



Instant Census

# A Guide To SMS Surveys

New to SMS surveys? Check out these tips to getting started with this new and effective survey technology.

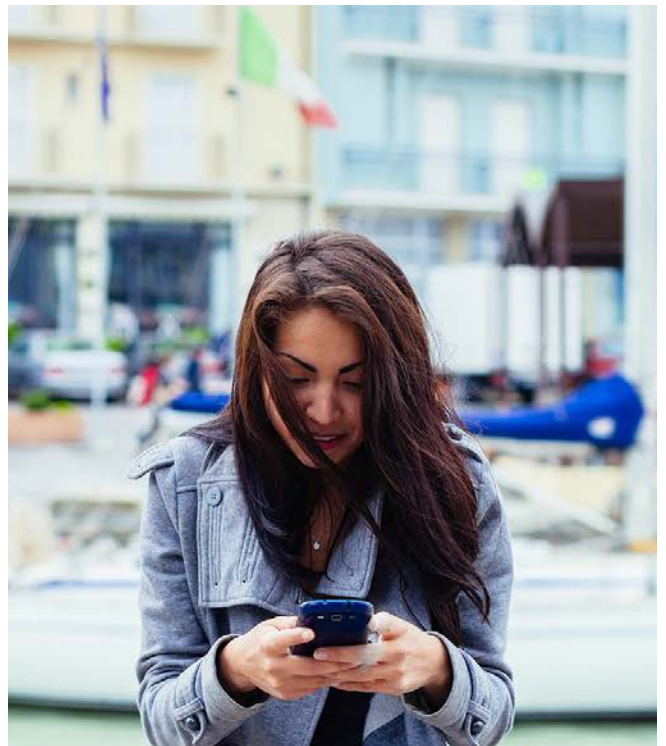




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# Introduction: What Are SMS Surveys?



The results traditional survey methods offer are no longer keeping researchers happy. In a world starving for quick access to information, waiting hours to days for survey results just doesn't make sense.

Instant Census automated text message surveys help researchers of all kinds connect with and gather feedback from their audiences in seconds to minutes.

By leveraging the power of SMS messaging, Instant Census' high response rates and fast response times do not even allow email, phone or web-based surveys to compete.

Survey participants interact with Instant Census as if they were holding a text message conversation with a real, live person. Instant Census texts a question, the participant texts an answer, Instant Census parses that answer and determines how to follow-up.

Any person with a phone capable of SMS messaging is able to participate in our surveys. No smartphone or app required.



# Response Rates

## Average Response Rate

*Uncompensated Participants*

**40 - 55%** SMS Surveys

## Average Response Rate

*Compensated Participants*

**85%** SMS Surveys

\*Similar results not guaranteed. ©2016 Zagarán Software.



# Obtaining Survey Participants' Consent

*What follows is our best understanding of how to make text message surveys comply with the new positions the FCC outlined in the 2015 Omnibus Ruling\*. But we are engineers, not lawyers, so this is not legal advice!*

## You Need Consent, Even For Non-Commercial Text Messages

In 2012, the FCC ruled that there were different standards of consent for commercial and non-commercial messages. As of July 10, 2015, that's no longer the case and the FCC now treats all messages the same.

First, the Omnibus Ruling clarifies that automatic SMS messages fall under the same restrictions as robocalls:

*...raises the issue of whether SMS text messages are subject to the same consumer protections under the TCPA as voice calls. We reiterate that they are... the Commission in 2003 determined that the TCPA applies to SMS texts." (paragraph 107)*


Then the Ruling says that all non-emergency messages require consent, regardless of whether they're for commercial purposes:

*...the Commission's policy, consistent with the plain language of the TCPA, is to treat informational and telemarketing calls to wireless phones the same. We do so again today, and find no reason here to differentiate the two." (paragraph 69)*


\*<https://www.fcc.gov/document/tcpa-omnibus-declaratory-ruling-and-order>

## People Can Opt-In Verbally Or In Writing, But You Must Document It


One point in the Omnibus Ruling actually makes it *easier* to collect opt-ins for SMS surveys. The FCC now explicitly explains that verbal consent can count as an opt-in:

 *For non-telemarketing and non-advertising calls, express consent can be demonstrated by the called party giving prior express oral or written consent or, in the absence of instructions to the contrary, by giving his or her wireless number to the person initiating the autodialed or prerecorded call.” (paragraph 52)*

However, if you’re running a survey, the burden is on you to document that you’ve received the necessary consent from each participant in the survey:

