



# So You Want to Survey Business Executives?

Executives Speak Out  
on What Works to  
Gain Their Participation

BuyLine Report  
2008

## So You Want to Survey Business Executives Executives Speak Out on What Works to Gain Their Participation

Published: August, 2008 by BuyLine Research LLC, Wellesley, Massachusetts, U.S.A.

The information in this publication is provided for reference only. All information contained in this publication is believed to be correct and complete. BuyLine Research, LLC shall not be liable for errors contained herein nor for incidental or consequential damages in connection with the furnishing, performance, or use of this material. All product specifications, as well as the information contained in this publication, are subject to change without notice.

This publication may contain or reference information and products protected by copyrights or patents. It does not convey any license under our patent rights nor the rights of others. We do not assume any liability arising out of any infringements of patents or other rights of third parties.

We make no warranty of any kind with regard to this material, including but not limited to the implied warranties of merchantability and fitness for a particular purpose. Customers are ultimately responsible for validation of their own data and information.

Copyright © 2008 by BuyLine Research, LLC, Wellesley, Massachusetts 02481, USA. All world rights reserved. No part of this publication may be stored in a retrieval system, transmitted, or reproduced in any way, including but not limited to photocopy, photograph, magnetic or other record, without prior written permission.

BuyLine Research, LLC  
25 Earle Road  
Wellesley, MA 02481 U.S.A.

Telephone: +1 781-608-8390  
Fax: +1 781-239-3216  
E-mail: [comments@buylinerresearch.com](mailto:comments@buylinerresearch.com)  
Web: [www.buylinerresearch.com](http://www.buylinerresearch.com)

BuyLine Research, Marketing Performance Measurement, and It's Time to Measure Up are trademarks of BuyLine Research, LLC. All rights reserved.

BL-RPT-08-401

---

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

The BuyLine Brief .....	1
Methodology .....	2
Introduction .....	2
Survey Methods.....	2
Survey Participation .....	3
Survey Timing and Value Propositions.....	5
Survey Incentives .....	6
The Survey Halo Affect .....	7
Survey Length.....	9
BuyLine Bottom Line .....	12

---

# TABLE OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Survey Participation - By Type of Survey .....	3
Figure 2: Survey Method - Most Practical.....	4
Figure 3: Survey Participation - Decision Criteria .....	4
Figure 4: Survey Participation - Affect of Day of the Week .....	5
Figure 5: Survey Participation - Day of Week Preference.....	6
Figure 6: Survey Interest - Most Engaging Categories .....	6
Figure 7: Survey Incentives - Interest by Types .....	7
Figure 8: Survey Quality - Impact on Sponsoring Vendor Perception.....	8
Figure 9: Survey Methods - Mistakes in Construction and/or Delivery .....	9
Figure 10: Survey Length - Maximum Time by Delivery Method.....	10
Figure 11: Survey Length - Maximum Time by Topical Coverage.....	10

---

## **THE BUYLINE BRIEF**

In changing markets with fragmented customers, effective market research can aid success while the lack of it contributes to failure. Research is often primary, conducted by interviewing target audiences to see what they think and want. BuyLine Research and Survey Executives set out to conduct a survey on the topic of taking surveys. Our business-to-business focus in this report targets one of the most difficult to reach of all audiences, executives who rank at a director level or above.

A total of 275 respondents participated and this report offers you insight that will confirm beliefs, wash away myths, and provide additional points for discussion. Our intention is to update long-held ideas on conducting surveys and refocus researcher energy on what is most important.

Research shows that one third of all executives do not participate in surveys. Responses from the remaining two thirds reveal needs and opportunities around survey development, presentation, and completion.

- Negative perception danger comes with surveys that exceed twelve minutes
- Executives don't care what day a survey arrives, what they care about is their time
- The biggest problem with surveys today is that they are often too long and include confusing questions
- A strong, well-done survey enhances the perception of the sponsoring vendor
- Online surveys are an extremely strong medium among executives
- Face-to-face surveys earn twice as much time with an executive than one done by telephone
- Executives are willing to spend almost 40 percent more time on an email survey than if they are reached by phone
- Incentives need not be monetary
- Executives value peer insight and seeing the data itself
- Survey positioning should try to emphasize a focus on best practices and industry trends

---

## **METHODOLOGY**

A web-based survey was conducted in mid 2007. Individuals in executive roles were targeted with a total of 275 respondents. One hundred percent of respondents were at a management level of director or above.

The survey was designed by BuyLine Research and Survey Executives. Online B2B sample and hosting was provided by Survey Executives. The research results are presented in aggregate form. For additional cross-tab information contact either organization.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Survey-based research is more critical than ever as vendors try to improve how they pursue market opportunities. Audiences are more fragmented, decision processes more complex, and it continues to get harder to determine what influences prospective customers. Market success demands the use of fresh, timely insight that highlights wants and needs, but many survey methods are dated as they suffer from too many assumptions.

