) and recent research firm layoffs have only added to the pressure. The reality? We can't afford to rely on standard survey invitations and questionnaires. To keep delivering reliable insights, we must keep evolving. That means finding new and innovative ways to navigate the road ahead.

The good news? Each year, various research-on-research studies test ways to improve survey quality—some explore new methods, while others refine best practices with fresh data. Many come from academic settings and, while sometimes small-scale, they offer insights we can apply in commercial research.

To help research rockstars stay ahead, we've summarized some of these studies. Whether you want to boost response rates, enhance engagement, or reduce fraud, these findings can help you bring fresh, evidence-based approaches to your next survey project.[2]

RESEARCH ON BOOSTING RESPONSE RATES

A well-designed research study includes taking steps to optimize response rates in order to achieve sample size goals and avoid **non-response bias**. This matters because, as professional researchers, we always strive to accurately represent a study's target population so that stakeholders can use the results with confidence.

The 2023 article, "We Are Looking for People Like You," offers market researchers a psychology-based lens on how to boost survey response rates using social influence. The authors argue that "knowledge of social influence psychology may be helpful when it comes to increasing response rates."[3] The three approaches offered by the authors were tested as in-person survey interventions but may be adaptable for online research.

The three psychological techniques are as follows:

1. Emphasize Individual Agency: "It's Your Choice"

   a. People enjoy feeling like they are in control of their own decisions, and market researchers can leverage this to improve response rates. Adding just one sentence emphasizing the participants' ability to choose can increase response; "When passersby were asked to participate in a short survey regarding local (businesses), 75% agreed to answer the questions. However, when the request was followed by "obviously, the decision is yours: you can agree or decline," stressing the agency of the respondent, 90% agreed to participate."[4] This nearly 15% bump is certainly not trivial! This potential response rate booster may be worth testing with different populations.

2. Ask for Help Across the Finish Line

   a. In the initial phase of this experiment, 60% agreed to take the survey. However, in the second phase, the request was followed by "I only need one more person," and 80% of the subjects

[1] Kostyk, A., Zhou, W., Hyman, M. R., & Paas, L. (2021). Securing higher-quality data from self-administered questionnaires. *International Journal of Market Research*.

[2] Research Rockstar courses all include numerous citations from academic and business journals, to ensure we are delivering evidence-based skill advancement. Most job aids include citations, and all courses include citations in the Recommended Reading sections.

[3] Dolinski, D., Grzyb, T., Kulesza, W., Błaszczyk, P., Laska, D., Liebersbach, F., Strzelczyk, Ł. (2024). 'We are looking for people like you' – new technique of social influence as a tool of improving response rate in surveys. *Social Influence*.

[4] Dolinski, Grzyb, Kulesza, Błaszczyk, Laska, Liebersbach, Strzelczyk (2024).

agreed to participate.[5] While the researcher risked being caught in a white lie, the 20% increase in response rates is notable. Again, this was an in-person recruitment, but with a little creativity, it could be tested in online survey invitations or reminders.

3. We Need YOU; You are Special

   a. This technique relies on the psychology of social obligation. As the authors explain, "The technique consists in suggesting to a respondent that the study requires individuals with a certain rare quality they have."[6] Because of this rare quality, potential respondents feel that another person won't necessarily be able to take their place in the survey and thus realize that by saying no they would likely leave the researchers in a lurch, and therefore they believe that their rare quality obligates them to respond. The researchers described this method as the "we are looking for people like you" technique. Using the psychology of social obligation was quite effective, improving response rates by up to 15 percent.

RESEARCH ON BOOSTING ENGAGEMENT

Getting people to accept survey invitations is the first step; but once we have them, how can we keep them engaged, and encourage thoughtful, complete responses? Here are three experiment-backed options:

1. Increasing the Fun Factor: Gamification

   - Enhancing the **fun factor** in surveys can lead to **better data quality** by keeping respondents engaged and reducing dropout rates.[7] Gamification elements include:

     a) Avatars – Participants choose an avatar to "play" through the survey.
     b) Non-player characters – Virtual guides or personas that enhance the experience.
     c) Digital cards – Respondents can sort or group items.
     d) Click-and-drag interactions – Allows respondents to move items into answer choices.
     e) Digital shopping baskets – Respondents "drop" their favorite brands or products into an animated basket.
     f) Interactive charts – Respondents report their answers by adjusting data visualizations.
     g) Story-driven surveys – Scenarios that invite respondents to role-play through choices.

