Maximizing Survey Participation: A Cost-Benefit Analysis

The motivation to respond to a survey may be understood as an analysis of the perceived costs and the perceived benefits to the participating individual. Within this framework, participation is maximized by increasing the benefits and decreasing the costs:

\[ \text{Survey Participation } \approx \text{ Benefit to Participant } - \text{ Cost to Participant} \]

**What are the costs and benefits of survey participation?**

Costs are anything that an individual perceives as a barrier to participation. Usually these perceptions center on the amount of effort that the prospective participant believes will be required to complete the survey. Perceived costs include:

- Time required to complete the survey
- Effort to find access to the survey
- Effort to read and think about survey items
- Giving up personal information
- Fear of retribution
- Preparation for the survey, such as making sure one has the requisite knowledge or information

Costs can be compounded for some groups of respondents. For example, clients who are not native speakers of English, assuming that they receive information about the survey, may have apprehension about communicating with an official organization, may not have access or know how to access survey translations, and may not be familiar with broader issues impacting business.

On the other hand, benefits are any advantages that the survey participants think they will incur due to participation. Some examples include:

- Having a positive impact on the business and corporate decisions
- Improving conditions within the company
- Bolstering sense of self
- Opportunity to learn more about the business
- Material incentives offered by the company

Often the costs loom larger than the benefits. Costs tend to be immediate; that is, the participant must pay cost of participation (time, effort, etc.) before any more distant benefit can be realized. The costs may also seem to be more personal than benefits. Whereas each individual must pay the cost of participation, their voice in the form of survey results is diluted among the voices of all other participants. Any impact of the survey results is at some point in the future and is more likely to affect the business or company’s decisions overall as opposed to a direct impact.

Motivation to participate suffers from the difference between the high salience and personal nature of the costs on the one hand and the less salient, more impersonal nature of the benefits on the other. To
improve survey participation, the perceptions of the costs and the benefits must change so that the benefits are perceived to outweigh the costs.

**How can we reduce the perceived costs to the participants?**

There are a number of steps that may be taken to reduce the costs of survey participation for constituents, employees, and community members:

1. **Direct Access to the Survey.** Getting the survey into the hands of the respondents with little or no effort on their part is a key to boosting participation. In this age of technology, sending surveys directly to email addresses or other online communication tools like social media is an inexpensive, efficient way to share the survey that is also convenient for the respondents. Links to a survey are delivered directly to email accounts that the respondents would simply click on to access the survey. Likewise, such online surveys require little effort on the part of the respondent to return responses for tabulation.

   For online distribution of surveys to be effective, an accurate and comprehensive email address database is necessary. Email databases are generally in existence at large businesses for staff. If the company does not know the contact information of some customers, databases for these groups can be effectively created or improved.

2. **Simple Alternative Access to the Survey.** While communications via email and other online tools is becoming increasingly pervasive, a proportion of our communities do not have the necessary technology in their homes or places of work. Community-based organizations can be valuable partners to providing access to the survey. Places of worship, neighborhood grocery stores, libraries, schools, and other convenient places where people congregate can provide access points for computer kiosks where individuals can access the survey. Volunteers at these locations can provide assistance for those individuals who are not familiar with the technology.

3. **Decreased Time To Complete.** An estimated amount of time to complete a survey must be part of pre-survey communications and advertisements. Ideally, surveys should be short and require little time on the part of the participant, with 5 to 7 minutes being ideal. Surveys are designed to coincide with advertised time constraints. To prevent participants from leaving a survey before completion, progress indicators help the respondents gauge how much time they will need to complete the survey. For longer surveys, an opt-out option is designed into the questionnaire allowing the respondent an opportunity to leave the survey at a logical point in the survey while ensuring essential questions are answered.

4. **Ease of Survey Comprehension.** The use of jargon and complex language often leads to frustration and premature termination by the participant. Care is taken to ensure that surveys are written in a jargon-free, easy to understand style. For non-English speakers, survey translations are provided in the major languages of the local community.

