Get people to take your survey seriously

Fix the issues keeping your respondents from giving their best answers.
What makes for a good respondent?

One of the best things about online surveys is how easy they are. With just a few clicks, respondents can give you the information you need.

But when it's so easy to answer, it's important to make sure respondents are taking the time to think deeply about their responses before they answer.

When respondents do “just enough” to complete your survey, but don’t give it the full attention it deserves, it’s called satisficing. Satisficing is a problem to survey creators everywhere. It leads to poor-quality data, which in turn affects the conclusions you draw from it.

Fortunately, there's a lot that you, the survey creator, can control to encourage your respondents to provide great answers instead of answers that are just satisfactory.

Optimizers vs. satisficers

There are two types of survey respondents: optimizers and satisficers.

Optimizers are the good kind of respondent. They take the time to carefully consider each question and come up with their own best responses.

Satisficers aren’t so good. They put minimal effort into answering your survey questions, provide guesstimates instead of exact answers, and don’t put deep thought into them.

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Why do respondents turn to satisficing?

Some satisficers might just be too lazy to think through your survey, but often the reason satisficers don’t give full answers is because the survey contains real flaws. There are 3 main types of survey flaws:

1. **The question is confusing.** Questions that are difficult to read because they’re too complicated, full of jargon, or grammatically incorrect can cause respondents to lose attention before they even finish reading. Even if those respondents provide an answer, it probably won’t be a very good one.

2. **The question is overly burdensome.** Some questions just ask a lot of your respondents—maybe too much. For example, if a survey asked how many times you flew on a plan in the last year, how would you answer?

Maybe you know the answer right away, because you know you didn’t fly at all last year. Maybe you happen to have all your flight itineraries stored on your phone and can look them up instantly. But, more likely, you’ll answer with a ballpark guess rather than a precise answer, and that’s a prime example of satisficing.

3. **The answer options don’t resonate.** Respondents don’t see a response option that they like, but respond anyway. This is a cut-and-dried case of satisficing—knowingly providing a less-than-ideal or just-good-enough response.

Maybe there’s a multiple choice question that’s missing necessary answer options. In this case, respondents will probably choose the next best option, which will hurt your data quality.

Maybe there’s a difficult open-ended question that’s required for respondents to continue the survey. Satisficers may provide unhelpful answers or just type gibberish in order to get past the question.
7 tips for keeping your respondents engaged

Now that you understand what satisficing is and why it happens, let’s look at some tricks to help turn your satisficers into engaged survey respondents.

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1. **Randomize your response options:** One of the most common ways people satisfice is by choosing the first available option from a set of choices.

By randomizing your response options, you ensure the first answer option doesn’t get all the attention.

For example, if you ask people to select their favorite snack from a list, satisficers are likely to choose the first snack they like or recognize without reading the entire list to select their absolute favorite.

**Tip**

To reduce this type of bias, you should randomize your multiple choice answer options in any situation where the order isn’t relevant.
2. **Limit the size of matrix or grid questions:** Matrix questions provide a simple way to let respondents quickly answer several questions that use the same set of choices by arranging them into a grid. But matrices also make it temptingly easy to rush through questions.

By limiting the size of your matrix questions, you ensure that respondents don’t get lost in a huge grid of answer options.

**Tip**

As a general rule, limit grid questions to a maximum of 5 columns and 10 rows each—and fewer is better.

3. **Don’t require unnecessary questions:** Remember that not every question will be relevant to every respondent. If you require a question, your respondents cannot continue to the next page or complete the survey without answering it; they’ll be forced to select an answer even if they don’t really believe in it.

**Tip**

If a question isn’t essential to your survey, don’t require it.
4. **Add some variety to your survey:** Respondents tend to disengage when you ask the same type of question over and over again. If you need to ask a long string of nearly identical questions, try breaking them up into sections or spreading them out between other types of question.

Tip

When possible, use different question types, different question wordings, and page breaks to provide natural “speed bumps” that keep your respondents on track. For example, you could separate similar rating scale multiple choice questions with a free-response question.

5. **Be smart about your question order:** Respondents are less likely to provide poor answers to the final questions of a survey when they’ve already put the hard work in to thoroughly answer the rest of the survey questions.

Generally speaking, it’s best to put easier-to-answer questions and required questions earlier in your survey.

Tip

If you have some questions that you know require more concentration than others, it’s a good idea to put them at the end.
6. **Ask a vague question, get a vague answer:** The way you ask a question determines the types of responses you get back. If you don’t write open-ended questions specifically enough to understand what type of response you’re expecting, people will write in answers that aren’t useful to you.

**Tip**

Use open-ended questions when you’re soliciting feedback, looking for information in respondents’ own words, or expecting some out-of-the-box responses. Otherwise, use closed-ended questions to give respondents more clarity and consistency for how to respond.

7. **Respect your respondents’ time:** Long, tedious surveys are likely to frustrate your respondents, causing them to stop taking your survey seriously. Keep your surveys as short and user-friendly as possible.

**Tip**

Consider using the progress bar feature to indicate how much longer the survey should take, and always test and time the survey by taking it yourself before sending it out to others.
Satisficing is a problem with all surveys regardless of whether they’re completed in person, over the phone, on paper, or online.

Online surveys are no different, but one big advantage is that you can program your survey to deter satisficing, even after it’s been sent out to respondents. That way, you can carefully make data quality adjustments right away, instead of waiting until after you have your results.

In the end, you can’t force your respondents to pay attention to your survey. But if you design it well, you can remove obstacles that keep them from giving their best answers, making your survey more engaging and increasing the quality of your data.

Try applying these easy fixes to your next survey.

Visit us at surveymonkey.com and sign up to get started.