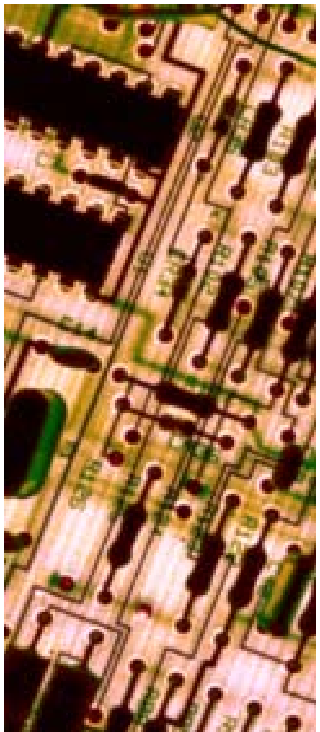

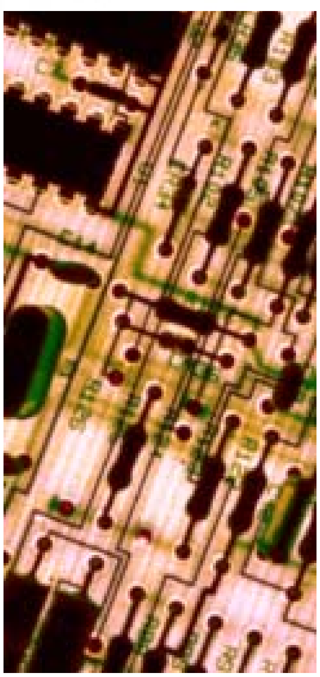

Socratic Technologies, Inc.

Best Practices for Email Invitations to Web-based Surveys

SOCRATIC
TECHNOLOGIES

Contents

Guildelines for Writing Email Invitations

Don't Look Like Spam 2
Subject Line Components 3
Salutation 3
First Sentence 4
Salience Points 4
Non-Qualified Terminates Recognition 5
Contact for Help or More Information 5
Privacy Policy/Confidentiality Statement 5
Privacy Policy Link 6
Opt-Out 6
Industry Affiliations / Standards 7
Contact Information 7

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Introduction

In today’s climate of anti-spam legislation (CAN-SPAM Act of 2003) and the mounting clutter accumulating in people’s in-boxes, it is becoming increasingly important to write email invitations for Web-surveys that will be opened. As response rates to email invitations drop it is critical to differentiate one’s invitation from general spam, obtain the reader’s interest and attention and adhere to growing rules governing privacy and opt-out rights.

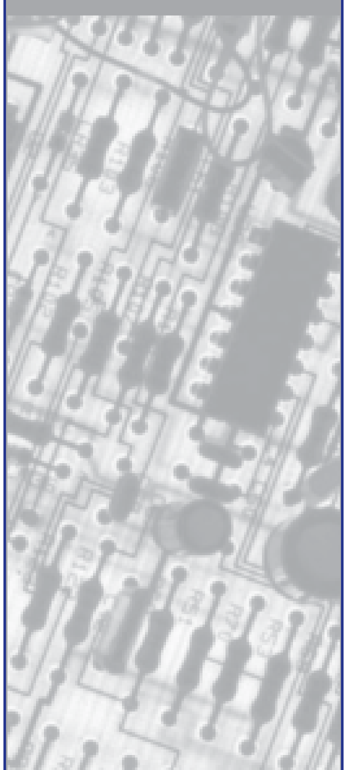
A wide variety of opinion has emerged as to what constitutes “best practices” for writing the perfect email. On one side of the debate, there are those researchers who feel that a strong appeal to respondent’s desire to get paid is a winning strategy. Others feel that the most successful approach is to the potential participant’s interest in giving his or her opinion.

After much trial and error and some experimental research, I have come to the conclusion that the decision to participate or not is based on a complex interplay of motivations that must be addressed. The tricky part is that not all people react positively to the same messages. Therefore, the secret appears to be to communicate a number of details very quickly, hoping to hit on at least one of the key elements that will act as the definitive persuader.

This article will go through eleven of the issues that we feel must be addressed in an email invitation to a Web survey and the order in which these points-of-information need to be presented. The order of presentation is important, because several usability studies have shown that the average time that someone spends reviewing an email to determine whether it is worthy of attention is about <u>three seconds</u>.

The steps indicated in this publication are derived from the work published by IMRO and CMOR as it relates to increasing survey response and cooperation rates.

They also reflect the current state of the industry’s understanding regarding complying with some aspects of anti-spam legislation, but are not intended as legal advice.



