



Survey Tips: How Many Respondents Are Enough?

By Linda Rink, President, *RINK Consulting*. November 2024

You're planning to do a survey... how many people should you ask? It would be ideal if you could ask every individual you're interested in and get a 100% response rate. But since this is unlikely to happen, you'll have to settle for a sample of that population. My clients always want to know the minimum sample size needed for "good" results – meaning they can base decision-making on them – at a price tag they can afford.

So how large should your sample be?

My answer: "It depends." To help, here are five questions I often ask my clients:

1) What is the size of the population you are interested in?

There is a big difference between surveying all 100 members of your organization versus all car owners in the United States. In the first case, 75 responses would be a very good sample size. But if your universe is large, you will want a bigger sample, like 300 to 500. (Beyond this level, you usually get diminishing incremental reliability.)

2) How will you use the results?

Are you doing medical, scientific, or other high-stakes research? Then you need the data to reflect your total target population as accurately as possible. (This calls for rigorously selected samples, often at considerable expense.) If not, what degree of accuracy can you live with?

3) What are your budget – and time – limitations?

There's a trade-off between what's practical – from a cost and time standpoint – and the degree of data reliability you want. The sample size should reflect the best balance for your situation.

4) What is your estimated response rate?

In other words, what percentage of people do you expect to respond to your survey? Factors such as who these people are, the survey topic, and the questionnaire itself, can significantly affect the response rate.

5) Do you want to compare responses among various subgroups?

If so, the sample size – and the subgroup sizes -- must be large enough to read any real differences.

Answering the above five questions thoughtfully will result in better survey design – and better data.

In addition to sample size, many other factors affect the "goodness" of survey data. I'll discuss them in next month's "RINK ink."

Considering a survey? Contact me at lrink@LindaRink.com.