Tips for collecting input and designing survey questions

Before you begin writing questions that you want the community to provide input on, think about:

- The objectives you set for your outreach process
- What do we want to learn from the community?
- How is the input and data going to help you?
- What are community members interested in providing input on, and can they reasonably influence that area?

You're building your survey to obtain important insights, so every question in the survey should play in important part. It's best to plan your survey by first identifying the data you need to collect and then writing your questions. Make assumptions about the answers you expect to see, and write survey questions that will either confirm or reject your expectations. Only ask questions that are actually open for influence, don't ask questions about something if the decision is already final as this can lead to unrealistic expectations.

When crafting your survey consider that there is more than one way to ask a question and ensure you are being specific in the questions you are asking so that you actually get the data and insights you need to make better decisions. Give some thought in how you can best structure your survey and use the different question methods to get the data you need and streamline your analysis i.e. multiple choice, drop down, ranking, dotmocracy etc.

Some other high-level things to keep in mind to ensure that your survey is easy for participants to complete, and gives you the most useful results are:

1. Keep it short and simple

Participants have limited time available and are less likely to complete long surveys or surveys that are disjointed from topic to topic. Make sure your survey follows a logical order and takes a reasonable amount of time to complete.

2. Be aware of bias

Be extra careful when writing your questions so that the survey questions do not lead participants to answer in any particular way. It's important to choose your words carefully so that you do not influence the participant and lead them down a predetermined path.

3. Watch out for overlaps

When asking multiple questions, ensure that you aren't asking questions that overlap or set the participant up to provide conflicting input and that your data gives you contradictory results. Also, if asking questions with numbers you must make sure that everyone can fit into only one box and there is no overlaps. i.e. Age Range: 16 – 18, 18 – 24, 24 – 36. If someone were 24, they would have two boxes to check.

4. Caution of open-ended questions

Everyone has a unique writing style and way of sharing ideas and concerns when answering open-ended questions. This can make it quite time consuming to properly analyze the data and get the insights you need. Before going with open-ended questions, think of the decision to be made and if there is any way to simplify your question into; multiple choice, select one, yes/ no or a drop down menu to select an option or options from.

If proceeding with open-ended, give some thought to character limits, this can help ensure that participants are being succinct in their responses and providing you with the most pertinent and relative data.

If you decide to utilize generic open-ended questions, like "Is there anything you would like to share about the proposal" etc. ensure that you are communicating with participants how you plan to use this data, and what is actually open for input or change. This will help ensure you are setting expectations and not leaving people disappointed.

5. Protect personal information

Participants are more comfortable and willing to provide input that doesn't compromise their personal information. If you are collecting personal data, ensure that when you are reporting back results that you aren't jeopardizing individual's safety and sharing personal information back with the public.

6. Test your survey

Ask a few people to test out your survey questions to help you catch problems before you distribute and refine as necessary.