



Program Evaluation

Tipsheet #22

Cover Letter for a Survey

Response rates are highest in studies with a cover letter that achieves the following goals.

GOAL 1: convince respondents

- ❖ that a problem exists.
- ❖ the problem affects or is relevant to a GROUP to which respondent belongs.
- ❖ their participation is needed to find a SOLUTION, not to help you.

GOAL 2: show respondents their participation will be respected. Explain that

- ❖ answers will be CONFIDENTIAL.
- ❖ the RESULTS will be useful.
- ❖ recipients can ASK about study.

Here is a step-by-step method to write a cover letter. Use a new paragraph for each item.



Step 1. State the problem that exists, mentioning the group to which the respondent belongs and how the group is affected by the problem. Explain why the respondent's participation is important. Say the study will benefit the group the recipient belongs to. Under no circumstances suggest that the recipient should complete the survey to help you. Convey the idea that the recipient should complete the survey to help others like themselves.

EXAMPLE 1

AVOID	Dear (name): Before spring arrives and brings back the busyness of fieldwork, we ask that you take a few minutes to help us evaluate the XYZ program.	<i>poor rationale</i>
USE	Dear (name): The past five years have brought significant change in agriculture. Fluctuating commodity prices, rising land values, and decreasing profit margins are a few factors that have contributed to making the sustenance of the family farm more challenging. The rising challenges that farmers like yourself face can force you into a decision to either stop farming or to find a way to change and sustain your operation.	<i>problems the group face</i> <i>the group affected</i>

EXAMPLE 2

USE	Dear (name): A recent study found that 63 percent of this country's private water supplies failed to meet health standards. Another study indicated that Pennsylvania has more reported cases of water-borne diseases than any other state. In Indiana county, contaminated water is also a problem.	<i>problems the group face</i> <i>the group affected</i>
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- Step 2.** State the social usefulness of the study, mentioning how the results will be used. Will summary results be shared with local or state officials, media or particularly relevant groups? In some surveys it will make the recipient's participation seem more worthwhile if the audiences are many. Will the results not be shared with anyone for some special reason? In some studies you may want to mention that. Additionally, express why the respondent's participation is important.

EXAMPLE 1

AVOID	Please answer the questions on the enclosed survey to help us understand how your participation in the XYZ program has helped you in your farming/business related activities.	<p><i>poor rationale for participation in the survey</i></p> <p><i>leading the participants</i></p>
USE	Our records indicate that you have participated in the XYZ program over the past five years. In an effort to better meet the evolving needs of our clientele, please look over and complete the enclosed survey to give us your opinion about the XYZ program. It is important that all opinions are represented.	<p><i>good rationale for participation in the survey</i></p> <p><i>not leading the participants</i></p>

EXAMPLE 2

USE	<p>Last May you attended the Safe Drinking Water Workshop, an educational program on water supply management. We're interested in knowing if the workshop and the Water Supply Records book (if you bought one) met your needs. It's important that all opinions are represented.</p> <p>The findings of this survey will help Penn State water specialists design programs for owners of private water systems throughout Pennsylvania so more families can enjoy the benefits of clean water.</p>	<p><i>the group affected</i></p> <p><i>good rationale for participation in the survey</i></p>
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- Step 3.** Promise confidentiality and add the idea that the data will be used in summary form only. You can say "Results will be used in summary form only to protect confidentiality".
- Step 4.** Explain that ID number on the front of the survey, if you use one, is for follow-up purposes only. You can say "The identification number on the survey will be used only to keep track of the surveys as they are returned. In this way, follow-up reminders won't be sent to those who respond soon."
- Step 5.** To whom can the recipient write or call with questions about the study? (Give details). This is very important, if not crucial, for increasing response.
- Step 6.** If planned, can the respondent get a summary of results? How?
- Step 7.** Express appreciation for *their participation* in the survey.



Other **research-based recommendations** about the format to increase response rate: include

- respondent's name and address on the letter
- respondent's name and address on the envelope
- official letterhead stationary
- date on letter – use date of mailing
- a one-page cover letter separate from survey form
- your personal signature in ink on each letter
- first class postage, not bulk
- pre-addressed, stamped return envelope

Other **research-based strategy** related to conducting a survey:

Be sure to build into the process, three reminders to obtain the scientific response in which you can have confidence in the results. For details, see [Tipsheet #74](#).

You can use the psychology outlined in this Tipsheet to write a cover letter for many *other* requests, such as participation in a focus group, telephone survey, needs assessment or strategic planning.

References

Dillman, Don A. 1978. Mail and Telephone Surveys. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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Salant, Patricia and Don A. Dillman. 1994. How to Conduct Your Own Survey. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, nekiernan@psu.edu

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