Sparkifico
B2B Research and Content

11 RESEARCH
STRATEGIES TO BOOST YOUR
CREDIBILITY

A how-to guide on creating trusted thought leadership content

Conducting original, survey-based research is the grand slam of content marketing. It's one of the best ways to build your brand, engage your audience and learn more about your prospects. And just one survey can provide content ideas for multiple pieces of content.

It's why 94% of marketers believe in the value of survey-based research. And why B2B buyers say the top way tech vendors can improve their content is to use more data and research.

Good quality research can deliver long-lasting results. Credible research positions you as a thought leader, builds brand awareness, and generates more engagement than almost any other type of B2B content marketing.

But poor-quality research can have the opposite effect—negatively impacting your brand's reputation and costing you time and money. And it happens more often than you might think.

> Just last week, we saw this comment in a popular content marketing Slack channel:
>
> " **Has anyone ever received survey data back from their third-party survey provider only to find that the number of respondents isn't, um, statistically significant?** "

This marketer was in a pickle and left wondering what to do:

- Publish the research and not mention the number of responses (it was a measly 35)? Unethical.

- Dump the research and watch the thousands they spent on the project go down the toilet? Ouch.

- Publish the research and the methodology but try to position it as a very exclusive audience to justify the small number of responses? Maybe—but people will probably see right through those marketing shenanigans.

Conducting original research can be incredibly rewarding and results-generating, but it needs to be done right. Here are the most common mistakes we see marketers make and simple strategies for how you can avoid making them too.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CONDUCTING RESEARCH
WITHOUT HAVING A DEFINED GOAL

Most marketers see the value of original research. They know it can be an excellent tool for generating leads, building thought leadership, getting media mentions, and even driving more backlinks to their data and thus strong SEO results. But just diving into a research project "because it works" without a clear purpose for doing the research will most likely mean you've invested a lot of time and money in generating data insights but can't use the data effectively.

Pro Tip

Start your research project with the end goal in mind:

- Have a thesis in mind about what you want the research to confirm or deny.

- Have clear actions that you plan to take with the survey results, such as using it for content campaigns or product development.

- Understand what information you need from the research to take action.

MISTAKE #2

POOR
SURVEY DESIGN

Writing a survey is part art and part science. It's also a lot harder than it seems. Here are just a few of the things that can go wrong when you're writing a survey:

1
Your questions are unclear

If questions are confusing or worded unclearly, people may answer incorrectly, which means your data will also be wrong.

2
Your questions are leading

It can be tempting to ask questions to encourage people to respond the way you want, but it will bias the data and reduce your credibility. Because of our own internal biases, it can also be easy to ask leading questions unintentionally.

3
Your answers don't cover all responses

If you don't have responses to your questions that align with how the person taking the survey would respond, they're either forced to answer incorrectly or may drop out of the survey due to frustration.

Pro Tip

The best way to ensure your survey is clear, credible, and compelling enough for people to stick with it until the end is to follow these survey design best practices:

Keep your survey simple
More complex question formats (ranking, open-ended questions, etc.) can be used, but should be balanced by easier "cognitive load" question formats like multiple choice or true/false questions.

Avoid using industry jargon
Questions are most commonly unclear when people don't understand the language used, such as industry jargon. If you need to use jargon or ask about something your audience may not know, make sure you define it first.

Make sure your options are inclusive
Using "none of the above" or "other" and allowing people to write in a response is a best practice to ensure that they can still answer accurately if the other responses don't fit.

MAKING YOUR
SURVEY TOO LONG

It can be easy to get carried away when you're writing your survey. You have so many questions you want to ask. Plus, everyone may be pitching in new ideas and questions with a large group of stakeholders.

But attention spans are only getting shorter. If you ask too many questions or ask complex questions that take longer for people to answer, they may abandon your survey.

Pro Tip

The perfect survey is relevant to what you're trying to accomplish. It also keeps people engaged from start to finish. To avoid too many people dropping out midway through your survey:

Keep your survey short
Surveys under 5 minutes (approximately 30 questions) perform best. Make sure every question you ask has a clear reason for being part of the survey and aligns with your research goals.

