

Using behavioural insights to increase completion of forms and surveys

Maximising the completion of forms and surveys helps government understand customers and better serve their needs.

Forms and surveys are used to enrol people in programs and services, record case notes, and collect feedback from customers. To get busy people to complete them, it can help to apply behavioural insights to the form or survey itself, the timing of the request to participate, and the invitation to participate. This guide focuses on improving the completion (not accuracy) of voluntary forms and surveys.

Make completion easy

People lead busy lives and have limited time and attention to spare. To increase form and survey completion, keep them:

Quick: Reduce the length of time required to complete your questionnaire. Completion of a web survey by German website owners increased from 19% to 31% when the time required was reduced from 30–60 minutes to 10–20 minutes.¹

Simple: Only ask what is necessary; use simple language (for example, avoid double-barrelled questions); ask multiple choice rather than open-ended questions; auto-populate fields where possible; and break down long lists into shorter, discrete tasks. Cutting down the number of open-ended questions in online surveys from 10 to 1 increased completion from 78% to 88%.²

Easy to start: Start with easier questions and leave difficult items to the end. Presenting a multiple-choice question first, rather than an open-ended question, increased the completion rate of online surveys from 84% to 89%.³

Mobile-friendly: Ensure that your form or survey is optimised for mobile devices. For example, small-sized slider questions can be difficult to use on small touch screens.⁴

Send timely and frequent prompts

Understand your target audience (e.g., employment status) to reach them when they're more likely to respond.

Forewarn: In some cases, it can help to inform recipients before sending your form or survey. Response rates across a 3-wave online survey increased from 36% to 51% when people were pre-notified by SMS.⁵

Remind: Follow-up messages can double response rates but not necessarily increase the diversity of responders. More than three reminders may have diminishing returns.⁶

Urgency: Tell people there's a deadline. The New York City Mayor's Office found that completion of a survey about flood risk increased from 11% to 16% when a 'last chance' to respond letter was sent.⁷

Optimise email subject lines

When a customer receives a form or survey by email, their decision to participate will be significantly influenced by the email subject line, as this is the first thing they'll notice. The average office worker receives around 100 emails each day, so your subject line needs to be personalised and spark curiosity, while avoiding the appearance of spam. A/B test a variety of subject lines using the built-in functionality of your email sending platform.

Increasing completion of forms and surveys

Send attention-grabbing invitations

People encounter a lot of digital 'noise'. To cut through, make your form or survey invitation:

Brief: One analysis found that the optimal length of emails is: 3–4 words in the subject line (48% response rate) and 75–100 words in the message (51% response rate). Response rates dropped slowly as more words were added.⁸

Direct: Send hardcopy forms and surveys by registered post.⁹ For digital forms and surveys, include a direct hyperlink in the invitation. A letter from the UK tax authority which provided a weblink straight to a form, rather than to a webpage that contained the form, increased the response rate from 19% to 23%.¹⁰

Personal: There are many ways to personalise your invitation, such as: using personal greetings; asking recipients for their help; explaining that they are part of a select group chosen to complete the form or survey; and sending the request from an authority figure.¹¹ Including a handwritten post-it note on a survey cover page increased the completion rate from 36% to 76% (Figure 1).¹²

Figure 1. Post-it note attached to a survey



Incentivised: In some circumstances, cash and non-cash incentives can increase voluntary form or survey completion. It's not necessarily the amount of the incentive that matters – it's the attention-grabbing effect. In a US study, a \$5 incentive increased survey completion from 40% to 65%.¹³

Honest: Provide a realistic estimate of how long it will take to complete the form or survey. The completion rate of a long, 30-minute survey fell from 47% to 28% when respondents were misleadingly told it would take 10 minutes.¹⁴

Obligated: Remind individuals how they have benefited from your service and any previous commitment they made to complete the form or survey. The UK Government increased completion of a 16-minute phone survey from 46% to 52% by introducing the call with: 'You agreed to take part in a short telephone interview when you applied to take part in the Growth Voucher Programme on [DATE]. We would now like to interview you about your experience and what has happened in your business since'.¹⁵

For help designing survey questions, refer to bit.ly/ABS-questionnaire-design

For help developing forms, refer to bit.ly/BETA-improving-government-forms

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