

PSO Interview Training Handout

Interviewing: Refusal Conversion¹

The first step in conducting a good telephone survey is to get someone to agree to participate in the interview in the first place. Ideally, the introduction to the survey should be persuasive enough that your potential respondents will be highly interested in completing a survey. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, no matter how compelling or important the topic and no matter how well written the introduction is.

If too many people refuse to go through a survey, this may also influence the reliability of your data. For example, if you are conducting a survey of area parents, you want your findings to be representative of all area parents—not just the helpful ones who like doing surveys and have lots of extra time to spend on the phone. The attitudes and activities of people who are “natural-born volunteers” with lots of free time may bear little resemblance to those of parents in general.

Therefore, you must make every attempt to get people who are initially not interested in the survey to complete a survey. We call this “refusal conversion.” Here are some refusal conversion strategies:

- **Ask the screener questions.** It may be that the respondent is not even eligible to complete the survey; for example, if the student is currently enrolled in High School. If it turns out that they are eligible, give conversion another shot; you got them to stay on the phone for three questions, see if you can keep them for more.
- **Do not talk too fast.** Talking fast is a sales tactic. You will appear more confident and legitimate if you can clearly explain the purpose of the survey.
- **Emphasize the duration,** if the survey is short. Stress that the survey will only take a few minutes of their time and that you will go as quickly as possible.
- **Work on the introduction.** Interviewers should work with supervisors to make the introduction sound more interesting, and include extra pieces of information that could be important to the respondent. For example, it may be helpful to include in the introduction that this is not a sales call of any kind.
- **Stress that the survey is important.** Use strong language. “This is a very important survey designed to directly impact the services and programs available to your children, and it should only take about ten minutes to complete. Is now a good time for you?”

¹ Adapted from The Wallace Foundation’s “Workbook F: Conducting Telephone Surveys”
<https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Workbook-F-Telephone-Surveys.pdf>

- **Be sure your conversion tactic answers their concern.** For example, if the respondent tells you they do not want to buy anything and you tell them it will only take a few minutes of their time, you have not addressed the fact that it is not a sales call. Convey to the respondent that you are listening to what they have to say by using the refusal conversion tactic that best answers their question. It is a great way to develop rapport!
- **Offer to call back.** It may very well happen that you have just reached this person at a bad time. Make it clear that it is so important that you get their opinions that you would be happy to call back whenever is best for them.
- **Call back hang-ups.** The worst-case scenario has already happened—somebody refused the survey. Calling back makes it possible to give them more information about the survey that they might not have understood and they will then complete an interview.
- **Do not let a refusal (or two!) get you down.** It happens to the best interviewers. Some people just do not do surveys, and it may be beyond your control. Interviewers should talk with supervisors about how they could have handled a situation differently. The most important thing is that interviewers are putting their best effort into converting refusals.

There are many specific phrases one can use when converting refusals into completions. Following is a sample of common concerns or questions from potential respondents, and specific language you can use to help these people understand the importance and value of completing your survey.

Hangs up after hearing reason for survey. Call back!

1. (Assume it was accidental) “I think we got disconnected. I was in the middle of explaining a very important study we are conducting about what students are doing after High School. We are not selling or promoting anything and we would like a chance to get your opinions. The survey only takes about [NUMBER OF] minutes—is now a good time?”

2. “I want to make sure you understand that this is a very important study that will have a direct impact on the types of activities and programs that are available for students with disabilities. It’s very important that we get your opinions, and if now is not a good time, I’d be happy to call you back whenever is most convenient for you.”

3. “I realize I may have called at a bad time, but I was hoping to speak to [NAME OF STUDENT] or a family member. When might be the best time to call back for them?”

I’m not interested.

“The results of this survey will have a direct impact on the types of programs and activities students with disabilities have available to them. Your answers will go a long way to helping other students with disabilities. It only takes about [NUMBER OF] minutes and if this is a bad time I’d be happy to call back whenever is most convenient for you.”

I don't have time for this.

