

How to do a Credible Survey/Poll

1. What is a Survey/Poll?

A survey or poll is a series of questions that a group of people, businesses or organizations are asked about a specific issue, situation, problem, or solution to a problem. Surveys are usually done by phone, or by going door-to-door, but more and more surveys are being done through the Internet.

Surveys are also conducted of things, for example the number of trees in a city, or the number of fish in a lake.

Descriptive surveys describe specific characteristics of people or businesses in a city, province, region, territory or country, such as what people think about a situation or an issue or problem, or the average income of farmers, or the percentage of unemployed people, or how much money an industry spends on research and development.

Analytical surveys explain more than they describe. Such surveys are done usually after a descriptive survey to try to figure out why people or businesses have specific beliefs or characteristics, or why things are the way they are.

2. Why do a survey/poll?

There are many good reasons to do a survey about your issue or problem, and your proposed solutions.

1. a survey can provide you with information about your issue or problem, and your solutions, that can be helpful in winning your goals.
2. a survey can help you push a government or a corporation to change a law, policy or activity because it can help prove that there is broad support for your proposed solutions.
3. a survey can help you educate the media and the public about your issue or problem, and your proposed solutions.

3. Key Steps to Do a Credible Survey/Poll

(a) Get Help from a Teacher or Survey Company

If your citizen group is planning to conduct a survey yourselves, you should get help from a statistics teacher at a local school. Conducting a survey is not difficult, but it is difficult to ensure that your survey is credible. In order to be credible, your survey must be conducted using a method that is “statistically valid”. Set out below are general points about what needs to be done to ensure that a survey is statistically valid, but again, get the help of someone who knows how to gather statistics. Sometimes statistics teachers will be willing to have their students conduct your survey as a class assignment, and this can be a very good way to ensure that your survey is credible.

If you have the funding to do so, your group can hire a survey company to conduct your survey. To have a survey company conduct a survey across Canada costs about \$1,500 for each question asked. For that cost you will receive a report that details how Canadians answered your question, including a break down of the responses by age, gender, race, province and political party affiliation. Usually, survey companies survey 1,000 to 2,000 Canadians for that cost. You can find survey companies listed in the yellow pages phone book.

(b) Figure Out What You Want to Know

The first step in planning a survey is to decide just what it is you want to know. For example, if you want to find out the housing conditions of the poor, you want to decide whether “housing conditions” means the type of dwelling, its age, and/or its location. Also, what does “poor” mean? Does it mean a person’s income or debts or both? It will save you time and resources if you make sure to take the time to figure out exactly what you want to know, and to develop questions that will result in answers that tell you what you want to know.

(b) Develop Clear, Effective Questions

Take a simple question such as, “Do you own a car?” What does this question mean? If a woman is answering the poll and the car is registered in her spouse’s name, how is she supposed to answer? What does “own” mean? Also, what does “car” mean? Do vans and four-wheel drive vehicles qualify?

Whatever the questions, whatever the information sought, you should make sure your questions are clear and effective before making the first phone call or knocking on the first door.

(c) Develop a Survey Plan

A survey plan contains 3 basic elements:

1. How the sample group of people, businesses or things that will be surveyed will be chosen and contacted;
2. The format of the survey;
3. A calculation of the how precise the survey will be (known as the “margin of error”).

To be credible, the sample group must be chosen randomly, and be representative of the population as a whole. As outlined above, questions must be clear, and answers must be clear also so that the results can be calculated accurately.

Some surveys are conducted by phone, some by people going home to home and interviewing people face-to-face. Another type of survey uses “focus groups” which are groups of 5-10 people who are all asked questions together during a meeting.

The size and diversity of the sample group, and how the survey is conducted, determines the “margin of error” for the survey. No matter how accurately the survey is conducted, there is always some margin of error. Again, a statistics teacher, or a survey company, is essential in

ensuring that you are conducting a credible survey.

3. Key Steps to Analyzing a Survey/Poll

While survey companies want people to think that all surveys are “scientific” the use of this term often wrongly makes surveys seem more accurate than they actually are. So, if someone else has done a survey about your issue or problem, or your solutions, analyze it before you use it in your campaign. If you use a survey to support your campaign and it is not a credible survey, you will open yourself up to criticism from your opponents that will hurt your credibility.

Again, the key elements of a survey are what you need to analyze to know if a survey is credible. Check the size of the sample group, how the sample group was chosen, the wording of the questions, the margin of error, and who conducted the survey.

For example, you will often see reporters on TV news standing in the street and asking people what they think about a situation. This type of survey is not accurate at all because the sample group of people is so small. Sometimes TV newshows also ask people to call in and “vote” (or vote on a website) or leave a message saying what they think about a situation. This type of survey is not accurate at all, because the sample group of people has not been chosen randomly.

When reporting a survey, the media unfortunately often make it seem like the results as precise as a score in a hockey game. Beyond the margin of error, the media and many other commentators rarely acknowledge that even if the survey was conducted accurately, some people may have responded to the survey in the same way they would respond to a test. They don’t want to fail the “test” so if the survey company asks them if they are concerned about the deficit, day-care, the environment and other issues, they may say they are concerned even though they may only rarely think about those issues.

Survey companies also often conduct surveys about issues that have just been in the news because they know the results of the survey will be covered by the media and they will receive publicity. The level of concern about the issue that the survey shows, however, has likely been increased because the issue was just in the news.

As well, studies show that sometimes people who are surveyed simply do not tell the truth. Again, some people see surveys as a test and they don’t want to flunk, and so they give the answer that they think is the right answer, as opposed to saying what they really think.

Despite these problems, if a survey is conducted properly it can be a useful tool and often a reliable indicator of trends in society.