



7 TIPS FOR BETTER, FASTER PROGRAMMING AND WHY YOU SHOULD CARE

We spend hours on the questionnaire, delight in every completed survey, delve eagerly into the data, and produce mind-blowing reports. But programming? Meh!

The fact is, programming is the unsung hero of survey research!

And ignoring it can be a costly and time-consuming mistake, as efficient and accurate programming can make or break a research project. If the data is not collected correctly and the respondents are not treated well, the project cannot successfully deliver high-quality data and actionable insights. So, as researchers, it is time we give programming its due respect and consideration.

HERE ARE 7 TIPS TO IMPROVE PROGRAMMING FOR BETTER SURVEY RESULTS:

TIP #1:

Don't Start Programming with Incomplete Materials.

A key factor that consistently determines programming efficiency and accuracy is the number of rounds of changes. Contrary to popular belief, it's not the length of the interview (LOI) or the complexity of the survey that primarily drives programming, but rather the iterations of revisions. When programmers have a finalized document with minimal changes, they can deploy the survey much faster than if the project undergoes multiple rounds of revisions. That goes beyond the questionnaire: have all materials finalized before you begin programming and include sample and subsample quotas, survey logic, supporting files (e.g., images and videos), and even some ideas about eventual data analysis.

TIP #2:

Follow the Process and Adhere to Best Practices.

Every programming project has a set of Best Practices consisting of Initial review of finalized materials, Programming, QA, Revisions, Soft Launch, Data Check, and Full Launch. Avoid skipping steps and plan for each one in your project timeline from the start. A kickoff call at the beginning of programming is a great way to make sure everyone is on the same page, and frequent communication ensures they stay there! Deviation from these Best Practices can jeopardize the project's success.

TIP #3:

Write the Survey with Programming in Mind.

Over the years, we've received survey questionnaires in Word, Google Sheets, Excel, PowerPoint, and even faxes! However, the most effective document is a well-organized Word document. To make sure your survey is clear and easy for programmers to understand:



- **Use different colors or symbols to differentiate** between programming instructions, survey instructions, and respondent text.
- **Simplify logic and avoid duplicating programming instructions.** For example:
 - Instead of repeating logic instructions (Q1: If 'yes', ask Q2/Q3/Q4/Q5/Q6/Q7 – if 'no', skip to Q8... Q2: ask if 'yes' at Q1 – Skip if Q1='no'... Q3: ask if 'yes' at Q1. Skip if Q1='no'... Q4: ask if 'yes' at Q1. Skip if Q1='no'...etc.), simplify them (As "Ask Q2-Q7 if Q1=Yes.")
 - If a respondent will "Terminate if Q1='Don't Know'" for the remainder of the screener, we do not want to add "If Q1 ≠ 'Don't Know', Ask Q2", "If Q1 ≠ 'Don't Know', Ask Q3", "If Q1 ≠ 'Don't Know', Ask Q4", etc.).

Programmers will need to review, investigate, conceptualize, and plan for each and every instruction outlined in a programming document, so unnecessary complexity and repetition will take more time and potentially complicate a straightforward execution.

- **Specify question layouts.** For an age question, would you like a drop-down with choices from 18-100+, or would you prefer a numeric open-end response? If the survey will ask a series of attributes for brands a respondent is aware of, specify on the word document if you would like to ask a grid of attributes as one element or one brand at a time with a repeating list on subsequent screens. Structure other scenarios on a single page but specify a "scrolling" or "card-sort" exercise. Having these types of preferences defined up-front will avoid the potential need to reprogram the survey after you review the test link.

TIP #4:

Document ALL Revisions. When updates are needed after the initial programming is complete, document any and all changes—no matter how small—in an up-to-date survey document as an overall "source of truth" for the project. Consistent documentation helps streamline the survey process, maintains clarity throughout the project's life, and has implications that spread through programming, QA, data processing, and the final deliverables.

TIP #5:

Set a Realistic Timeline. In an industry driven by deadlines, it is essential to set clear and realistic expectations for programming, revisions, and testing at the outset. If the project requires faster-than-usual timing, additional resources can be allocated and schedules adjusted to meet the deadline. However, without a defined deadline, assumptions about timing can lead to miscommunications. Having a defined deadline – however aggressive! – is crucial to a smooth programming workflow.



TIP #6:

Review the Data Layout Before Survey Launch. Given the growing complexity of online surveys, it is vital to review a data layout before launching the survey to ensure that it will be stored appropriately. Even if it "looks" correct in a browser, data could be stored in a different format. For example, if you are collecting responses on a one-to-five labeled scale, do you want the data to be stored as a numeric response, a categorical response, or both? If a respondent will see ten ads but will only answer questions about three of them, do you expect to see only three groups of variables or ten groups of variables? You may also realize that you want 'net' or 'hidden' variables set up before data collection. It is always easier to make adjustments before launch than midway through the field.

TIP #7:

Run a Simulated Data Check. Many programming and QA tools can run automated data that simulates respondents' answers. This can help expose ill-fitting or inconsistent logic, quota framework or implementation issues, and other problematic classifications and ensure the integrity of the data outputs. This also gives data processors a preliminary look at the format to ensure they can efficiently and quickly prepare the final deliverables. By generating enough data to populate all survey questions and hidden elements, this process also allows for thorough testing of the report to help verify that skips and question logic have been appropriately defined.

Clear expectations, frequent communication, meticulous documentation, and strict adherence to established processes and Best Practices can make survey programming fast and efficient. A strong foundation of accurate and thoughtful programming will strengthen and improve your survey results. Additionally, respondents will appreciate a well-programmed survey and will deliver complete results and better data. Pay close attention to programming to maximize the probability of success for your survey research efforts!

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If you'd like to learn more about how Research Results programs surveys that make our clients look good, contact **Ellen Pieper, Chief Client Officer** at Ellen_Pieper@researchresults.com or 919-368-5819