 *...if any question arises as to whether prior express consent was provided by a call recipient, the burden is on the caller to prove that it obtained the necessary prior express consent.”(paragraph 47)*

The FCC is vague about how to document consent, but suggests that “proper business records” are adequate:

 *The well-established evidentiary value of business records means that callers have reasonable ways to carry their burden of proving consent. We expect that responsible callers, cognizant of their duty to ensure that they have prior express consent under the TCPA and their burden to prove that they have such consent, will maintain proper business records tracking consent.”(paragraph 70)*

Instant Census documents and records survey participant’s text message consent for all customers. If you are not using Instant Census, you may have to take on the burden of recording consent yourself.



## Anyone Can Opt Out At Any Time By Texting STOP

The FCC requires that if a participant sends a message with just the word *STOP*, you must stop texting them *immediately* (although you're allowed to send a single confirmation message to tell the person that they've been removed).

Instant Census handles this automatically when someone texts *STOP*, and it's case-insensitive, so *STOP*, *Stop*, and *stop* all do the same thing. Instant Census sends one opt-out confirmation message and then immediately ceases texting that person's number. People who have opted out can opt back in to Instant Census by texting *START*.

The Omnibus Ruling also announced that people must be able to opt out "through any reasonable means." (paragraph 55) This part is especially vague, but it appears that if a person calls, emails, writes a letter, or asks in-person to be opted-out of automatic text messages, you must stop sending them text messages.

## Anyone Can Opt Out At Any Time By Texting STOP

In your first message to the participant, you have to:

*Identify who is sending the messages ("e.g. This is the \_\_\_ Survey Center"), and*

*Tell the participant how to opt out ("Text STOP at any time to opt out.")*


Instant Census automatically sends a message with this information (customized to identify the organization sending the survey) to new participants when they're enrolled. If we're sending participants a survey every week, we only send them this informational intro message once, at the start of the first survey; we don't re-send it every week.

# Optimizing Questions For SMS

Survey research professionals often ask us how to build text message surveys using questions that they've previously asked in web surveys or phone surveys (either CATI or IVR). Because text message surveys have some advantages but also some limitations, here are a few tips on how to adapt your survey questions to SMS.

## Matrix Questions

Popular in desktop web surveys, matrix questions ask several questions in a row that all have the same answer choices. But matrix questions are often difficult for participants to answer on mobile web browsers, because they can involve lots of scrolling back and forth and up and down to see all of the options and what they're labeled. It's recommended that if you expect most of your participants to use mobile browsers, you limit your use of matrix questions and instead ask the same questions individually.

 We recommend not using matrix questions at all, and instead replacing them with individual questions.

Text message surveys take this even further: we recommend not using matrix questions at all, and instead replacing them with individual questions. So use questions that look like this:

**Instead, ask it as a series of separate questions** that look like this:

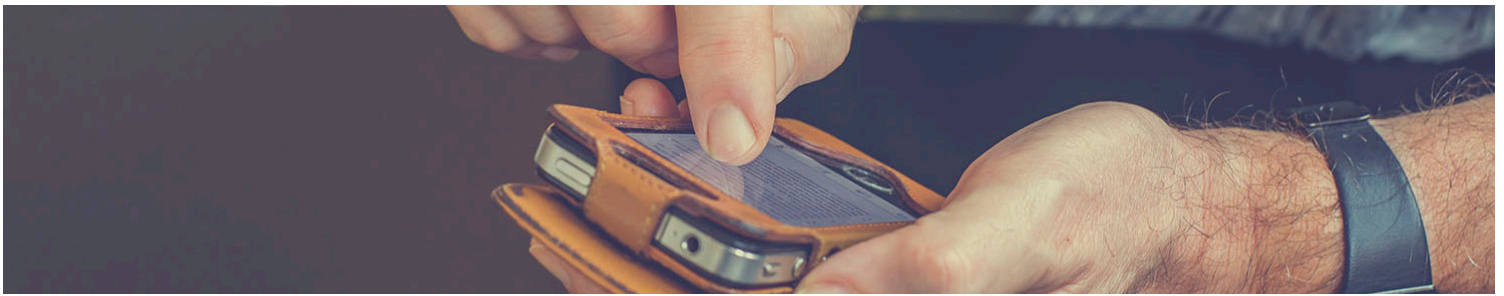
*How often do you watch a movie at home: Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Yearly, or Never?*

*How often do you watch a movie at a cinema: Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Yearly, or Never?*

*How often do you watch a play or opera at a theater: Daily, Weekly, Monthly, Yearly, or Never?*

This is a better user experience for the participant, because when answering each question, they don't have to remember what the answer choices are. It also may cause the participant to stop and think about each question, instead of blazing through all questions in the matrix by giving the same answer to each one.