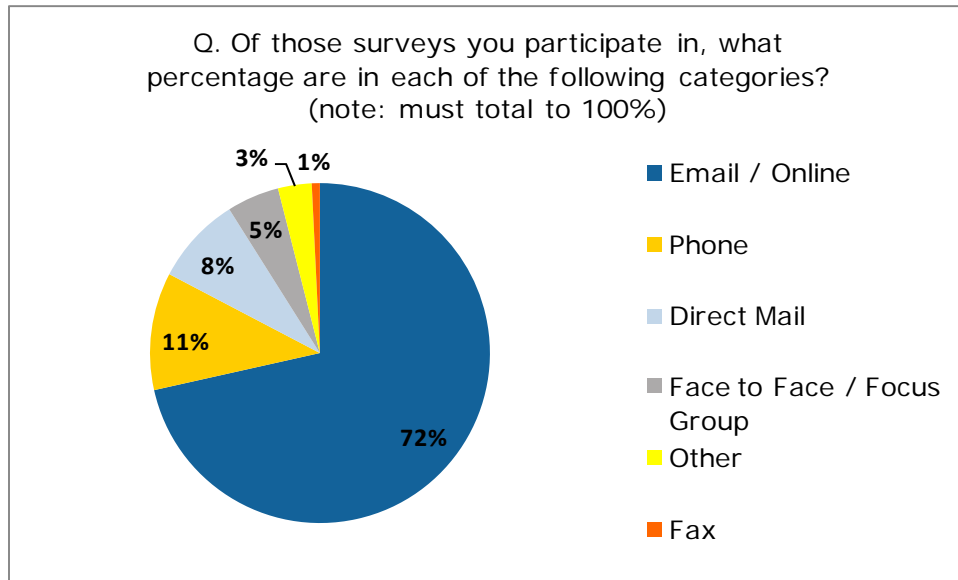
The reality is that today, seemingly everyone wants to survey and everyone is being surveyed. Providers and so-called experts offer their own tricks, tips, and techniques to pursue survey-based primary research. It is time to determine what beliefs have merit and which are better discarded.

BuyLine Research and Survey Executives set out to conduct research to help answer some of the key questions. What day of the week should the survey go out? What are the best types of incentives? How long should the survey be? Accurate answers drive cost-effective research which then assists offer development, structures pricing, manages campaigns, retains customers, and drives go to market efforts. Wrong answers simply waste time and money. Use this report as a starting point to get on the right track for effective primary research using web-based surveys. For some readers this report will confirm beliefs and for others it will make survey investments deliver a better return.

## **SURVEY METHODS**

Survey techniques have evolved rapidly since the advent of the Internet. Only several years ago, many frowned upon web-based surveys with claims of inferior data and too many unknown elements. Our director and above level executives highlight a dramatic change in preference. While certain bias is expected, as this survey was conducted online, almost three quarters of respondents prefer surveys to be sent via email and completed online (see Figure 1). Phone surveys are preferred by ten percent of respondents and it is interesting to note that almost 8 percent prefer surveys sent via direct mail.

**Figure 1: Survey Participation - By Type of Survey**

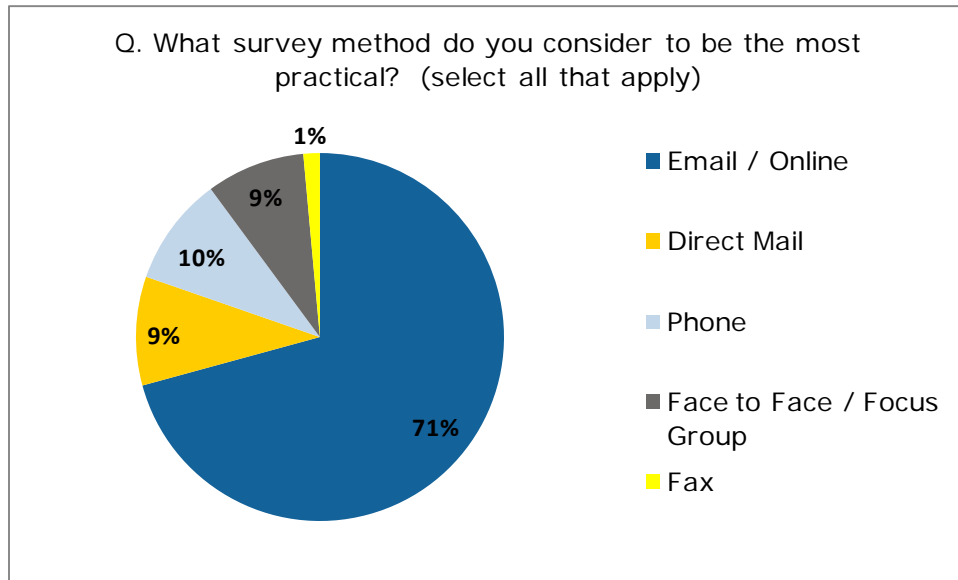


The best survey method for your research needs depends on the survey content itself. Numerically oriented surveys, pick from lists, fill in the blank all gain advantages from online methods. It is possible to monitor the respondent, force or limit the number of entries, auto sum, and incorporate earlier responses into succeeding questions, or aid in branching. But telephone surveys also have their strengths when open-ended questions require a dialogue where the interviewer has the flexibility to drill down with follow-up questions based on the insight a respondent offers. When you decide on a survey method, be sure to review the mix of questions and the type of qualitative or quantitative insight desired.