5. **Protection of Private Information.** Survey respondents sometimes feel that their participation will lead to a loss of privacy or that their responses will somehow negatively impact their standing in the community. All survey invitations indicate whether participation is confidential or anonymous, steps to protect participants’ information, and how their responses will be used in reporting.
6. **Freedom from Retribution.** Particularly common among staff members is the concern that they might be punished for views expressed on the survey. Part of the pre-survey communications, including invitations, is an explanation of how the survey information will be used. This statement should include assurances that the information is used only for improvement and not in an evaluative context. Responses will not be traced back to an individual. In addition, managers and CEOs should not approach individual staff members or other respondents to discuss particular survey responses.

7. **Preparation to Answer the Survey.** Some respondents refrain from answering a survey out of concern that they do not have the necessary knowledge and/or lack the motivation to learn about issues prior to the survey. Invitations and pre-survey communications clearly identify the survey’s topics and issues along with any relevant background information. In this manner, potential respondents’ confidence is enhanced so that they feel prepared for the survey.

**How can we increase the perceived benefits to the participants?**

While lowering the perceived costs will help boost participation, individuals must also see a benefit to answering a survey. A number of actions can help to increase saliency of personal benefit. Participants want to feel that their voice is heard and that their participation has an influence on decisions, instruction, and operations. A number of actions can help to increase the perceptions of benefits among prospective participants.

1. **Pre-Survey Communications.** Surveys are preceded by communication activities such as press releases, op-eds, backpack notices and survey invitations. The communication campaign begins at least two weeks prior to the beginning of the survey period. The purposes of these communications are:
   - Make known that a survey will be administered,
   - Discuss the issues to be addressed by the survey,
   - How the information from the survey will be used,
   - What kinds of decisions will be made based on the survey responses, with particular regard to how they will affect individual participants,
   - How previous surveys on the same or similar topics have shaped decisions.

2. **Personal Relevance.** Invitations and survey documents that have been customized to highlight personal relevance will help to increase perceptions of personal benefit. Using a well-created email database that includes links to employee IDs, opens the possibility of direct delivery of surveys that have been customized and personalized for the respondent. Individuals might receive surveys with customized text that is appropriate for the survey issues. Such personally-relevant survey invitations and documents appeals to the respondents’ view of themselves as active and engaged stakeholders.

3. **Increase Salience.** Even when customized with an employee or customer’s name and other information, text-only invitations tend to suffer from an impersonal feel. Online invitations and other communications can be made to feel more salient and important by including a video invitation from the CEO, district manager, or other staff member. Alternately, including images of the business or employees engaged in an activity relevant to the survey topic will also increase the salience and motivation to respond.
4. **Post-Survey Communications.** Respondents must be shown that the survey results are attended to and have an impact. Soon after the conclusion of a survey, information must be shared proactively with all key stakeholder groups. These post survey communications include:

- **Press release** detailing the major survey findings and next steps in the use of the data, such as how the data will be used for making decisions or other change.
- **Open letter to Constituents** from the CEO or manager to discuss the findings and impact on the community. This is more personalized than the generic press release.
- **Op-Ed** explaining the company’s views of the findings. The op-ed may focus on particular findings and how they fit with the company’s leadership’s agenda.
- **Press Conference** to discuss the survey findings and impact with the media.

Zarca Interactive will provide post-survey communications materials for press releases and op-eds, and will train individuals for one post-survey press conference.

In addition to the standard set of post-survey communications, the survey data should be referred to and highlighted in public forums to show how the public’s voice is being used to inform and influence discussions within the community.

5. **Material Benefits.** Businesses may increase motivation by offering a small gift for participation. This is often accomplished through partnership with community organizations or other benefactors to offer incentives in the form of small gifts, gift certificates, or money for survey participation. Respondents are entered in a raffle upon completion of the survey, with the award recipient(s) drawn at the end of the survey window.

Increasing survey participation is an ongoing, cumulative process. The trust and confidence of community members and employees must be earned through transparent processes and consistent application of the principles outlined above.