## Multiple Choice Questions

When asking multiple choice questions in text message surveys, it's helpful to solicit only single word responses. For example:

*Are you Female or Male?*

*Are you registered as a Democrat, Republican, Independent, or Other?*


*You said you have a smartphone; is it an iPhone, Android, Windows, Blackberry, or Other?*

If you ask text message multiple choice questions that solicit multi-word answers, you can set Instant Census to look for keywords in answers, so that Instant Census can properly code shortened responses.

For example, if you asked the question:

*Compared with one year ago, is your opinion of your Congressperson more favorable, less favorable, or about the same?*

you could set Instant Census' answer parser to look for the keywords "more", "less", or "same", so that whether a participant answers "about the same," "the same," or "same," that participant gets coded as "same." This saves your participants the hassle of having to enter exact response phrases, and it makes a text message survey seem more like a natural, human conversation.

 Instant Census can track keywords and properly code multiple choice responses. Meaning you spend less time cleaning your data.



If you need to ask questions that solicit multi-word answers that are more complicated, or must have overlapping keywords, you can consider numbering the responses like this:

***What's the highest level of education you've completed?***

- 1- Some high school*
- 2- High school/GED*
- 3- Some college*
- 4- College degree*
- 5- Graduate degree*

## Likert Scale Questions

Likert scale questions are a subset of multiple choice questions that try to classify participant opinions on a symmetric scale. Because Likert scale answers are often multi-word with many overlapping keywords, it's best to number the options for Likert scale questions:

***What's your opinion of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase?***

- 1- Strongly approve*
- 2- Approve*
- 3- Neither approve nor disapprove*
- 4- Disapprove*
- 5- Strongly disapprove*

## Question Length Limitations


Whenever possible, try to keep SMS survey questions under 160 characters, the specified maximum length of an individual text message. Most text messaging apps have built-in tools to automatically handle longer messages by breaking them up into chunks on the sending end and splicing them back together on the receiving end. Instant Census has infrastructure to work with this.



## Question Length Limitations Continued

But because cellphone carriers don't guarantee the order in which messages are delivered, these methods work most of the time but not always. That means that if you send messages longer than 160 characters, they may occasionally arrive out of order.

The 160 character limit is restrictive, but it also encourages you to use one of the most helpful characteristics of text message surveys: short questions that are easy for participants to understand and to answer.

 Mind the 160 character limit for text messages. Going beyond may result in out of order messages delivery.

## Incomplete Surveys

One of the advantages of text message surveys is that if a participant stops answering questions partway through, Instant Census can just resend the last question some hours or days later. Phone surveys and internet surveys don't have that advantage; if a participant puts down the phone or closes the browser window before completing all the questions, there's often no easy mechanism for prompting the participant to resume later at the same point in the questionnaire. This is another reason to make each question self-contained, rather than using matrix questions: it enables questions to be re-sent to non-responders, and it doesn't require sending them context.



# Using SMS Surveys To Complement Your Research



SMS is a great way to interact quickly and reliably with a broad base of possible participants, but even we at Instant Census don't claim it can completely replace other, more traditional, modes of data collection. It can, however, be a powerful supplementary tool no matter your primary mode of data gathering. Whether you're calling people manually or sending out surveys by snail mail, adding an SMS component to your survey methodology can generally improve your ability to interact with recipients and gather data.

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## Email Or Web-Based Surveys

Surveys deployed over Email are among the best and easiest to supplement with SMS. At the most basic level, SMS can be used as a reminder/delivery system for web surveys. A study by Mavletova & Couper (*Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology* (2014) 2, 498-518) indicates that surveys sent via email got a much higher response rate when they were accompanied by an SMS reminder. This little bit of personalized prompting was enough to get participants to open and take the survey in much higher numbers than email alone.



## Email Or Web-Based Surveys Continued

If you know your participants have web-enabled phones, this can be even further extended by using SMS to deliver the web survey directly. While this might require minor redesign of the survey to accommodate the increased number of mobile participants, 53% of emails are opened on phones, making it likely many users will be attempting to take it on mobile devices anyway. By serving the link directly through SMS, you can remove the need for them to take any intermediary action between receiving the reminder text and beginning the survey.