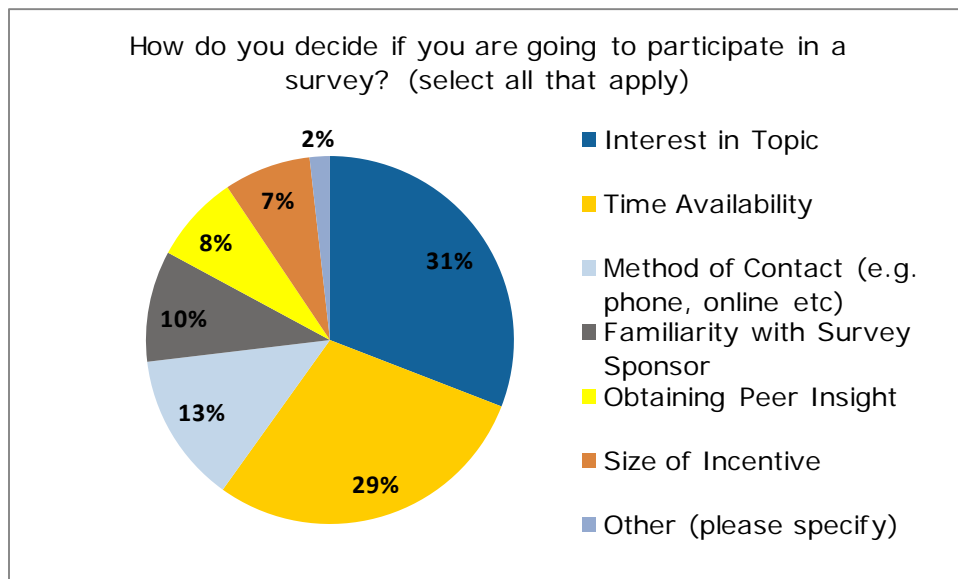
### **SURVEY PARTICIPATION**

Eighty percent of respondents feel that online surveys are the most practical, but that does not mean they will participate (see Figure 2). To gain executive insight, survey creators must offer interesting and desired insight. The first step toward that is making the survey topic relevant. Almost one-third of respondents state that they decide to participate based on their interest in a particular topic (see Figure 3); so survey creators must ask themselves if a target audience cares about a particular topic and why. The second most important factor in determining survey participation is executives simply having enough time (28 percent), followed by how the initial contact takes place (13 percent).

**Figure 2: Survey Method - Most Practical**



**Figure 3: Survey Participation - Decision Criteria**



It is interesting that the size of the incentive is actually perceived to be less important than gaining peer insight and familiarity with the sponsor of the survey. This highlights that for surveys to have maximum reach and success, they should leverage a multi-faceted strategy. Such a strategy may combine a relevant incentive with the opportunity to receive a summary of what one's peers think on the topic. So, don't simply expect that adding an incentive will drive responses. Rather, maximize the chance for success by combining a crisp, timely, interesting topic; offering peer insight with the right contact method; and a relevant incentive.

