



The Importance of the Introductory Script in Telephone Interviews

Introductory scripts are the “first impression” of a telephone survey. A clear and concise introduction can make the difference in reducing refusals and getting a good response rate.

Most refusals occur very early in the survey process; therefore it is critical that the first two or three sentences of the introductory script effectively hold the respondent’s interest long enough for them to consider participating in the survey. Researchers must take special care to ensure that the introductory script effectively communicates to respondents not only the purpose of the study, but also reasons why they should volunteer their time. The introductory script should provide the following information:

- Identity of ownership (research team or organization for whom call is being made)
- Purpose and importance of survey
- Survey length (tells respondents how long they should expect to be on the phone)
- Confidentiality assurance (encourages them to provide honest feedback)
- Voluntary nature of response
- Ethics clearance

Ownership – gets respondent's attention

The increasing use of surveys to the general public, along with endless approaches by telemarketers, have made the public more wary and less inclined to participate in any telephone survey, regardless of its purpose. This, coupled with advances in technology such as call display, makes it more difficult than ever to reach potential respondents. Even when they are contacted, respondents may be reluctant to participate due to any number of reasons. These reasons may include not wanting their line being tied up, resentment over the disruption in routines or the invasion of their privacy, current unavailability, or their suspicion that the survey may be nothing more than a guise for a sales call.

Stating the ownership of the survey helps overcome these obstacles by providing immediate assurance that the survey is legitimate and not an attempt to sell something. It is important to emphasize that the survey is being done for research by a well-respected university.

Purpose and Importance – explains relevance of survey

The likelihood of acceptance is increased when respondents are told early why the survey is being conducted and thus why they should volunteer their time to participate in it. A case for the survey's importance to research and possible social applications can almost always be made. The introductory script must state why the survey is being conducted and how the data collected will be used.

Survey Length –sets time expectations

Disclosure of survey length can be a significant factor in survey acceptance. The shorter the survey, the more likely someone is to agree to participate. The longer the survey, the greater the reluctance and the more likely they are to abandon the survey in mid-interview. Be honest about the length; respondents resent being told to expect a 5 minute survey that turns into 15 minutes.

Confidentiality – encourages honest participation

Participation means very little if respondents are concerned about who sees their answers and how they are used. Interviewers must provide assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. These statements encourage both participation and honesty by assuring respondents they can speak without worrying about reprisal. This must be especially emphasized for recruited surveys, making sure

respondents know their responses will not be individually identified and reported to recruiting organization.

Voluntary Responses – removes sense of coercion

Interviewers must provide assurances that response to the survey or any of the individual questions is voluntary. Respondents should not feel that they must respond to every question regardless of comfort level or appropriateness. Again, for recruited surveys, assurances must be made that any responses made will not impact on their relationship to the recruiting organization.

Ethics Clearance – reassurance of legitimacy and outside agency

The University of Waterloo requires that surveys provide participants with assurance that the survey has received clearance from the Office of Research Ethics. Participants should also be provided with contact information for the Office of Research Ethics in case of concern. Ethics clearance reminds participants that the survey is a legitimate research study that is being overseen by the university.

(partially adapted from Decision Analyst white paper “Achieving High Response Rates with Telephone Surveys, 2003)

For Further Reference

Jean Morton-Williams. 1993. *Interviewer Approaches*.

Edith de Leeuw, “How do successful and less successful interviewers differ in tactics for combating survey nonresponse?” *BMS* April, 1999.

Robert Groves and Mick Couper. 1998. *Nonresponse on Household Interview Surveys*.

Sample Scripts

The following are two examples of introductory telephone scripts that includes all the necessary and helpful information. Script 1 is for a survey of a recruited sample, a targeted population that has already been made aware of the survey.

Script 2 is for a randomly dialed survey that is seeking a selected population. Script 2 provides an opportunity to get eligibility information from non-participants (useful for calculating response rates) and attempts a soft conversion of refusals.

Script 1 - Recruited

May I please speak to _____?

My name is _____ and I am calling from the University of Waterloo Survey Research Centre. We are conducting research on behalf of (client name) on (research topic). At an earlier time you indicated that you would be willing to participate in research on (Brief statement on purpose of survey).