### Break your survey up into multiple surveys
Sometimes it's better to break your survey into multiple surveys. This way, you keep them short enough so that people stay engaged—and you can use the second survey to dig deeper into insights from the first survey.

NOT CAREFULLY VETTING
WHO TAKES YOUR SURVEY

For any survey, you should have a specific audience in mind. Perhaps it's pretty broad—such as anyone who works in marketing. Or maybe it's quite narrow. You only want to survey marketers who work in the healthcare or biotech industries, hold a manager or higher position, and whose company has an annual revenue of $500 million or more.

Regardless, if you don't define these parameters upfront—both as part of your research goals and your survey design—you may end up with people taking your survey who don't fit your target audience. This will muddle the data and make it hard to derive meaningful insights.
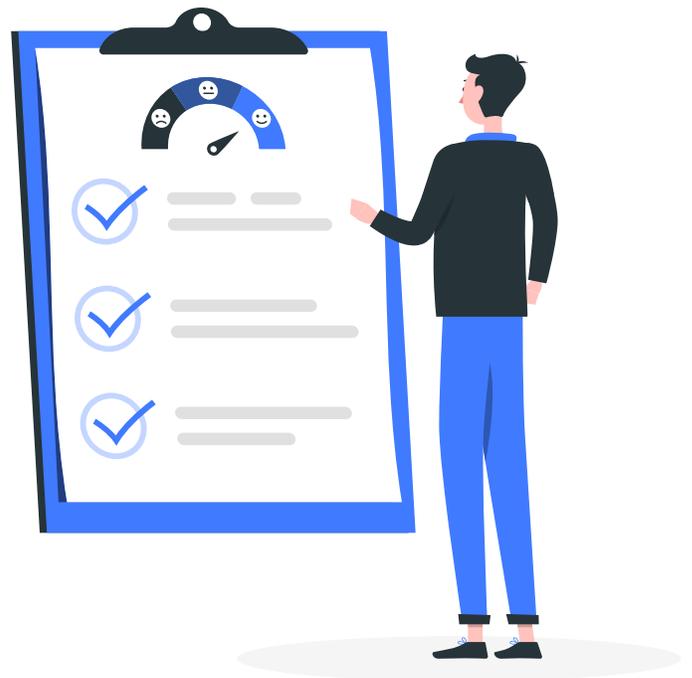
Pro Tip

Whether you're using your own email list or paying for an audience through a panel company, you want to be able to qualify who takes your survey. Here's how:

Segment your email list
Just like you segment your list for other marketing activities, you may want to segment your list to send your survey to a specific portion of your audience.

Add qualifier questions to your survey
Whether you're using an email list or a panel, qualifier questions are crucial to making sure you get the right audience. These questions should be designed to disqualify anyone who doesn't meet your criteria. If you have a very narrow audience you're trying to reach, you may need to ask several qualifying questions.

ENDING UP WITH TOO FEW RESPONSES

The first question you might have about this mistake is—what qualifies as too few responses? While there's no hard and fast rule to the "right" number, we recommend a minimum of 100 responses for a quantitative survey—even for the most niche audiences. If you want more likelihood of media mentions or your audience is fairly broad—the number of responses should be even higher.

How you determine your ideal number of responses should be based on your initial research goals and how you plan to use the research, what options you have available to you to reach the audience, and your research budget.

Pro Tip

The best approach to ensuring you can secure enough responses to your survey depends on how you plan to survey your audience:

Email list

You must have a fairly large and active email list or social media following in order to get enough survey responses. Even with engaged lists/followers, the average response rate is between 2-4 percent. So, do the math and make sure the email list you have is likely to deliver the number of responses you need.

Incentivize your audience

If you're using an email list or social media following, you can boost the number of responses you get by offering incentives for people to take the survey. This can be $5 gift cards to everyone who completes the survey or a larger reward, such as $100 - $500 gift cards or an iPad, to just 1 or 2 randomly selected survey respondents.

Find a reputable panel company with your specific audience

Well-known panel companies like SurveyMonkey and Pollfish are great for consumer audiences but not so great for B2B niche audiences. You'll need to do your homework and legwork to find a B2B panel company that has your specific B2B audience—and can guarantee the number of responses you want.