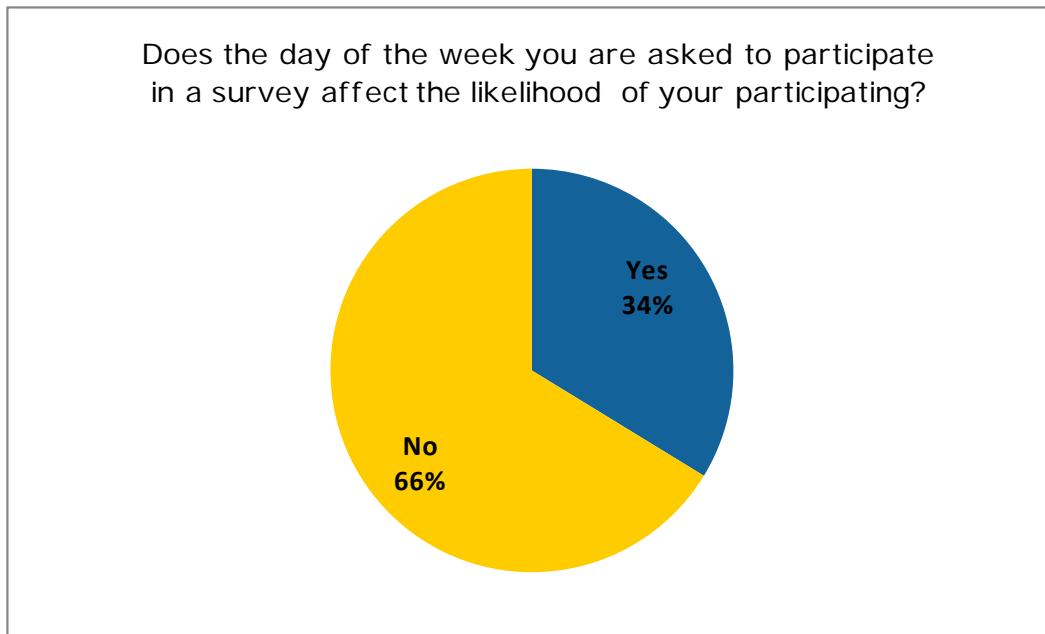
---

## **SURVEY TIMING AND VALUE PROPOSITIONS**

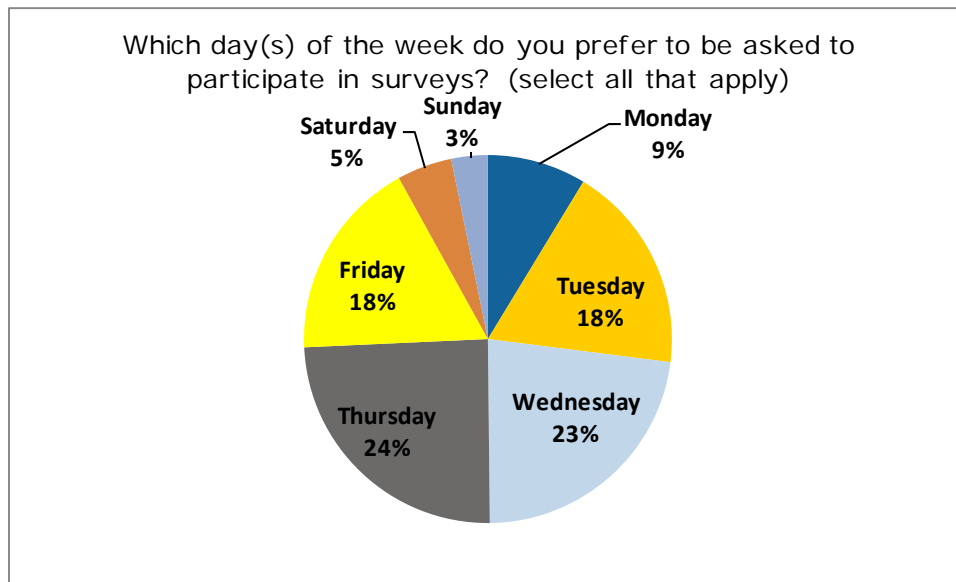
If having enough time is the second most important determinant of survey participation, what can survey providers do to maximize their chances of success? First, let's discount a myth that Tuesday is the best day to field a survey. According to two thirds of executives, the day of the week when a survey is sent does not impact the decision to participate (see Figure 4). For those executives that feel the day of the week does matter, specific days of interest are broken out fairly evenly between Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday (see Figure 5).

What survey providers can do to increase participation becomes quite clear when it comes to the types of surveys by category. Executives care about surveys where they can give their insight in return for the insight of others. Among the key categories, surveys on best practices are most valued, followed by a focus on trends and strategic issues (see Figure 6).

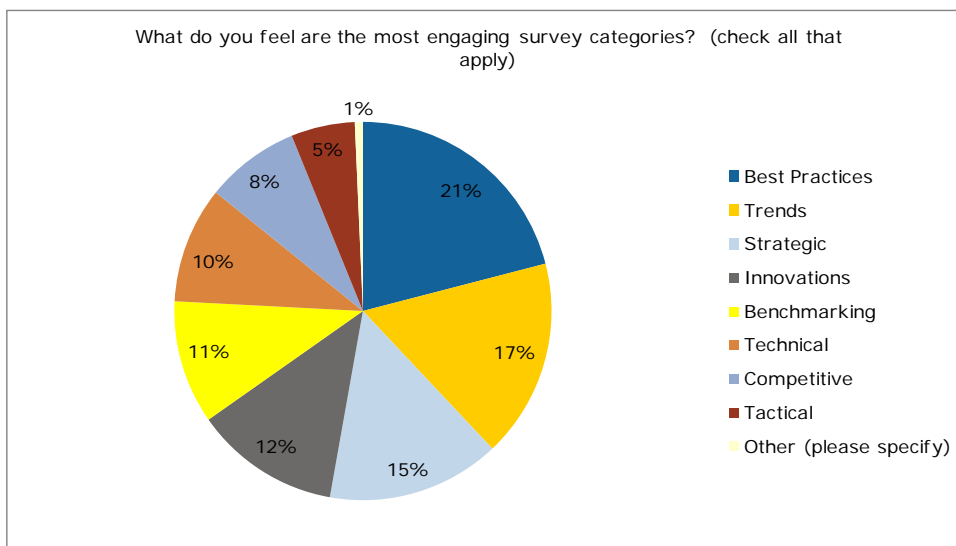
**Figure 4: Survey Participation - Affect of Day of the Week**