Step 1: Don’t Look Like Spam

Of course it *should* go without saying that your emails should not BE unsolicited Spam (emails sent in bulk to people with whom you or your client has no ongoing business relationship or opt-in permission for contact) is illegal under the CAN-SPAM Act of 2003. However, even if you have contact permission, the number one reason that people do not respond to email invitations to Web surveys is that the invitation is *mistaken* for Spam.

What are some of the ways you can avoid the appearance of being junk email? For one, use text for the body of the email, not HTML. HTML email format, with fancy graphics (and long load times) has become so closely associated with Spam that any benefits from “looking nice” are lost. Second, use the full, correct email address for each invitation sent. Do NOT use a populated BCC field or bulk mailing options.

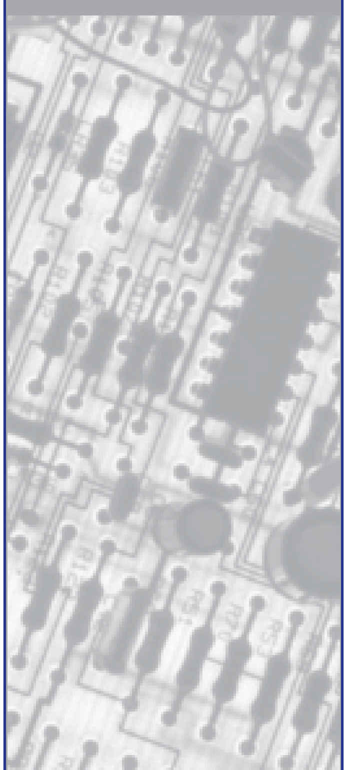
Familiarity with the sender is a prime influencer of the decision to participate. Send invitations from a domain that will be recognized by the recipient. Researchers should avoid sending emails from domain names with elements known to cause “spam filters” to prevent their delivery. Some spam filters look for domain names with key words such as: Offer, Free, Cash, Blast, Private, Bargain, Discounts, Daily, Deals, Promo, Win/Winner, Shop, Dollars, Lotto, Marketing, Rewards, Wholesale, Unique, Thrifty, Value, Direct, Buy and many other “salesy” come-ons.

Tip: People associate HTML emails as spam--use text emails instead.

Tip: Spam filters look for key words that determine whether an email is junk mail.

Tip: Use the subject line to identify yourself, the topic and the fact that this is a survey

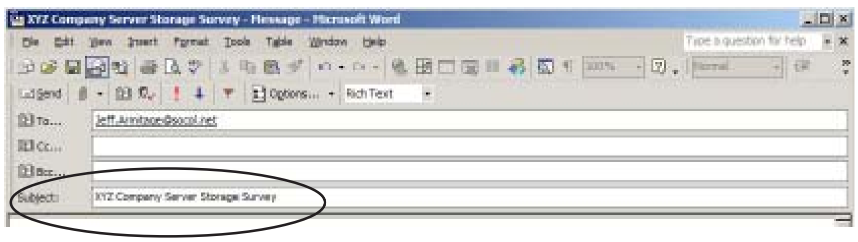
Tip: Use the participant's name ONLY if you are sure that it is correctly spelled.



Step 2: Three Critical Subject Line Components: "Sponsor," "Topic," and "Survey"

Dealing with a "known and trusted" source is also a major factor in getting an email survey invitation opened. It is also one of the requirements for compliance wtih CAN-SPAM. Several industry association and academic studies indicate that the sponsor of the survey and the general topic of the area of inquiry are very important considerations in the critical three second window for the recipient's decision as to whether or not to open the email and review it.

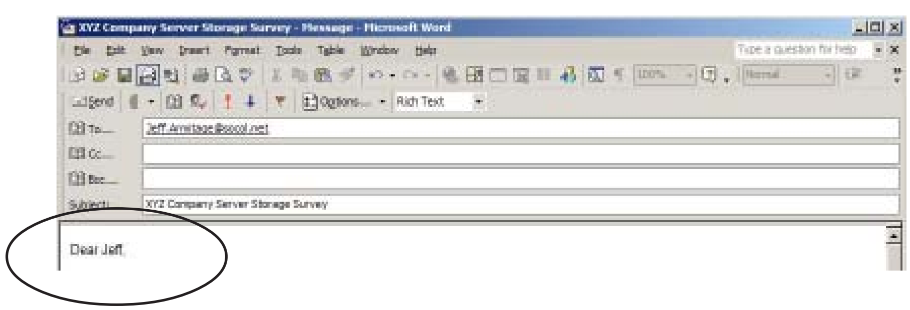
From personal experience, I have found that adding the word "survey" helps to amplify the fact that this is research, not an errant Spam message. This is somewhat controversial, in that some IMRO members prefer "market research." But from follow-up survey satisfaction questions, however, I find that "survey" sounds less burdensome than "research" and that anything with the term "marketing" in it tends to be a mental filter leading to deletion.