 53% of emails are opened on phones, making it likely many participants will attempt to take email surveys on mobile phones anyway.

You can also use SMS with email to get some limited subset of answers from people who fail to respond. While you probably cannot ask the entire survey this way, boiling it down to one or three really essential questions and sending those out to people who, despite SMS reminders, will not take the web survey can be a way to get some limited information from non-responders. Some information is better than no information, and a supplementary SMS survey of the most valuable questions can help flesh out data in those areas about which you care the most.

## Telephone Surveys

How SMS can supplement a telephone survey largely depends on whether or not you have consent to text before making the phone call. While this is a necessary prerequisite to sending any SMS messages, if you get it early it changes the way SMS can be used.



If you already have participants' consent:

### Scheduling

SMS can be a useful tool for scheduling the actual call with participants. Sending initial text messages to schedule the actual call for a time convenient to the participant can ensure someone picks up the phone when you make the primary call.

### Initial Data

SMS can also be used to gather some initial data about the subject, allowing you to skip over, for example, basic personal and demographic information before diving into the questions that really matter, and might require further explication over the phone.

Assuming you don't have consent to text before calling the participant, the actual phone call can be a great time to get that consent. Having gotten the participant to agree to receiving SMS messages from you, you can then use SMS to ask shorter, less intrusive follow-ups. This can help you dig deeper into results, or even keep broad track of changing views over time. You might even use this subsequent SMS contact to schedule future calls.





## Mail Surveys

If you're sending out snail mail surveys to people for whom you already have consent to text, then the obvious supplementary use of SMS is as a reminder/confirmation of receipt, much like an email survey. If you haven't received the survey back from someone, you can use SMS not just to remind them to take it, but also to help diagnose potential postal problems. Did they receive it? Did they send it back? Do you need to update their address? All of these potential problems can be diagnosed and fixed through SMS.

Also in common with email and web surveys is the potential to use SMS to grab the most vital information from non-responders. If, after a certain number of reminders, someone still does not fill out and send in the survey, you can use SMS to deploy the most essential subset of it.

If, on the other hand, you are mailing people for whom you do not have consent to text, then this is once again an ideal time to get it. Including a question in the survey asking for phone number and consent to text is possible, but given the times involved in postal service, it is probably better to include a text-in number with the mailing. This would allow recipients to initiate contact immediately by simply texting you, and could allow you to hook into the above uses of SMS.

🔗 If you don't have consent to text your panel, mail and phone surveys are a great way to obtain consent and recruit participants for SMS surveys.

## In-Person Surveys

Many of the same possible applications of SMS apply to in-person surveys as they do to telephone surveys. SMS can be a great tool to schedule something in person (if you are interacting with the subject far enough ahead to be managing that) or to get an initial set of data from them to inform the in person survey.



As with the other modes, there is also use to sending messages *after* the in-person survey. You can gain consent during the in-person element, and then use SMS to follow up in various ways. From quick check-ins on some behavior or action, to scheduling future interactions, it can help you stay in contact with, and build a relationship with, someone you were able to survey once in person. This can help you get a more complete picture of their behavior or experiences, even if you are never able to survey them in person again.

## Mixed-Mode

If you are already employing a mixed-mode survey, the benefits of adding SMS are even greater. By leveraging the power of SMS to ask quick, unobtrusive, and repeating questions, you can keep better track of what your subjects are doing, and maximize the impact of the other modes. Between helping coordinate with other modes, and winnowing down questions in other modes to maximize their impact, SMS adds a quick, responsive element to any existing multi-mode survey approach.



## The Takeaway

Whether you're using Instant Census SMS surveys as a complement to other survey tools or as your primary mode of performing research, they're a great way to gather data more quickly and perform research much faster than using traditional methods alone. When used in conjunction with other survey methods, our text message surveys can be used in preparatory or subsequent ways for communicating with survey participants.

