



Some important aspects to conducting a membership survey (Notes from talk to BTO Bird Clubs Forum, Feb 2004)

1. Poll all members, or for a large society, a random sample.
2. Make sure you get a high response rate
3. Prepare a balanced and structured questionnaire, based on pre-coded questions, with ample additional space for open-ends
4. Make sure respondents have time to consider their responses at home. Don't distribute the questionnaires at a meeting, thereby putting them under pressure, and risking them being influenced by others
5. Guarantee anonymity
6. Ideally get someone seen to be impartial to analyse the responses
7. Use a database programme to enter all the answers, including coded open-ends to aid the analysis

Notes to the above for reference:

1. If membership is more than about 350, it will become a very onerous task: suggest a sample of 200 – 300 would be adequate even for large society, but in this case it is essential that the sample be properly drawn to be representative. Don't let the sample be self-selective!
2. We got a response rate of 60%+, and including some that arrived too late for inclusion in the analysis, more like 70%. There are tricks to achieving this, such as providing an incentive. (But don't offer an incentive which might influence perceptions of the Club, and make respondents think about tailoring their answer to what you might want to hear from them!) If you get under about 40% response rate, consider throwing it all away! We recommend mailing questionnaires together with a SAE (makes them feel guilty if they don't reply!)
3. The basic questions need to be pre-coded: however open-ends are valuable, though take much time to interpret. We had respondents who wrote whole essays in the open-ends – and these were extremely valuable! But to make sense of them, you need to analyse and code them.
4. Ideally do the whole thing via mail: never have them fill out a questionnaire at a meeting.
5. Most of our respondents were happy to identify themselves, but this should not be a requirement. If you insist, expect a lower – and less honest – response.
6. Avoid letting a committee member use research to “justify” himself or the committee's policies! Impartiality is essential, and look in particular for critical comments: these may be the most valuable!
7. Any other way is likely to be too much effort to be practicable.
8. For the record, the total cost of our survey was in the region of £65, and this included mailing costs and stationery.
...but it did take several days of work to enter the data and do the analysis.