

Questionnaire Length

Questionnaire length requires a balance between including enough questions to make a survey relevant but not too many that there are high incompleteness rates among panellists. Adequate response rates help to achieve successful project completion that meets client specifications. In this fact sheet, Lightspeed Research will examine the effect of questionnaire length on incompleteness rates and make recommendations to ensure adequate response rates, including specific measures to accommodate for longer surveys.

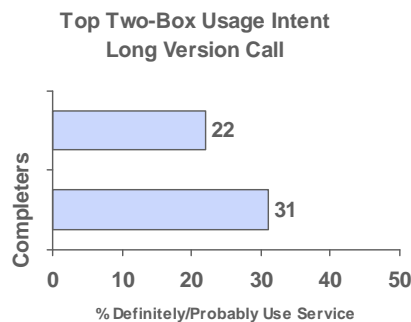
Questionnaire length and incompleteness rates

There is often pressure to increase the number of questions in a survey to ensure it addresses all relevant issues. However, increasing the length of an online questionnaire can have a negative impact on the research process as well as the quality of the research results.

Research undertaken by Burke and SPSS into effective questionnaire length based on the results of a concept/product test showed that the longer the questionnaire, the higher the level of incompleteness (people who start the survey but drop out before they finish it). This research also noted that in longer questionnaires the results tended to be more positive as respondents who disliked the concept/product tended to drop out earlier than those who had more positive feelings.

Usage Intentions Inflated for Survey Completers

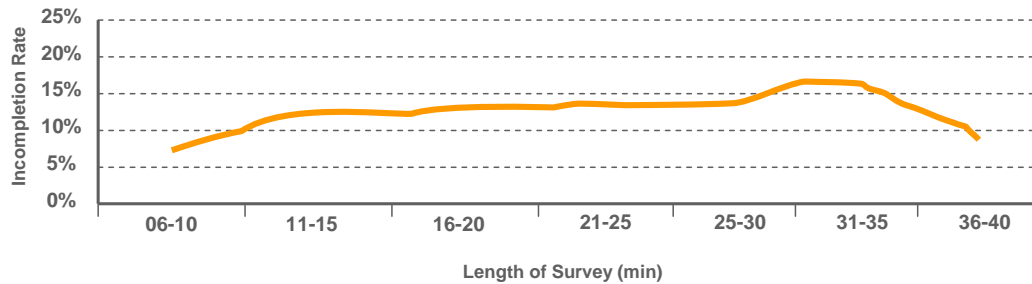
- Top two-box scores differ directionally
- Mean for "completers": 2.98
- Mean for "non-completers": 2.73
- The most typical measure of behavioral intentions would be overstated



SPSS/Burke 2003

Lightspeed Research has also assessed previously undertaken projects to measure incompleteness rates by questionnaire length.

Incompletion Rate by Questionnaire Length



Analysis based on 443 US projects

Standard incentives were offered on projects between 6-34 minutes. Additional larger incentives were offered after 35 minutes.

Results

This chart highlights the relationship between survey length and incompletion rate, clearly demonstrating how incompletion rate increases with questionnaire length. Growth in incompletion rates is fairly steady for questionnaires up to 30 minutes in length, increasing even more sharply after this point as more respondents drop out of the survey.

A high level of incompletion (for example over 15%) can make research more difficult and expensive to carry out as the number of respondents requiring an invitation could become very large. If highly-defined/strict quotas are present it could even impact the feasibility of the research within certain targeted characteristics/demographics as it may become difficult to find enough panelists that possess the relevant criteria.

The chart also shows the effect that the addition of larger incentives can have on incompletion rate (additional incentives were offered to respondents for surveys 35 minutes or over). The addition of larger incentives can help reduce incompletion rates, although the level of impact would depend on the size of the incentive and the type of respondents.

To ensure an adequate level of response, Lightspeed Research recommends that questionnaire length does not exceed 30 minutes. However, in some instances undertaking a questionnaire over 30 minutes is required to meet research objectives. If this is the case, Lightspeed Research will work in partnership with clients to identify the best online technique to ensure effective research results. Lightspeed Research would also recommend undertaking a pilot study to assess the impact that the longer survey would have on incompletion rates.

Case study

Shown below is a case study where Lightspeed Research worked with clients to accommodate longer questionnaires and some of the methods used to help ensure successful project completion.

Financial service organization

A client wanted to target its own credit card users, as well as potential users in a number of countries (UK, Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada, and Japan). The research, which required 125 card users and 300 prospects in each country, was to identify their credit card usage.

The questionnaire designed by the client was 45 minutes long. To help reduce the impact on incompleteness rates by this length of survey, Lightspeed Research recommended splitting the survey into 2 sections, both being just over 20 minutes in length. To complement this, Lightspeed Research also recommended the client offered an incentive for each completed survey.

Breaking the survey into smaller sections and offering an incentive enabled Lightspeed Research to complete this survey successfully in all countries. The client was also very happy with the robustness of the segmentation and results achieved. The methodology was successful and the client next asked Lightspeed Research to apply this methodology to Mexico, where a previous offline methodology had failed.

Conclusion

The length of a questionnaire can have a negative impact on completion rate and response quality. In general, it is not recommended that questionnaires are over 30 minutes in length, as longer surveys could impact the effectiveness of the research being conducted. However, if there is a requirement for questionnaires to be longer than 30 minutes, Lightspeed Research will work with the client to identify the best methodology to ensure successful project completion. Undertaking a pilot study is also a good way to determine the impact a longer questionnaire has on incompleteness rates.

Increasing incentives and even splitting the survey into shorter sections can help reduce incompleteness rates and increase research feasibility. However, these measures can also have an adverse impact on the cost of undertaking the research. As such, it is important to understand the research objectives to ensure the best methodology is used.

For more information regarding questionnaire length and how it can affect research results, please contact your Lightspeed Research Account Manager.