Customers have used Instant Census alongside other survey technologies for the following:

### Preparatory Use

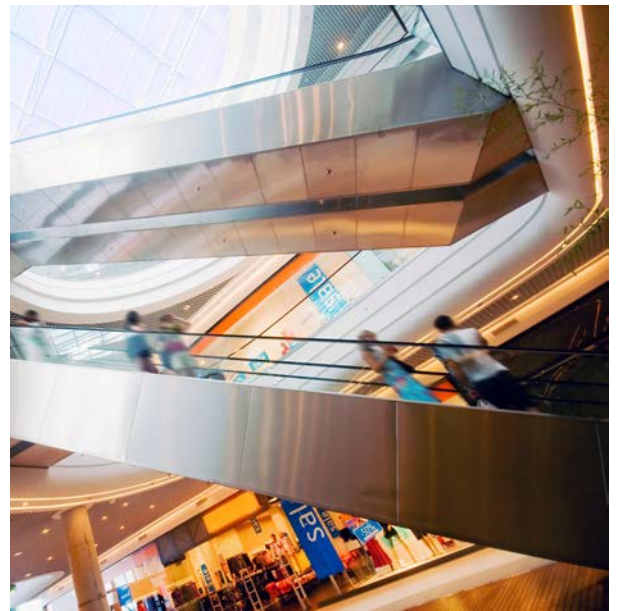
- Screening Participants
- Gathering preliminary data
- Scheduling

### Subsequent Use


- Follow-ups
- Clarifications
- Getting essential data



# Do SMS Surveys Bring Any Costs to Participants?



People using our text message survey platform sometimes ask us what percentage of people in the U.S. have unlimited texting. This is a serious concern, because researchers worry about non-response bias from participants who get charged per message. Just two years ago, scientists used Instant Census to power a 5-month population study, and they compensated participants up to \$100 to make sure that even if people were paying 20 cents per text message, they would still come out ahead of what their carrier billed them.

 *Unlimited Talk and Text* has become increasingly popular among carriers and customers.

Several years ago it was standard practice for U.S. cellphone carriers to sell plans with a fixed number of text messages (and steep overage fees). But in the last few years, "*Unlimited Talk and Text*" has become an increasingly common phrase. Our personal theory is that because a text message has almost zero marginal cost to phone carriers, the carriers were simply charging for minutes or messages because that was a way to price-differentiate customers based on usage. Now that most plans include mobile data, gigabytes of data have become the main price differentiator, so carriers can simplify their pricing and appear generous by offering unlimited calls and texts.



## Estimating The Number Of People In America With *Unlimited Talk And Text*

In order to estimate the number of Americans with *Unlimited Talk And Text*, we dug through the publicly-available 10-Q (quarterly) and 10-K (annual) financial reports for all major U.S. cellphone carriers (Verizon, AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, and US Cellular). The financial reports list the number of prepaid and postpaid cellphone connections each company has. All postpaid plans at those five carriers include unlimited texting, and some prepaid plans do too.

We also looked at MVNOs (Mobile Virtual Network Operators), companies that sell cellphone service but don't operate their own cell towers (they rent bandwidth from one of the big four carriers). By far the largest U.S. MVNO is Tracfone, which also owns a number of other MVNO brands including Net10 Wireless and Straight Talk. Tracfone's plans are all prepaid without unlimited texting, but some of its subsidiary brands offer unlimited texting plans. There are other MVNOs, but they have much lower subscriber counts: the largest we found numbers for were Republic Wireless with 300,000 subscribers (0.1% of the cellphones in the U.S.) and Ting with under half that. MVNOs we didn't count might add about 1% or 2% to the total number of cellphones in the U.S., but some of them offer unlimited texting as well, so they would have an even smaller impact on the final calculated percentage of phones with unlimited texting.

## Our Unlimited Talk And Text Estimates

Once we had the total numbers of postpaid and prepaid subscribers with each carrier, we made high and low estimates for what proportion of prepaid subscribers had unlimited texting.

 We estimate between **83% and 92%** of U.S. cellphones have unlimited texting, and our best guess is that the number is **88%**.



One small problem is that an unknown number of people in the U.S. use more than one cellphone, often one for work and one for personal life. Our data gave us 320 million total cellphone connections in the U.S., which is almost exactly the same as the number of people. The Pew Research Center calculates that 92% of U.S. adults own cellphones, but we don't know what portion of children own them (it's probably lower, especially among 0-6 year-olds). So it could be that a high single-digit percentage of Americans have two cellphones.

The main takeaway is that if you're sending a text message survey, odds are nearly 90% that any given U.S. cellphone number has unlimited texting. And even among plans that don't include unlimited texting, a large portion still offer a fixed number of texts that the subscriber may not have exceeded. Given that, there's probably a less than 10% chance that someone is actually paying for each message you send them.

**Download our data and calculations here:**

[http://pages.instantcensus.com/hubfs/americans\\_unlimited\\_texting.xlsx?t=1455107605088](http://pages.instantcensus.com/hubfs/americans_unlimited_texting.xlsx?t=1455107605088)



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