

TRORC Guide to Conducting Surveys

A number of towns in the TRORC region have conducted surveys for the purposes of planning. The most common method of surveying residents has been through mailed surveys.

Mailed surveys are not as effective as phone surveys, but they are the least expensive method, requiring a limited amount of manpower to conduct the survey. In my experience, a response rate of 25-50% is common. However, the response rate as with the results themselves will differ from town to town.

Included with this packet are my own recommendations for conducting a good survey, several guides put together by the University of Vermont and a few sample surveys. Please understand that the samples included are by no means perfect. Each one has positive and negative features and will need to be adjusted to the needs of your Planning Commission.

Getting started

While considering the content of a survey, keep the following suggestions in mind:

- **Know what you want to get from the survey** – Be sure that you know your purpose before you start writing questions. Discuss the topics that will be included and be sure they are relevant to your purpose.
- **Know what you want to do with the data you receive** – Just because an answer to a question is interesting, does not mean you can do anything with the data. Surveys are a tool you use to collect data for a specific purpose. Don't ask questions that will provide data that does not meet your purpose.
- **Know who you're surveying:** Who will be responding to the survey? Voters? Landowners?
- **Do your research:** Don't try to reinvent the wheel. Look at other surveys. Use them as a starting point as you design your questions.
- **Be sure each question will provide you with useful information** – In the Quintown survey (included in this packet) there were several questions asked that gave us information that was not particularly useful. The space those questions took up could have been dedicated to questions which would have provided the surveyors with better data. Ask questions that get you the data you *need* to know, not the data you'd *like* to know.
- **Keep the questions concise:** Long winded questions can be confusing and misinterpreted. Be sure your questions are to the point. Less is, as they say, more.
- **Don't lead the questions:** One of the most common mistakes made by survey designers is to phrase the questions in such a fashion that they illicit a response that is expected.
- **Avoid asking for identifying information:** People prefer a level of anonymity when they respond to surveys. Don't ask information that they will be uncomfortable giving you unless it will provide you with data that you must have.
- **Use plain language:** Be aware that not all respondents may be able to read exceptionally well or understand complex questions. Do not use big words or confusing concepts. Do not assume that because you understand the question, that everyone will understand it.
- **Include simple instructions:** Make sure that you provide your respondent with easy to understand instructions.

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- **Ask only one question at a time:** Avoid “double barrel” questions such as “do you like cats and dogs” as they can cause confusion and poor responses.
- **Keep the answers simple:** Use multiple choice responses such as “yes/no” or graded (bad to good) to questions in your survey. Complicated answer methods can be confusing to the respondent.
- **Avoid open ended responses:** Unless they are absolutely necessary, avoid questions that have open ended responses. They are difficult and time consuming to tally and they do not usually give you a clear answer to your question. However, you should always include an area in which respondents *can* add comments (generally at the end of the document) about the questions or the survey itself.
- **Avoid “select all that apply” questions:** Again, you have to know what data you’re looking for. In the Quintown survey, the least useful information came from those questions that were answered using this method.
- **Avoid the response option "other":** Careless responders will overlook the option they should have designated and conveniently mark the option "other."
- **Put important questions first:** You can never be sure that a respondent will completely answer your survey. They may run out of time or feel the effort is too taxing. However, they will commonly answer the first few questions asked.
- **Avoid agreement bias:** By framing both positive and negative questions, your respondents will evaluate each question rather than uniformly agreeing or disagreeing to all of the responses.

Layout and Design

Laying out your survey is important. You will most likely want to include as many questions as possible on the least amount of pages. Consider these points:

- **Keep the survey short:** The longer the survey, the less likely the response. A good survey is generally no more than three to four double-sided pages *including* the last page which will have the address and mailing information on it when folded.
- **Use colored paper:** By putting your survey on colored paper, it will stand out from the rest of the mail a respondent receives.
- **Make it professional looking:** Be sure your survey looks good. A poor looking survey could make potential respondents feel as though the group asking the questions is not professional enough to do anything worthwhile with the information.