Limit your qualifiers

We discussed earlier how it's important to qualify your audience to ensure you're surveying the exact persona you want. However, you also need to be careful not to go too crazy with the qualifiers. The more qualifiers you add, the fewer people who qualify. This makes it harder to find enough of the "right" people—whether you're using an email list or a panel company. So qualify your audience, but within reason.

NOT USING SURVEY DESIGN
QUALITY CONTROLS

Even with a qualified audience, you need additional quality controls. Suppose you're offering a reward for taking the survey. In that case, people may be incentivized to take the survey but not necessarily incentivized to take their time and answer questions thoughtfully. And, as we already discussed, if questions are confusing or unclear, the responses you get may not be accurate.

Pro Tip

There are a couple of ways you can build quality controls into your survey process to help ensure that the data you're collecting is as accurate as possible.

Add in quality check questions

To ensure quality responses, add in questions to check for people speeding through the survey and not thoughtfully responding. You can also add questions to check for a certain level of expertise on the subject.

Test your survey

It's important to get an outsider's perspective on your survey. Before launching it in the field, recruit several people to take your survey and provide feedback about the general flow of the survey and whether any questions or response choices are unclear or leading.

Carefully clean your data

Once you get your survey results, you should review the data to ensure it's valid. If you see average response times of 3 to 5 minutes, but a few survey respondents took less than a minute to complete, you can flag those as speeders and remove their results. You can also make sure all IP addresses are unique to ensure you don't have someone who has taken the survey more than once.

NOT DIGGING DEEPER INTO THE DATA FOR MORE INSIGHTS

What you see isn't always what you get. Yes, you asked 30 questions, and you got data back for those 30 questions, but if you stop there with your data analysis, you may be missing a whole slew of interesting insights.
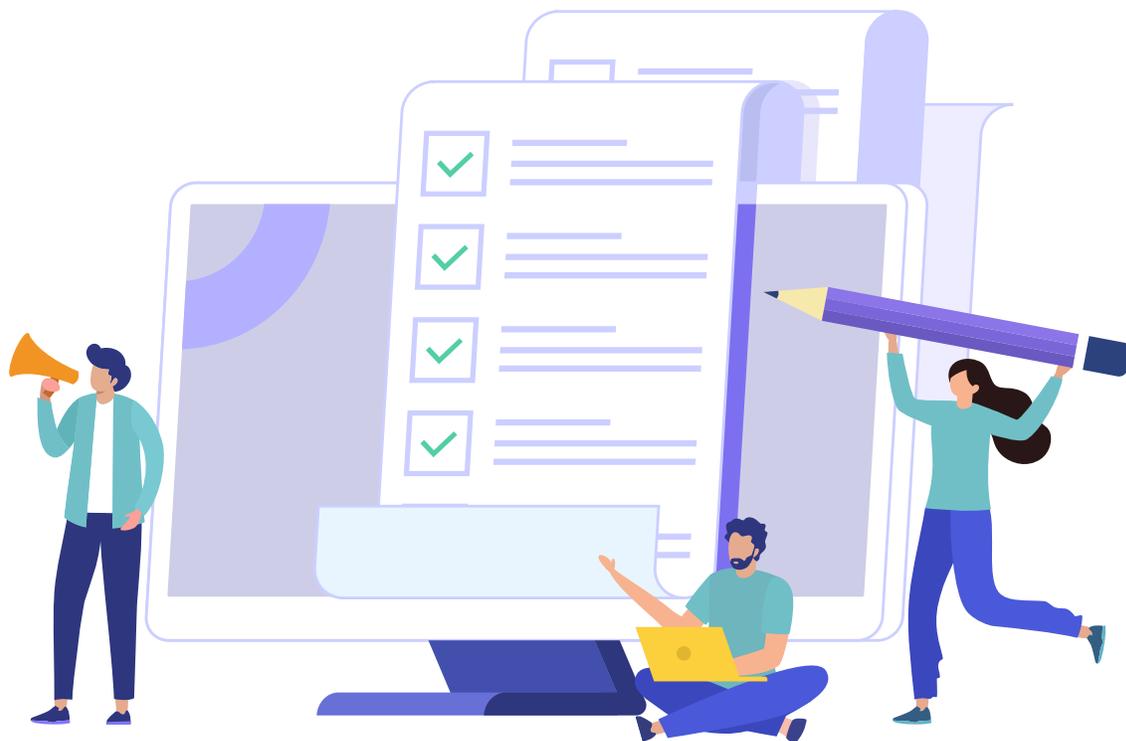