Is this a convenient time to continue?

- | | |
|---------|-------------------|
| 1 – Yes | go to Background |
| 2 – No | go to Better time |

Better Time

The interview would last about ____ minutes, and can be arranged for a time convenient to your schedule. Is there another time we could contact you?

- | | |
|---------|-------------------------|
| 1 – Yes | schedule appointment |
| 2- No | Thank you for your time |

Background

Involvement in this interview is entirely voluntary. You may decline to answer any of the interview questions you do not wish to answer and may terminate the interview at any time. All information you provide will be considered confidential. The survey will take about ____ minutes.

This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Office of Research Ethics. Should you have any comments or concerns resulting from your participation in this study, I can provide the phone number of (name of client) or the Office of Research.

Are you ready to continue?

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| 1 – Yes | go to begin survey |
| 2 - No | go to better time |
| 3 – wants more info | go to details |

Details

The purpose of the study is to (reiterate details of purpose). The data collected will be used to _____. Individual respondents are not identified by name.

If you have any questions regarding this study, or would like additional information to assist you in reaching a decision about participation, please feel free to contact (client's name) at _____ or Dr. Susan Sykes in the Office of Research Ethics at 519-888-4567, Ext. 6005.

Are you ready to continue?

- | | |
|--------|--------------------|
| 1- Yes | go to begin survey |
| 2 – No | go to better time |

Begin survey

I will begin the survey now.

Script 2 - Random

Intro

Hello, my name is _____ and I am calling from the Survey Research Centre at the University of Waterloo. We are conducting a research survey on _____. May I ask someone over the age of 18 a few questions to see whether anyone in your household qualifies for the survey?

- | | |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 – Yes | go to intro 2 |
| 2 – Child – no adult available | go to child |
| 3 – No adult in household | go to inelig |
| 4 – No/respondent refuses | go to reluctant |

I would like to speak to an adult age 18 or older in your household.

Is there a better time to call back to speak to them?

Thank you. We'll call back then.

Thank you. We'll try again at another time.

How many people age 18 or older live in your household, including yourself?

I'd like to speak to the adult who (eligible criteria) and who is at least 18 years old whose birthday is coming up next. Would that be you?

[go to Consent](#)

Can I speak to that person now?

2 – No is there a better time to reach them?

We need to select someone at random. With each call we make, we ask to speak to the person whose birthday is coming up next. This helps us to ensure that we have a representative sample as some groups of people are less likely to answer the phone.

I understand, I'll let you go. But if you would, could you help us out by answering just two very short questions?

How many of these adults, including yourself, (eligibility question for selected population)?

Thanks for your help and sorry to have bothered you.

Inelig

I'm sorry, but we can only complete the study with adult _____. Thanks for your time and sorry to have bothered you.

Consent

We are looking for _____ who would be willing to answer a survey on _____ that is part of (description of research). The survey will take about ____ minutes. Your answers to this survey will be kept absolutely confidential. All personal information, including your name and address, will be kept strictly confidential and will not be shared with any person or group that is not associated with this survey.

Would you be willing to participate in this survey?

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| 1 – Yes | go to consent2 |
| 2 – No | go to refuse |
| 3 - wants more info | go to details |

Consent 2

Thanks for your help. Please let me know if you'd like to skip any questions you'd prefer not to answer. There are no right or wrong answers – we're most interested in your personal opinions and you can decide to stop answering questions at any time. This study has received ethics clearance from the Office of Research at the University of Waterloo.

Begin survey

Refuse

I'm sorry to have reached you at a busy time. The survey will only take a few minutes and we could really use your help for this study. If this is an inconvenient time, could I call you back at another time?

- | | |
|---------|--------------|
| 1 – Yes | reschedule |
| 2 – No | go to thanks |

Details

This survey is being conducted by (client name) in order to (reiterate purpose of survey). The data collected will be used to _____. It is very important that we reach as many people who (eligibility criteria) as we can. We appreciate you taking the time to help in this valuable research.

You may contact (client name) or the Office of Research at any time if you have any questions or concerns.

Shall we begin the survey now?

1 – Yes go to consent 2

2 – No go to refuse

Thanks

Thank you for your help. Sorry to have bothered you.

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