**Figure 5: Survey Participation - Day of Week Preference**



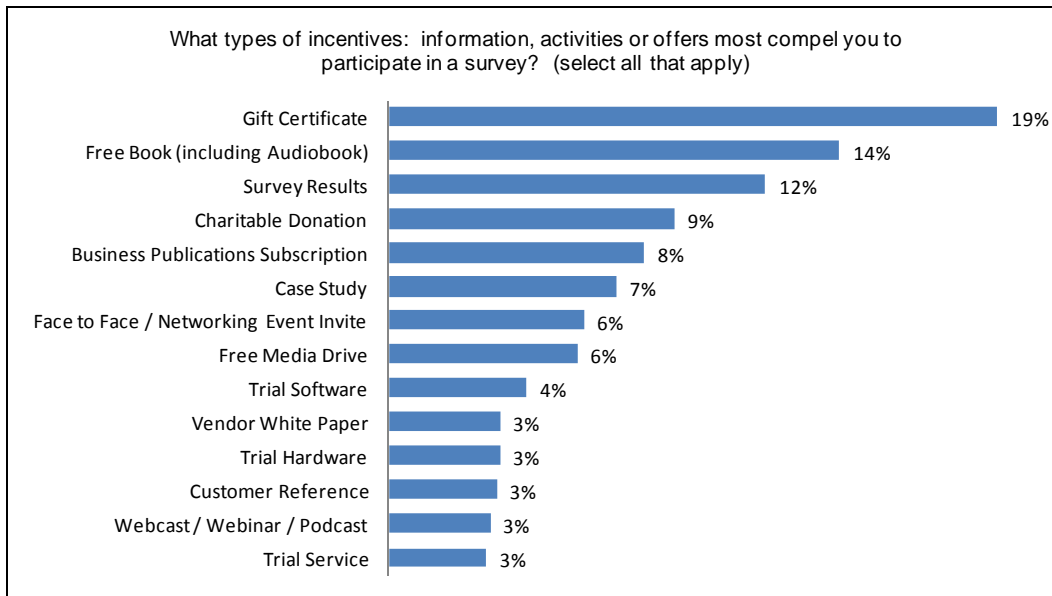
**Figure 6: Survey Interest - Most Engaging Categories**



## **SURVEY INCENTIVES**

Another myth is that to drive participation, an offer of money is all that matters. Not true. It is true that seven out of ten executives report that a special offer increases their likelihood of participation. While gift certificates are rated highest, it is by fewer than 20 percent of respondents. Books are quite compelling with a rank of second, while survey results rank third (see Figure 7). Also, recall that Figure 3 showed that the size of incentive ranks sixth in executive decision criteria, so non-monetary value offers a potentially strong motivator for some people. But what types of value work best?