"The survey only takes about [NUMBER OF] minutes and I can assure you that your responses will go a long way to helping other students with disabilities. If now is not a good time, when would be the best time to call you back?"

I don't like answering questions over the phone.

"I understand your concern, but answering will go a long way to helping other students with disabilities. May I try reading you a few questions and we will see how it goes? Of course, if there are any questions you don't want to answer, just let me know."

I only do surveys through the mail; just send it to me.

"The reason we do surveys over the phone is because it's much faster and more accurate, and because I will be available to answer any questions you may have about the survey itself. It only takes about [NUMBER OF] minutes and if now is not a good time, I'd be happy to call you back whenever is most convenient for you."

That person doesn't do surveys—don't bother calling back.

"Thank you for that information, but I will need to speak with him/her for a moment just to make sure they understand the importance of the study. When would be the best time for me to reach them?"

I'm satisfied with things the way they are / I don't have any complaints.

"We're very interested in speaking to people who are satisfied as well as dissatisfied, so that we can identify what types of programs and services should be continued or expanded as well as those that should be discontinued or changed."

I wouldn't know anything about that / I don't use those services.

"It's still very important that we get your opinions. We are interested in knowing what people should be informed of as well as what they already know. Don't know is a valid answer to any of the questions."

Just put me down as being happy with everything.

"My computer is formatted so that I'm unable to do that. We have questions on many different aspects of life after High School, and it's important that we record all your answers accurately."

Asking the Questions²

You have gotten in. The respondent has agreed to answer your questions. It may be that the respondent was in the middle of doing something when you called and you may need to allow them a few minutes to finish up. Now, you're ready to begin the interview itself.

Use questionnaire carefully, but informally

The questionnaire is your friend. It was developed with a lot of care and thoughtfulness. While you have to be ready to adapt to the needs of the setting, your first instinct should always be to trust the instrument as designed. But you also need to establish a rapport with the respondent. Even though you may be nervous, you need to recognize that your respondent is most likely even more nervous.

Ask questions exactly as written

Sometimes an interviewer will think that they could improve on the tone of a question by altering a few words to make it simpler or more "friendly." **DON'T.** You should ask the questions as they are on the instrument. It is important that the interview be as standardized as possible across respondents. You may think the change you made was inconsequential when, in fact, it may change the entire meaning of the question or response.

Follow the order given

Once you know an interview well, you may see a respondent bring up a topic that you know will come up later in the interview. You may be tempted to jump to that section of the interview while you're on the topic. **DON'T.** You are more likely to lose your place. You may omit questions that build a foundation for later questions.

Ask every (required) question

Sometimes you'll be tempted to omit a question because you thought you already heard what the respondent will say. Don't assume that. For example, while answering the question about their college experience, they mention working between classes and specifically mention where they worked. A few questions later, you are supposed to ask if they worked anywhere after high school. You figured you already know the answer is yes, so you decide to skip the question. Instead, you might say something like "I know you already mentioned that you worked while in college, but did you do any other work anywhere else after high school?" At this point, the respondent may say something like, "Well, in addition to delivering pizza part time, I worked at another place packing boxes full time." If you hadn't asked the question, you would never have discovered this detail.

Don't finish sentences

I do not know about you, but I am one of those people who just hates to be left hanging. I like to keep a conversation moving. Once I know where a sentence seems to be heading, I am aching to get to the next sentence. I finish people's sentences all the time. If you are like me, you should practice the art of patience (and silence) before doing any interviewing. As you will see in "Obtaining Adequate Responses - The Probe", silence is one of the most effective devices for encouraging a respondent to talk. If you finish their sentence for them, you imply that what they had to say is transparent or obvious, or that you do not want to give them the time to express themselves in their own language.

² Adapted from the Web Center for Social Research Methods:
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/interview.php>

Obtaining Adequate Responses - The Probe³

OK, you have asked a question. The respondent gives a brief, cursory answer. How do you elicit a more thoughtful, thorough response? You probe.

Silent probe

The most effective way to encourage someone to elaborate is to do nothing at all - just pause and wait. This is referred to as the "silent" probe. It works (at least in certain cultures) because the respondent is uncomfortable with pauses or silence. It suggests to the respondent that you are waiting, listening for what they will say next.