Pro Tip

Your demographic data offers an opportunity to cross-tabulate your data and compare how different demographic characteristics impacted responses. For instance, you may want to look at how marketers in different industries responded to a question. Maybe you'll discover that marketers in the retail industry are 10 times more likely to use email marketing software than marketers in the manufacturing industry.

NOT BEING TRANSPARENT WITH YOUR SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Remember the marketer who was in a pickle about his startling poor response rate and was questioning whether to reveal how many responses he collected? This is exactly why it's so important to include your survey methodology. When you're transparent about who you surveyed, when, how many people, and other details about your respondents such as their location, job title, and so on, people are much more likely to trust that your data and your brand are credible.
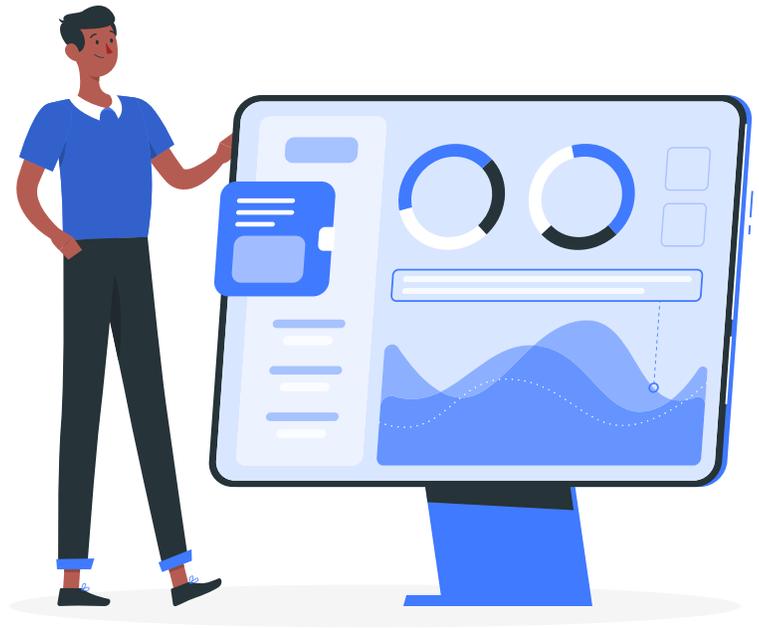
Pro Tip

It's a best practice to include your methodology—who you surveyed, how many, and any other demographics. This will provide added credibility to your report. You can include it either at the start of your report or at the end, but make sure it's in there.

NOTHING INTERESTING TO REPORT ON FROM YOUR DATA

There's nothing worse than getting your survey results back and not having anything much come from the results—and it does happen. The most likely culprit for uninteresting or unuseful data is not defining your data story at the start of your project. But, another common cause is that you didn't write your survey questions in a way that would deliver strong messaging from the data.

Pro Tip

Here are two things you can do to avoid having only meh insights from your data:

Define your data story at the start

You may have thought about your research goals and the outcomes you want, but don't forget to create a coherent storyline about the data. While you can never guarantee what responses you'll get from a survey, having a clear narrative at the onset will make it much more likely you'll ask the right questions to support it.

Position your survey questions for strong data messaging

If you want strong messaging points, you need to ask the question in a way that is most likely to give you what you're looking for. If you ask people to rank how they feel about something on a scale of 1 to 10, the percent for each rank will likely be low because there are 10 choices, so the results get spread out. If you provide only 4 options—such as "very satisfied" to "very unsatisfied"—it's much more likely you'll see a large percentage of people in one or two categories.