Step 3: Salutation

Whenever possible, use a seeded database from which you can use the respondent's name in the salutation. Although it is acceptable to say "Dear Customer" or "Dear Panel Member," we have found that "Dear Mr. Peterson" or "Dear Jeff" is more effective at getting the potential respondent's attention.

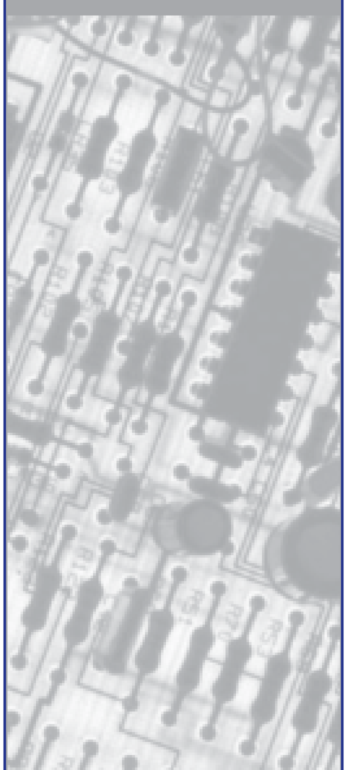
Caution should be used, however, to ensure that the spelling and punctuation is correct. All the value of the personalized greeting is defeated if the name is misspelled. Be particularly careful if you are using your client's customer lists or other opt-in relationship sources—they tend to be out of date and/or error-prone. If there are any doubts about the correctness of the spellings, titles, etc., it is safer to use a more generic greeting.



SOCRATIC TECHNOLOGIES

Tip: Distance your survey invitation from spam as soon as possible.

Tip: Make your case for participating quickly and succinctly.

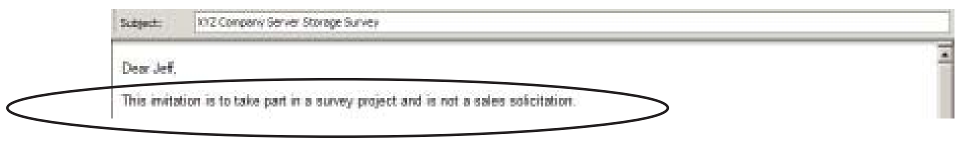


Step 4: First Sentence

As mentioned earlier, once someone opens an email invitation, we have between only two and five seconds worth of reading time to get the person's decision whether or not to participate. Research on phone-based studies suggests that a live-interviewer has slightly longer, perhaps five to seven seconds to reach the same decision. Online, this translates to about one sentence's worth of content.

The ultimate question then becomes: what message to send with those critical seconds? Our recommendation is to overtly distance the research from direct marketing and/or a sales pitch. Here is one variation of that message that appears to work well:

"This invitation is to take part in a survey project and is not a sales solicitation."

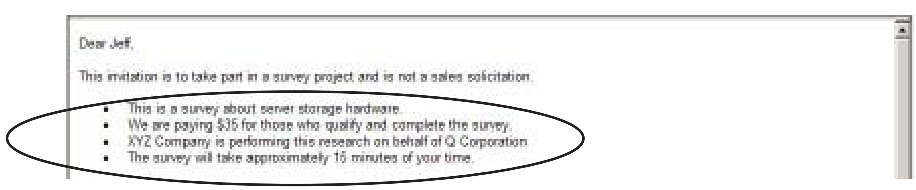


Step 5: Salience Points

Many scholars have studied the factors that influence people to open mail survey envelopes. Some of those findings can also be applied directly to email invitations. In essence, there appear to be four issues that account for the majority of the decision-making process whether or not to participate. We have come to refer to these as "salience drivers," in that they influence the degree to which people feel the research is "salient" or relevant to them personally.