   - In one experiment, a municipality survey, gamified and traditional formats were tested. Respondents overwhelmingly preferred the gamified version, with 90% stating it was the most fun and easiest to complete.[8] However, while a separate study also found positive feedback for gamified surveys, in this case, it also had a higher dropout rate.[9] Thus, while adding these elements can in some cases boost data quality by improving engagement, attentiveness, and completion rates, it's crucial to test for fit with the target audience before implementation.

2. Surveytainment

   - Surveytainment may sound like gamification, but it's broader—it refers to any intervention that makes survey-taking more enjoyable, which can include gamification but also non-game elements. Proponents suggest that, when done well, it can lead to longer survey times

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[5] Dolinski, Grzyb, Kulesza, Błaszczyk, Laska, Liebersbach, Strzelczyk (2024).

[6] Dolinski, Grzyb, Kulesza, Błaszczyk, Laska, Liebersbach, Strzelczyk (2024).

[7] Rijshouwer, E. A., & van Zoonen, L. (2023). Doing Research with a Gamified Survey: Reflections from Smart City Research. *Social Science Computer Review*, *41*(4), 1363-1380.

[8] Dolnicar S., Grün B., Yanamandram V. (2013). Dynamic, interactive survey questions can increase survey data quality. *Journal of Travel & Tourism Marketing*.

[9] Aubert AH, Scheidegger A, Schmid S.(Oct 2023) Gamified online surveys: Assessing experience with self-determination theory, PLoS One.

(potentially indicating more thoughtful responses), and reduce satisficing. And in one experiment, a surveytainment-enhanced survey improved respondents' mood and attentiveness.[10] Surveytainment may include interactive and non-interactive elements that enhance respondent enjoyment and engagement, such as:

  a) Non-interactive elements may include visuals, videos, or audio, for example, a "ta-da!" sound effect when completing a question.

  b) Interactive elements might include animated feedback or engaging storytelling.

- The idea of using entertainment in otherwise "dry" content is not new; newspapers include word puzzles and cartoons to keep readers engaged. Could we try it for surveys?[11]

3. Modular Design

- In questionnaire design, shorter is often synonymous with better when it comes to enhancing respondent experience. However, despite best efforts, researchers often face the challenge of a survey that's just too long—risking lower completion rates, satisficing, and other data quality blockers.[12] One option is to embrace a more modular design, which can be done two ways:

  a) Dividing Full-Length Questionnaires into Modules: Break the survey into smaller sections. All respondents might see the same core sections, but then certain ones are only shown to subsets.

  b) Restructuring Long Questions: Even in surveys that are generally "short enough", a complex question can be problematic. One option: break grid-style questions with numerous rows into shorter versions (fewer rows) and rotating across the sample. As examples from Researchscape show; this can reduce the amount of time needed per participant, while still collecting all of the data needed across the entire sample.[13]

- When carefully designed and properly implemented, this approach can produce results comparable to those of a traditional, non-modular survey

ON THE HIGHWAY TO SURVEY SUCCESS

In survey research, data quality is everything. But with tight deadlines and competing priorities, reviewing best practices can easily slip down the to-do list. Still, even a quarterly or annual refresh can surface new strategies for improving response rates, reducing dropout rates, and minimizing satisficing—ultimately strengthening the integrity of our findings.

> **Recommended Next Step:** Share this reading with your team and schedule a discussion to compare takeaways. Ask team members to come prepared to discuss which intervention described has the most potential applicability to your team's work.

Consider this: would a 5% increase in response rates or a 5% decline in dropout rates be worth the time investment for your team? Small improvements in participation and engagement translate into higher-quality data, better representation of the target population, and more reliable insights. Taking the time to refine our approach is like maintaining a well-paved road—helping us prevent unnecessary potholes and keeping research on a smooth path to stronger insights.

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[10] Kostyk A., Zhou W., & Hyman M. R.(2019). Using Surveytainment to Counter Declining Survey Data Quality. Journal of Business Research.

[11] Kostyk A., Zhou W., & Hyman M. R.(2019).

[12] Bansal H. S., Eldridge J., Halder A., Knowles R., Murray M., Sehmer L., Turner D. (2017). Shorter interviews, longer surveys: Optimizing the survey participant experience while accommodating ever-expanding client demands. *International Journal of Market Research.*

[13] Henning, Jeffrey (2023). Modular Surveys: Shorter Surveys with More Questions. Researchscape blog.