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Review and redrafting

Just because the group of people who created a survey feel it is a professional looking, easily understood and useful document, doesn't mean the respondents will. Always plan to have others review the document before you finalize your draft. It is imperative that you avoid "working in a bubble". Be sure to get outside input. You may want to:

- **Hold a focus group:** Once you've drafted your document and have it laid out as you hope to mail it out, organize a meeting with a mix of potential respondents from town. Be sure to include a wide range of individuals. Do not have them answer the questions, but instead have them tell you what they think of the questions from the standpoint of understandability. Did they interpret the question the way you intended? Does the layout enhance or confuse their understanding of the questions?

Making the survey available

When conducting a survey by mail, it is important to make sure that it will reach the targeted group. You should know the following before you send the document out:

- Who are you mailing it to?
- Where is your mailing list coming from and is it complete?
- Will the survey be distributed through additional methods (public places, web, etc.)?
- How will people get additional copies if they have more than one household member who wants to take it?

Once you've answered these questions, you'll be ready to mail the document out. Be sure you do the following:

- Always include a self-addressed stamped envelope. Response rates without one are often 10-20% lower.
- Consider sending out a reminder postcard two weeks after the survey has been sent. This may increase the percentage of return.

Conducting a Focus Group

In the advertising world, businesses often use focus groups to determine if a new product has merit. They have large staffs and rooms with two way mirrors to allow the group to be uninfluenced by the focus group leaders. However, towns don't have this option, so they have to be creative.

The key to conducting a good focus group is to avoid influencing the respondents. Designate one person as a facilitator. Have that person guide the group through the process, but do not lead questions or attempt to clarify anything.

Focus group participants should be sitting at a table, with the overseers of the group behind them (similar to the one way mirror used by professionals in this situation). This will hopefully help eliminate any pressure felt by the group.

Make them feel comfortable. Offer water at their table. Make snacks available.

Ask for their initial impressions of each question. Do not discuss your intent or purpose for asking the questions with them. If you have to clarify a question, then it should be rewritten. Don't hesitate to have the facilitator ask how they might suggest the question be worded.

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- Advertise: Articles in a local newspaper, posters at the post office and other public locations, will help make people aware that the survey is coming.
- Give adequate time to response: Give respondents a month to return their survey. More than that is too long, but less is not enough time.
- Advertise some more: Mid-way through the response period, you may want to put another article in the paper reminding folks to respond.

Alternative Distribution Methods

Sending out a survey via mail, while more likely to reach more of your audience, can be expensive and time consuming. If a community has more time to invest in distribution than money, volunteer boards can distribute the survey, here are some examples:

- Make the survey available to pick up at Town Meeting or on voting day.
- In communities with a transfer station, having a volunteer hand the surveys out on a weekend day when the transfer station is open is a viable distribution option.
- Make them available at the town office.
- Make them available at local stores or other civic places.

If using an alternative distribution method, it is essential that the community be made aware that the survey is available. This can be communicated through newspaper articles or announcements, postings in the community or online if your community has a listServ or is part of Front Porch Forum.

Processing the data

Once you have received your survey responses, you'll need to process the data. Consider having one person do the work, either a volunteer or a professional. Multiple people processing data can lead to confusion and lost information.

Be sure to put the information in a form that is easily understood and useful. Hold a public meeting or at least put an article in the paper that makes residents aware of the response information.

Conclusion

There are no silver bullets when it comes to creating, distributing and processing a survey. It takes effort and careful consideration to create a survey that is useful and understandable. Be sure to involve others outside of the committee who is creating the survey for feedback. Be sure that residents are aware of the survey and are encouraged to respond. Don't hesitate to ask for professional assistance.

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Additional Information

The following additional information is included with this packet:

- UVM's "Community Planning Surveys" guide.
- Example surveys from Royalton, Braintree, Plymouth, Quintown and Bradford.
- Example surveys from the Center for Rural Studies.