In order to communicate all of these key points quickly and effectively, we recommend a bullet-pointed list of all four salience drivers:

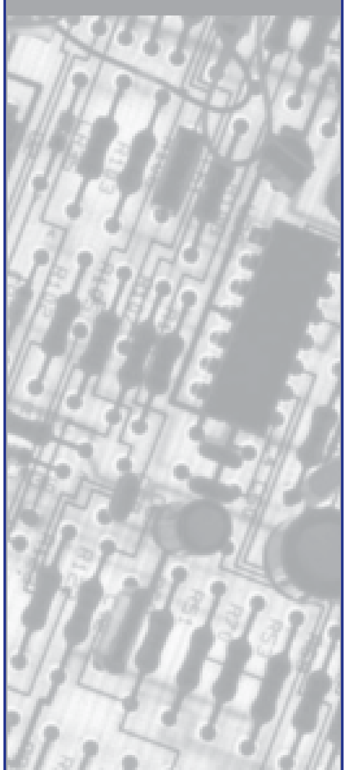
- What are we researching?
- How much are we offering for your time?
- Who is the sponsor (or affiliated industry)?
- How much time/effort will this take? (Note: Be truthful!)



Tip: “Not feeling like my time is appreciated” is the number one reason why people report dissatisfaction with the survey experience. Make sure they are rewarded for trying, even if they don’t qualify.

Tip: Put a personal face on the invitation. A name and personal email address helps increase trust.

Tip: Always address the key privacy concerns in a quick one to two sentence statement.

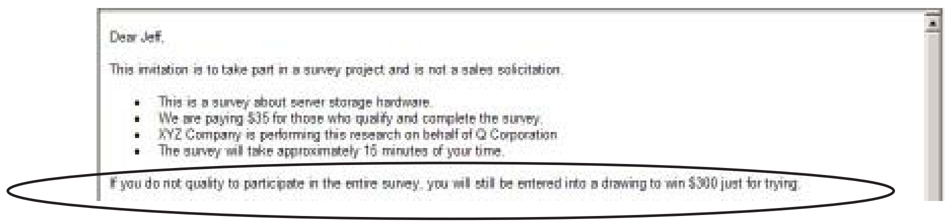


Step 6: Non-Qualified Terminates Recognition

If your sampling strategy calls for the screening of individuals for demographic or other characteristics, we highly recommend giving an indication of what will happen if the person doesn’t qualify. We have found that people who terminate without recognition of their efforts report feeling disrespected and are less likely to participate in future research.

Even an entry into a small drawing is usually enough to say thank you and express an appreciation for their effort. We have used the following verbiage with success:

“If you do not qualify to participate in the entire survey, you will still be entered into a drawing to win $xxx just for trying.”


Dear Jeff,

This invitation is to take part in a survey project and is not a sales solicitation.

- This is a survey about server storage hardware.
- We are paying $35 for those who qualify and complete the survey.
- XYZ Company is performing this research on behalf of Q Corporation.
- The survey will take approximately 15 minutes of your time.

If you do not qualify to participate in the entire survey, you will still be entered into a drawing to win $300 just for trying.

Step 7: Contact for Help or More Information

Today’s respondents are faced with an avalanche of spam on a daily bais. This creates anxiety about the legitimacy of a research request. Due in part to the spam come-ons barking that you can “make up to $50 an hour for your opinions,” respondents do not trust “third party” online researchers as much as they used to. Therefore, we have seen an increasing need to provide a “contactable” human being live or online, who can assure potential participants that the study is authorized and legitimate.

For this reason, we strongly recommend an email address for online contact and a toll-free number for “questions you may have” about the study. Some effective wording might be as follows:

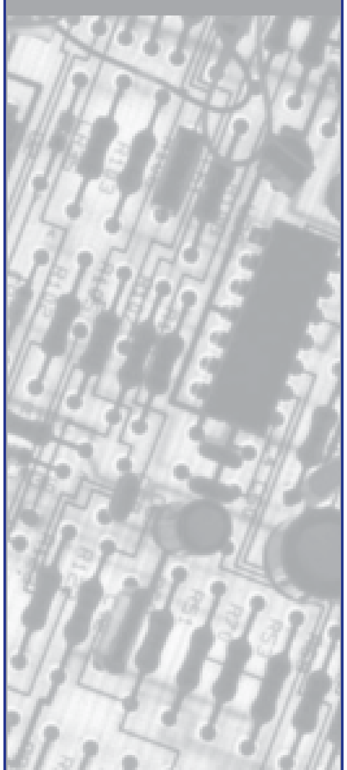
“Please contact antonio.sanchez@XYZ.com, our member services manager, if you have any questions and reference project number 123-1234. Antonio also can be reached at 800-555-1234.”

Step 8: Privacy Policy/Confidentiality Statement

A very strong, clearly worded statement regarding the researcher’s respect for privacy and confidentiality is crucial for people not intimately familiar with the research organization. Privacy concerns center primarily around two questions: “Are you going to sell my telephone number?” and “Are you going to sell my email address?” Confidentiality concerns are also expressed by two pervasive fears: “Who is going to see my answers?” and “Will I be confronted by someone if my reactions are negative or be direct-marketed to based on the information provided?”