**Figure 7: Survey Incentives - Interest by Types**

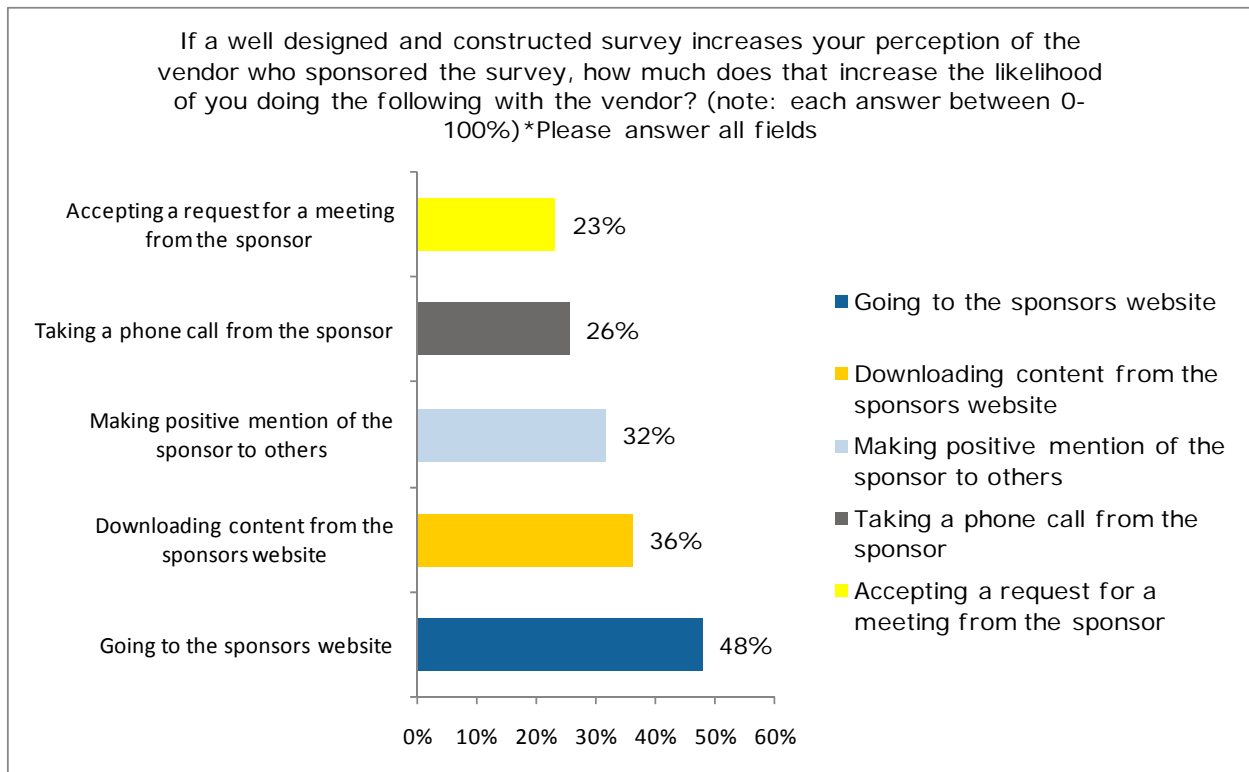


Alternative types of non-monetary value are clear. Executives want to know what their peers think. Even more importantly, respondents want the data to see for themselves. This can be tricky ground for survey sponsors who feel the insight from the data is something they funded and wish to use for competitive advantage, but selective sharing is clearly a great tool to obtain participation.

### **THE SURVEY HALO AFFECT**

Do you think that a survey is always merely a burden for respondents? Many research people do, so they try to make it less painful through offered incentives. Survey results show that reduced pain can come through survey length, clarity and method, but what about the impact of a well conceived, designed and presented survey? The strongest, percentage-wise, response across all questions was that a well designed and constructed survey can improve the perception of the sponsoring vendor (see Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Survey Quality - Impact on Sponsoring Vendor Perception**

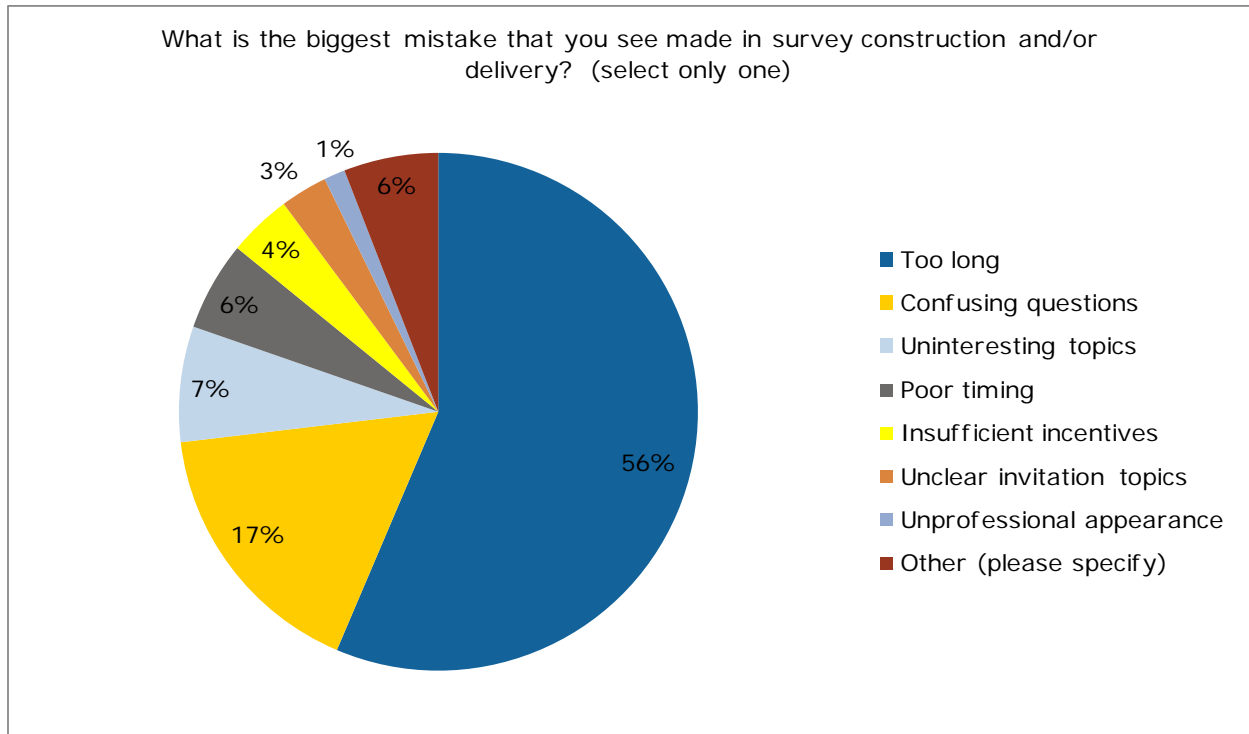


That halo affect can help a vendor gain interest, appreciation, and motivate respondents as they see that the vendor is concerned with issues important to them. If a vendor is going to create a positive halo affect from conducting field research, they must make it very clear as to why they are asking certain questions in the first place. Make it clear that the desire is to help the overall industry, individual respondents, customers, prospects, and others as you uncover key issues, share insight, and build improved results. Offer some of that insight back in the form of executive summaries that you deliver on time and presented in an attractive, colorful format.

