

Surveys 101: Formatting On Line Surveys



Methodological Implications of Response Categories for On-Line Surveys:

Radios, Drops & Text Boxes

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Market research studies suggest that appropriate formatting is vital to conducting, and ultimately, analyzing your Web-based surveys. The right formatting engages your respondents, makes it easier for them to navigate through surveys and maximizes your return rates. Correct formatting also helps elicit unbiased opinions, so that you can collect highly accurate feedback that supports your critical decisions.

So if you spend your days designing surveys, you may often ask yourself if you're formatting them optimally. When should you use a radio button rather than a drop down, for example? Or, more importantly, what general principles of design should you follow to ensure as valid a survey as possible?



The most commonly used response options today include: **radio buttons, check boxes, drop downs and fill-in boxes.**

The following presents the most recent thinking from authoritative sources on formatting options, as well as helpful tips and tactics to allow you to optimize your survey designs.

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Radio Buttons

Traditionally radio buttons are represented as small round circles in Web design. Recent findings indicate that radio buttons may encourage more or better end-user responses, because users may perceive them as easier to use. Findings also indicate that users may be more likely to finish a survey if presented with radio buttons.

However, radio buttons should be used when there is only *one* answer from a predefined set of options. In other words, responses should be mutually exclusive. Radio buttons are also the best choice for “either or” items.

4. I am expecting my grade in this course to be:

- A
- B
- C
- D
- F

- The use of radio buttons that offer the user a non-substantial answer, such as “Don’t Know,” did not increase the likelihood of being selected. However, drop downs did. ¹.
- The radio button version of questions required no more time to complete than the drop box version².
- A 2002 experiment in Belgium revealed the advantages of using radio buttons. Two groups were given the same survey: one with radio buttons and the other with drop downs. Participants using radio buttons were more likely to complete the survey (88.37 percent) than those using drop downs (84.07 percent). (1)

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Check Boxes

Check boxes are similar to multiple-choice categories, which are often used in paper-based surveys.

1. Please indicate below the reasons you are attending this workshop? (Check as many as applicable.)

- a. Those guys in IR don't do their job so I have to learn survey analysis for them
- b. I was dying for one of Paco's Tacos
- c. I heard Robyn was starring at the Hacienda's Karoke night
- d. I only needed one more trip on SW to qualify a free trip to Hayward

These response categories can be mutually exclusive or can be used when multiple answers exist

for a single question.

- Recent research on internet surveys and response categories tends to treat radio buttons and check boxes as synonymous, so conclusions regarding impact on responses of using a checkbox vs. a radio button are not definitive.
- It appears that stationary, visible check boxes may reduce end-user mistakes.
- The use of multiple option check boxes may result in respondents filling out what they perceive as the “appropriate” number of responses, then skipping to the next question.

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Drop Downs

Drop downs require the user to scroll down to click on a blank box, then scroll down further to locate the answer. Drop downs are typically used for longer, or wordier response categories.

A screenshot of a survey question: "What state do you live in?" with a dropdown menu. The question is in a dark font on a light blue background. Below the question is a white rectangular input box with a small blue downward-pointing arrow on the right side, indicating it is a dropdown menu.

- With drop downs, user effort may be greater, slowing response time.
- According to the 2001 Belgian experiment, neither the use of drop downs nor radio buttons impacted users' tendency to give "Don't Know" responses or leave items blank. However, drop downs took significantly more time for users to complete.
- Because response categories are not totally visible on the initial screen, drop-down options should be factors with which respondents are already familiar (such as their state of residence). If drop downs are used, it's important to organize response options in a logical way (e.g. alphabetical listings).
- Ordering effects may be more pronounced when the first five options are displayed initially and the rest are hidden².
- Visibility and primacy are key factors in influencing choice on both web- and paper-based surveys. When comparing two different response formats—radio and drop downs—the order in which these items are presented impacts the likelihood of one being chosen over the other. This ordering effect seems to be magnified when using drop boxes, especially when not all options are initially visible.

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Fill-In Boxes

Text or fill-in boxes are blank spaces in which users can enter free form answers. They are ideal when you either have more answers than can be accommodated by a drop

box, or when you want to hear *exactly* what users have to say. Based on our field experience, here are some tips for using fill-in boxes.

2. What was your role in the fund raising effort?

- Users typically fill the space provided. So when using fill-in boxes, it's important to allow sufficient space. If you want short answers, limit the space provided; if you want longer responses, use larger boxes to accommodate wordier responses.
- Providing clear, concise directions to users gets the best results.
- Motivation levels may play a stronger part in getting users to complete text boxes than multiple-choice boxes, since they require more effort and thought. Fill-in boxes may have higher skip rates, so it's wise to use them sparingly.
- Placement of fill-in boxes may also be important. Using them earlier in the survey is generally better than later. However, you should avoid using fill-in boxes at the top of the survey, as many respondents want to start with easy, non-controversial questions.
- And as many survey designers already know, informing subjects that fill-in answers are optional may increase the likelihood they will not complete those areas of the survey.

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Conclusion: Variety is Good

In the world of surveys, even the smallest details—a radio button, for example—can mean the difference between a successful or unsuccessful survey. Yet none of the aforementioned research results point to one response category as being empirically better than another. In fact, the research implies that alternating between response categories often helps to engage users and counteract end-user fatigue.

To ensure you've created the most engaging survey possible, try to experiment with different formats in your pre-tests, which can help you uncover inefficiencies *before* you send out your surveys. Consider the space available. Think about the number of questions you'll have. Evaluate the visual clues that will move respondents from one question to the next. And most importantly, think of your audience—who they are and how they wish to give feedback.

Works Cited

¹Heerwegh and Loosveldt, "An Evaluation of the Effect of Response Format on Data Quality in Web Surveys." www.icis.dk/ICIS_papers/A2_3_2.pdf and see *Social Science Computer Review*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 471-484 (2002)© 2002 SAGE Publications

²Couper, Tourangeau, Conrad and Crawford, "What They See is What We Get." *Social Science Computer Review*. <http://ssc.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/22/1/111.pdf> (2004)

³Dillman, Tortora and Bowker, "Principles for Constructing Web Surveys." <http://survey.sesrc.wsu.edu/dillman/papers/websurveyppr.pdf> (1998)