Tip: Insert a link to your broader privacy policy. Make sure everyone on your staff knows your company's policy.

Tip: Privacy and Anti-spam legislation requires several ways that people can opt-out and contact you. Adopting a standard, broad contact policy will help avoid conflicts in States with more severe requirements.



By providing answers to both of these concerns, you will also be in primary compliance with new requirements for data privacy from the European Union.

A clear and unambiguous statement that we recommend is as follows:

"We are a market research firm that values your privacy. All of your responses will be kept strictly confidential, reported only in aggregate and used only for [product development] purposes. Your personal information will not be sold or traded to anyone."

Step 9: Privacy Policy Link

Over time, more and more people are checking formal corporate privacy policies prior to entering any type of personally identifiable information. These policies need to be much more detailed and specific than the simple statement shown in Step 7. A link to the broader policy should appear in your email invitation.

If you have not published a Web-based, formal privacy policy, there are numerous sources for templates and definitions. Some examples can be found at the following sites:

- IMRO (www.imro.org)
- AMA (www.marketingpower.com)
- MRA (www.mra-net.org)
- CASRO (www.casro.org)

Step 10: Opt-Out Email, Physical Address and Toll-Free Number

CAN-SPAM and state laws require a free opt-out mechanism for "list removal." Fourteen states now require a toll-free number and mailing address in addition to an email reply system; in some cases a $10,000+ per-incident fine for not providing this information is levied. Some states are now requiring a mail address for opting-out.

A second, private regulatory system known as "spam filters" or "black hole lists," checks to see if opt-out email and telephone numbers are working if complaints arise. Although this is just one point on a checklist to identify chronic spammers, domains that do not comply with working emails and telephone numbers can be blocked at the ISP levels for multiple email delivery systems.

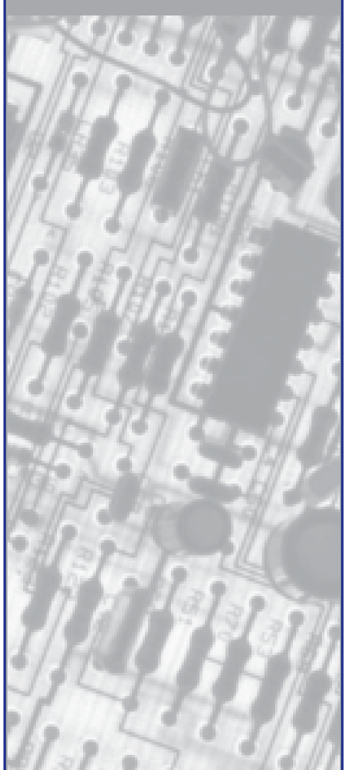
It is usually wise to include a timeframe within which the contact information will be removed. In most modern systems this can be done very quickly (i.e., automatically), but it is safer to say "your information will be removed from our contact list within 5 to 10 days" depending on your system's technical capabilities.

A statement that provides the required information, and that allows you to track problems with specific sample sources, reads as follows:

"If you would like to be removed from our contact list, please reply to this email and type 'Remove' in the subject line, or call 1-800-555-1234 and reference project number 123-1234. You may also request to be removed from our lists by mail by sending a card or letter addressed to: XYZ Company, Opt-Out Registry, PO Box 554560, San Francisco, CA 94100."

Tip: People feel more comfortable with third party affiliations and with companies that subscribe to industry codes of ethics.

If you cite an organization's code, make sure you are in compliance.



Step 11: Industry Affiliations and Ethics Standards

There is a great deal of comfort that is lent from association with a national or international industry group with a broader mission for ethical standards, and the *enforcement* of those standards. If your company or department is a member of such an industry association, we recommend that you publish the following:

- The name of the organization (with a hyperlink) in your text-based email invitation
- The association logo both on your privacy page and on the first page of your Web survey

Note: If you use a hyperlink to your industry group within your live survey, be sure it opens the link in a new window.

imro INTERACTIVE MARKETING RESEARCH ORGANIZATION

As an example, in order to highlight the association with an industry group, we recommend the following wording, with a highlighted link, within your email invitation:

"XYZ Company is a member of the Interactive Marketing Research Organization (IMRO) and we subscribe to the privacy policies and code of research ethics published by that group."

Following these simple steps in crafting your email invitations can significantly improve the comfort levels of your invitees, resulting in higher response rates and covering you in terms of some important legislative and regulatory demands.

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