All the planning and best intentions in the world can't help a vendor's perception if they construct or deliver the survey in ways that create pain rather than sweep it away. The majority of respondents feel that surveys are too long (see Figure 9), but the second biggest fault is confusing questions. That comes from the "we understand it so everyone should understand it" question development syndrome. A lack of true survey editing, testing, and feedback is the culprit as survey sponsors are often too quick to get the survey "out the door." This mistake is clearly preventable, but requires better discipline on the part of survey creators.

Confusing or poorly written surveys contribute more to poor responses than bad survey sample. A good respondent may simply "gift wrap" responses to get to the end of a survey if it is too long. Also, you must manage expectations honestly. If a survey is going to take fifty minutes to complete, let them know that and adjust the incentive and value to make it worth their time.

**Figure 9: Survey Methods - Mistakes in Construction and/or Delivery**

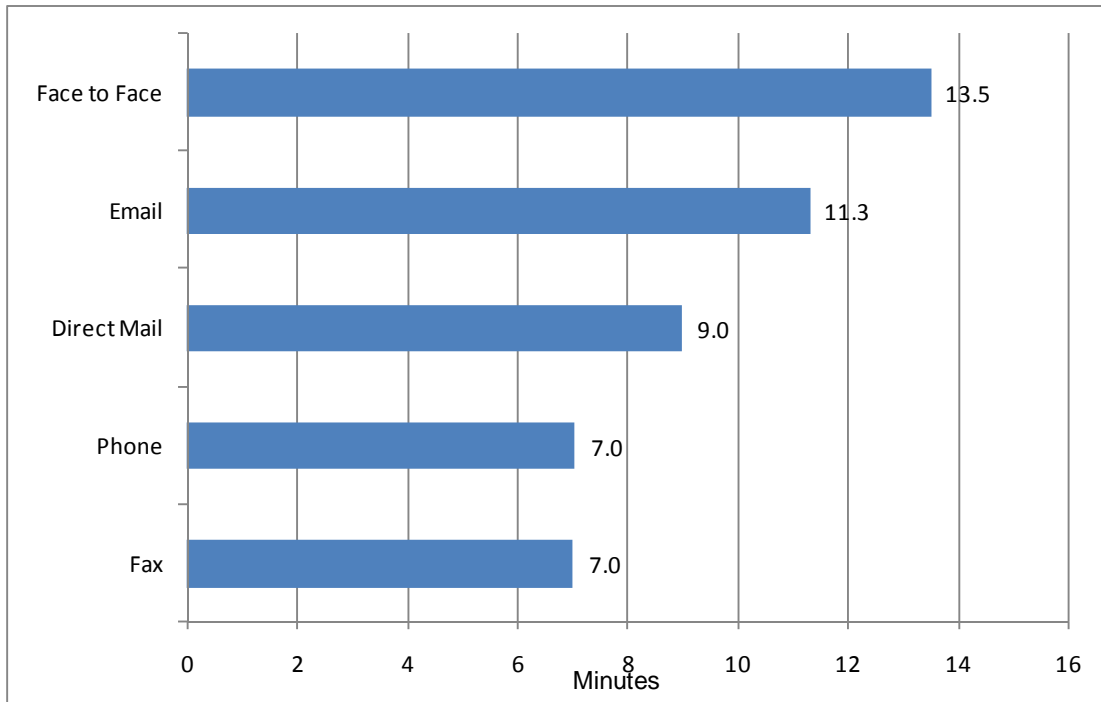


## **SURVEY LENGTH**

Since respondents feel that most surveys are too long, just what is the right length? The right answer depends on survey type, question mix, topic, survey method, and timing. Overall, respondents shared some interesting views. First, the average executive who participates in surveys responds to one survey per month. Clearly there is a battle for executive time and mindshare among survey sponsors. But often survey sponsors try to stuff too much into a survey, understate the time, and cause frustration among respondents. That frustration leads to higher dropout rates and a negative view of the sponsor.