Overt encouragement

At times, you can encourage the respondent directly. Try to do so in a way that does not imply approval or disapproval of what they said (that could bias their subsequent results). Overt encouragement could be as simple as saying "Uh-huh" or "OK" after the respondent completes a thought.

Elaboration

You can encourage more information by asking for elaboration. For instance, it is appropriate to ask questions like "Would you like to elaborate on that?" or "Is there anything else you would like to add?"

Ask for clarification

Sometimes, you can elicit greater detail by asking the respondent to clarify something that was said earlier. You might say, "A minute ago you were talking about the experience you had in high school. Could you tell me more about that?"

Repetition

This is the old psychotherapist trick. You say something without really saying anything new. For instance, the respondent just described a traumatic experience they had in childhood. You might say, "What I'm hearing you say is that you found that experience very traumatic." Then, you should pause. The respondent is likely to say something like "Well, yes, and it affected the rest of my family as well. In fact, my younger sister..."

Caution: Every probe used by an interviewer must be general and not bias a response. Acceptable probes do not lead a respondent into any particular answer, only into saying more.

If the respondent says, "It's good" you could say, "What makes it good?" Do not lead the respondent. For example, if they say, "School was good" you could say, "What was good about school?", but not "Was school good because of the help you received?"

³ Adapted from the Web Center for Social Research Methods:
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/interview.php>

Recording the Response⁴

Although we have the capability to record a respondent in audio and/or video, most interview methodologists do not think it is a good idea. Respondents are often uncomfortable when they know their remarks will be recorded word-for-word. They may strain to say things only in a socially acceptable way. Although you would get a more detailed and accurate record, it is likely to be distorted by the very process of obtaining it.

Record responses immediately

The interviewer should record responses as they are being stated. This conveys the idea that you are interested enough in what the respondent is saying to write it down. You do not have to type or write down every single word -- you are not taking stenography. However, you may want to record certain key phrases or quotes verbatim. You need to develop a system for distinguishing what the respondent says verbatim from what you are characterizing (how about quotations, for instance!).

Include all probes

You need to indicate every single probe that you use. Develop a shorthand for different standard probes. Use a clear form for writing them in (e.g., place probes in the left margin or record the question number and what probe used in the Interviewer Notes box).

Use abbreviations where possible

Abbreviations will help you to capture more of the discussion. Develop a standardized system (e.g., R=respondent; DK=don't know). If you create an abbreviation on the fly, have a way of indicating its origin. For instance, if you decide to abbreviate Spouse with an 'S', you might make a notation in the right margin or in the Interviewer Notes box saying "S=Spouse."

⁴ Adapted from the Web Center for Social Research Methods:
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/interview.php>

Concluding the Interview⁵

When you have gone through the entire interview, you need to bring the interview to closure. Some important things to remember:

Thank the respondent

Do not forget to do this. Even if the respondent was troublesome or uninformative, it is important for you to be polite and thank them for their time.

Don't be brusque or hasty

Allow for a few minutes of winding down conversation. The respondent may want to know a little bit about you or how much you like doing this kind of work. They may be interested in how the results will be used. Use these kinds of interests as a way to wrap up the conversation. You do not want the respondent to feel as though you completed the interview and then rushed to hang up -- they may wonder what they said that was wrong. On the other hand, you have to be careful here. Some respondents may want to keep on talking long after the interview is over. You have to find a way to politely cut off the conversation.

Immediately after hanging up -- write down any notes about how the interview went

Sometimes you will have observations about the interview that you did not want to write down while you were on the phone with the respondent. You may have noticed them get upset at a question, or you may have detected hostility in a response. Immediately after the interview, you should go over your notes and make any other comments and observations -- but be sure to distinguish these from the notes made during the interview (you might use a different color pen, for instance or distinguish it in the Interviewer Notes box with some key or code).

⁵ Adapted from the Web Center for Social Research Methods:
<http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/interview.php>