NOT GETTING THE MOST MILEAGE OUT OF YOUR RESEARCH

One of the biggest benefits of an original research project is the sheer amount of content you can generate. But too often, the research just sits there gathering dust, or it's compiled into one report and press release but not used for much else.
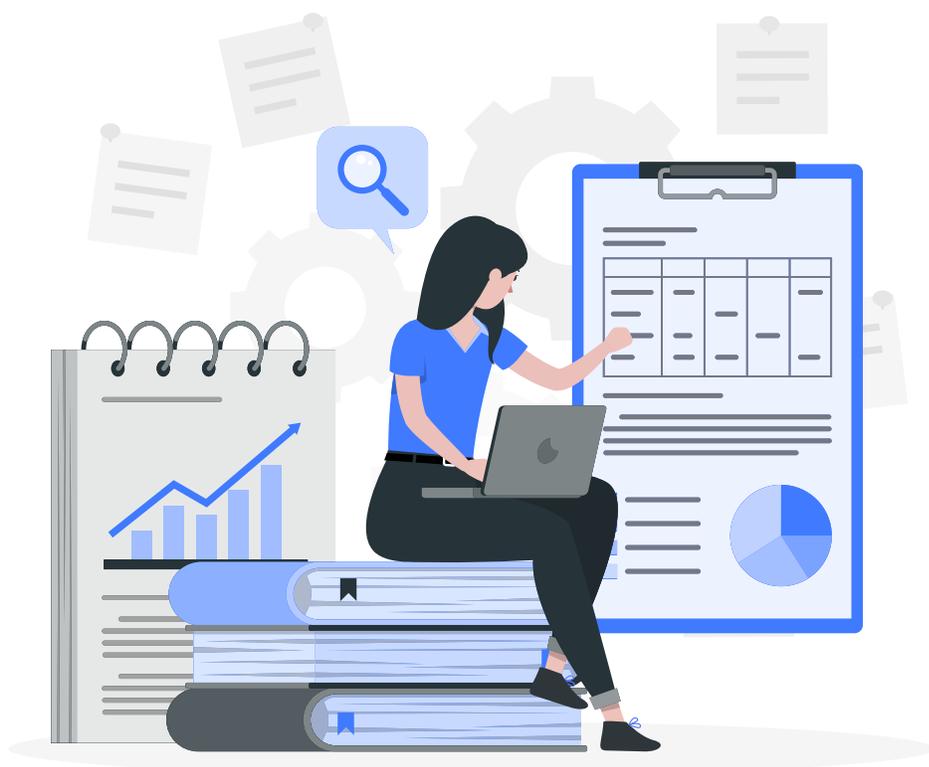
Pro Tip

Repurpose your research in multiple content formats. There are almost limitless ways you can do this, but here are a few ideas to get your brainstorming started:

- Blog posts
- Webinars
- Infographics
- Social media posts
- Videos

- Podcasts
- Press releases
- Newsletters
- Slideshares

LACKLUSTER ENGAGEMENT
WITH YOUR RESEARCH

If you've created compelling content from your research but you're not seeing the results you'd hoped for, it may be that you don't have a good distribution plan. Original research requires a significant investment of time and money—the last thing you want is for all your effort to go to waste because you don't have a good distribution plan.

Pro Tip

In addition to talking up your research report in emails, social media, and blog posts, here are a few other ways you can ensure more people see your data insights:

Press Releases
Engaging a PR firm to help you get media placements can be extremely helpful. At the very least, you should create a press release and publish it to major media release sites and any niche trade publications that might be interested in your data.

Content Syndication
Another great way to get more visibility is to syndicate your content with a third party that has access to a large number of your target audience. Typically, they'll guarantee a minimum number of leads for featuring you in their newsletter or other publications.

GAIN MORE THOUGHT LEADERSHIP WITH TRUSTWORTHY DATA

Original research is worth the investment, but only when it's credible and compelling. By following the best practices in this guide, you can avoid credibility-killing mistakes with your research and feel confident that your data, and the thought leadership content you create using it, is accurate and insightful.

Sparkifico
B2B Research and Content

ABOUT SPARKIFICO

At Sparkifico, we believe data can spark terrific content—and equally terrific results.

We are deeply committed to helping B2B brands craft original content that people want to engage with and share—and will convert on. And we believe one of the best ways to do that is through credible, high-quality original research and in-depth interviews with your thought leaders and other industry experts.