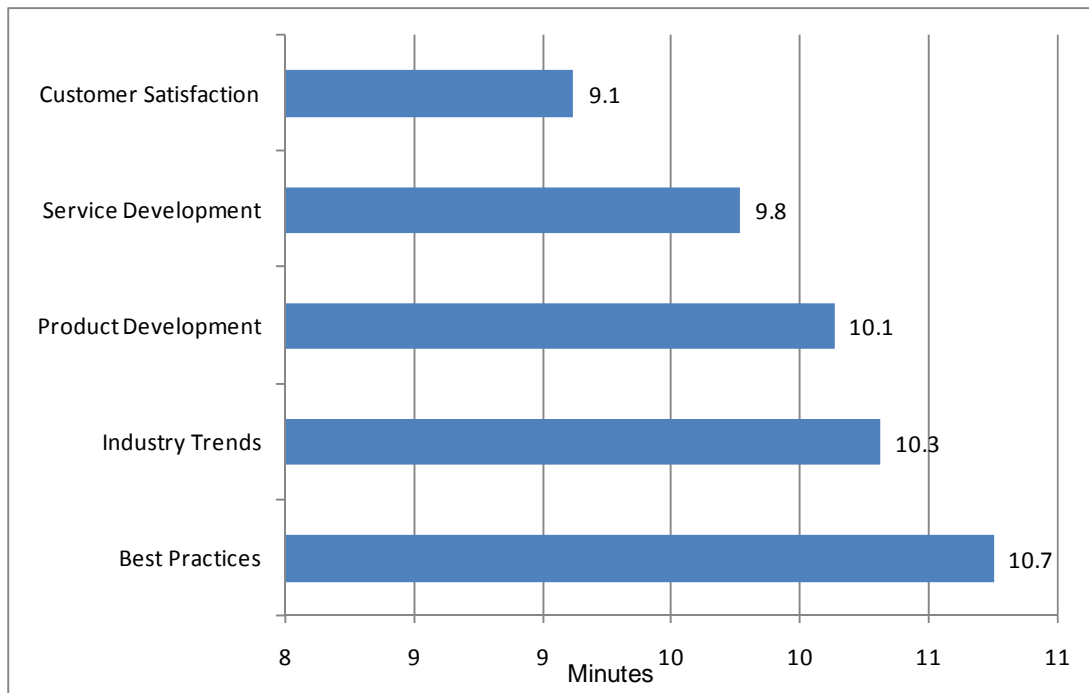
Respondents state that the method used to deliver the survey affects the amount of time they are willing to spend answering a survey. Among methods face-to-face receives the longest response time while phone and fax are allowed about half as much time. (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Survey Length - Maximum Time by Delivery Method**



The type of survey, such as one on industry trends versus customer satisfaction, also affects what respondents consider a reasonable length (see Figure 11).

**Figure 11: Survey Length - Maximum Time by Topical Coverage**



---

When it comes to the focus of a survey the shortest desired duration was for those targeting the topic of customer satisfaction. Respondents who are willing to spend more than five minutes on surveys will spend a maximum of just over eight minutes discussing their satisfaction. The next, slightly longer duration was for that covering service development at 9.5 minutes. Respondents are willing to spend 10 minutes on trends and product development surveys while best practices surveys present the longest duration at almost 11 minutes.

This presents a clear game plan for survey authors. If you want to be able to come back to a set of respondents and expect them to participate on an ongoing basis, ten minutes is the maximum amount of time a survey should take to complete no matter what type of survey you pose. Also, when you state how long a survey will take and set expectations with respondents make sure that you stick to your end of the bargain.

What can survey providers do to show respondents that they value their time? Several things come to mind. First of all, consider a non-obtrusive on-screen timer that counts down from the time it should take. While this may seem counterproductive if you think it will simply rush respondents, in fact it may signal to them that you are sincere about not using too much of their time. To account for interruptions be sure to have the timer stop due to inactivity of certain duration and then start again when progress continues.

Second, if you do time the survey and the individual goes over the allotted time, when you fulfill the incentive, change/enhance the incentive if your real-time analysis reveals that a respondent gave additional or more complete insight. To do this, survey tools can count the number of character given in open-ended questions, survey completeness, or the randomness of entered values. Make it clear that you valued their time and reward them for the extra, potentially higher-value insight. But do not advertise this fact in advance, just sensitize them and, over time, train respondents to be more thoughtful. You can also make all open-text optional—decrease drop outs and avoid collecting garbage. Remember, if it needs a lot of open, free-form dialogue perhaps a phone survey is better.

---

## **BUYLINE BOTTOM LINE**

The role of web-based surveys is a powerful option for survey providers, but only if they are done with care. To maximize the value of the data and minimize any negative perception among a target audience consider the following ten suggestions for better online survey success.

- Present topics around industry trends and best practices to gain participation
- Realize that individuals like to see peer insight coming from the data
- Don't extend the survey beyond reasonable time limits
- Make sure every question is simple, clear, and tested. Question confusion can only hurt vendor perception
- Timing of survey delivery is not nearly as important as if the executive has time to participate
- Books make excellent executive incentives, but consider how you can package insight related to the research topic as well
- Use online surveys for quantitative surveys—and remember they are strongly favored by participants
- Keep satisfaction surveys short—and remember that best practice surveys garner the most patience among respondents
- State up front why you're asking certain questions to gain a sense of commitment
- Always map your survey questions to confirm that you are asking something that is "actionable" rather than simply "nice to know" and will enable you to do something with the results. This can help you keep survey length down and make completing the survey focused and always on topic.

A large, stylized blue waveform graphic that starts on the left side of the page and extends horizontally across the bottom. It has a 3D effect with a lighter blue highlight on top and a darker blue shadow on the bottom.

## Marketing Performance Measurement <sup>®</sup>

Email [comments@buylineresearch.com](mailto:comments@buylineresearch.com)

Phone 781-608-8390

[www.buylineresearch.com](http://www.buylineresearch.com)