

# Increasing response rates by managing survey length

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Potential respondents weigh the costs and benefits when deciding to complete a customer experience survey. Research shows long surveys are one obvious cost to respondents that decreases survey participation. Examining data across SMG clients confirms that respondents are more likely to quit longer surveys and this tendency limits clients' ability to generate insights from customer feedback. These effects are even more pronounced for surveys taken with mobile devices.

The potential benefits of longer surveys need to be weighed carefully against their impact on response rates and data quality.



Clients frequently ask us, “How long can I make a survey and still expect customers to complete it?” There are a number of factors that influence the likelihood that customers will complete a survey about their experience. Most of these factors can be understood in the context of social exchange theory. As Dillman (2000) explains:

“Rewards for survey participation include the incentive offered, intrinsic enjoyment, or the opportunity to provide feedback to improve a company with whom the customer has, or would like, a strong relationship. Costs include the amount of time and effort it takes to complete the survey. Finally, trust involves issues such as confidentiality and belief that survey responses will be used to make the customer’s experience better.”

Surveys are most likely to be completed when rewards for participation exceed costs and respondents trust that their time and effort will be respected.

### Why focus on survey length

A well-designed survey program should focus on factors influencing respondents’ perceived rewards, costs, and trust. Survey length is of particular importance because it is easy to quantify, influences respondent perceptions of rewards and trust in the brand, and is easy to control. Break-off rates reflect the percentage of respondents abandoning the survey before completion. High break-off rates are a problem because they limit sample size and may reflect customer frustration with the survey that has the potential to be damaging to the brand.

Research consistently demonstrates that longer web surveys lead to lower response rates (Bean and Roszkowski, 1995; Dillman, 2000) and increased break-off rates. Tourangeau and his colleagues maintain, “Keeping the questionnaire short might be the best strategy for avoiding break-offs” (p. 277).

### SMG findings

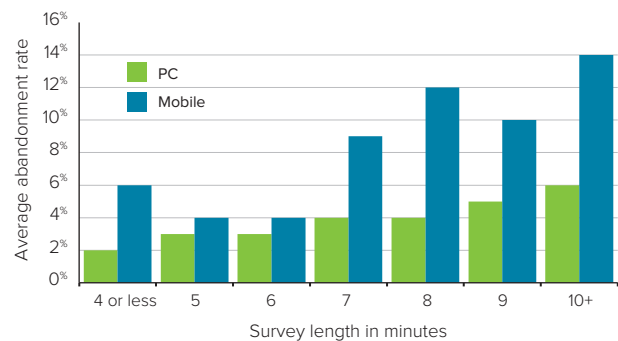
Research with SMG clients using web surveys demonstrates similar results: longer surveys are associated with increased abandonment rates. We looked at average survey length and abandonment rates over a six-month period for 124 clients with web surveys taken on a PC and 69 clients with mobile-optimized surveys taken on a mobile device.

FIGURE 1 shows abandonment rates for PC and mobile surveys of different average lengths. Both methodologies show higher abandonment rates on average as survey length increases. Mobile survey takers show less tolerance for long surveys than PC respondents—even if those surveys have been optimized for mobile devices. Surveys that are 10 minutes or longer had an average abandonment rate of 14 percent on mobile devices compared to an abandonment rate of 6 percent for surveys of similar length on a PC.

The most dramatic increase in abandonment rates for PC-administered surveys occurs after 8 minutes. For mobile-administered surveys, abandonment rates increase dramatically after 6 minutes. It’s important to remember that a survey for the same client taking 6 minutes on a PC may take 7 minutes or more on a mobile device. Therefore, clients should always consider the growing percentage of their customer base taking the survey on mobile devices. >>

FIGURE 1

Abandonment rates increase with survey length

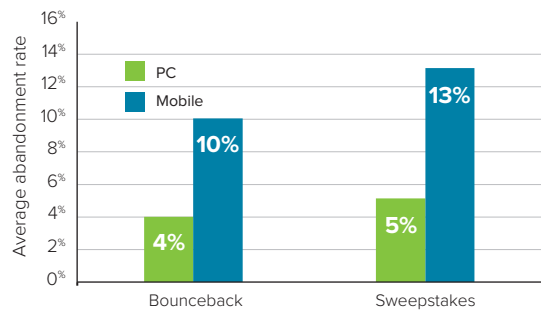


Looking at survey length by industry (restaurant versus retail) or incentive (bounceback versus sweepstakes) showed similar patterns of increased abandonment rates with increased survey length. On average, respondents to retail surveys tolerated slightly longer surveys than respondents to restaurant surveys. All respondents were more likely to tolerate a longer survey for a bounceback incentive versus a sweepstakes incentive.

As shown in FIGURE 2, bounceback incentives, such as dollars or percent off a future purchase, were associated with lower abandonment rates but still did not entirely mitigate the high correlation between taking a survey on a mobile device and higher abandonment rates.

FIGURE 2

Survey abandonment rates by incentive



### Conclusion

Whether the increase in abandonment rates is worth the extra information potentially garnered from a longer survey cannot be answered by this data alone. The important thing is to be aware that the trade-off is taking place.

The data presented demonstrates that survey length has an impact on respondents' willingness to continue taking customer satisfaction surveys. Certainly other factors—such as the characteristics of respondents, belief that the information provided will be used, and attractiveness of the incentive—will influence the relationship between survey

length and abandonment rates. However, holding all else equal, the longer the survey the less likely customers are to complete it. This analysis did not look at the relationship between data quality and survey length, but other researchers have found that survey respondents answer questions near the end of a long survey more quickly, provide less detail in their responses, and tend to differentiate less in their responses than respondents taking shorter surveys (Galesic & Bosnjak, 2009; Herzog & Bachman, 1981). These potential data quality issues represent another negative consequence of long surveys.

While it is tempting to add additional questions to a survey to get the most value possible in exchange for the cost of survey administration and incentive redemption, survey length should be reasonable enough to ensure customer participation. SMG's general recommendation is to strive to keep the survey no more than 6 minutes long, especially if you have a high percentage of customers taking the survey via mobile device. Whether the information gathered by adding more questions to the survey outweighs the loss of customer responses is a decision made by the client. The key is to keep the customer's perspective in mind and make survey length manageable. ●

### REFERENCES

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### About SMG

SMG (Service Management Group) partners with more than 325 brands to create 5-star human experiences that drive loyalty and profitable sales. SMG's holistic approach differentiates through state-of-the-art measurement, technology, and insights that help clients listen, understand, and act. Strategic solutions include Customer Experience Measurement, Employee Engagement, OmniView Feedback, Social Monitoring + Publishing, and Brand Research. SMG is an AMA Top 50 research firm with a global footprint — evaluating over 110 million surveys annually, in 46 languages across 116 countries.