Public Engagement:

6 Drawbacks of Multiple Choice Surveys

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eBook

Executive Summary

Are multiple choice surveys the answer to collecting informed input for planning initiatives, building transparency, and gaining public trust?

Research would suggest otherwise. Our findings are born out of 250+ interviews conducted with planning and engagement practitioners from across the country.

In this eBook, we explore the ways in which multiple choice surveys have put effective public engagement at risk. Taking the time to explore the issues uncovers the harm that traditional surveys can inflict on public engagement programs.

To guide you toward engagement success, this eBook includes valuable insights and actionable tips to counteract the drawbacks of multiple choice options.

Introduction

For context, it's important to first understand what government agencies tell us about the purpose and goals of public engagement.

While citizen engagement is a broad category, most government agencies focus much of their outreach efforts on transportation and urban planning projects, as these tend to be critical make or break points in their relationship with the public and represent major investments.

Fuelled in large part by a desire to increase participation levels, agencies have increasingly turned to online community engagement to collect informed input across broad citizen demographics.

While some outreach programs have seen a marked increase in participation, others have struggled to attract large numbers.

Why? The failure in online engagement is often traced to the overuse and reliance on multiple choice questions as the primary source of public input.

Since many online engagement tools on the market are, at their core, multiple choice surveys, it's useful to understand why these traditional surveys are not achieving the results that many expect from online public engagement.

In this eBook, we uncover and explore the facts you need to know to ensure that your outreach initiatives leverage the best options and strategic methods to ensure high participation and actionable results.

At MetroQuest, our own cloud-based solution for public engagement offers fourteen tools to collect informed input on planning projects. And yes, one of those tools includes multiple choice questions. However, we only suggest using the multiple choice method as a last resort. Let's explore 6 reasons why.

Multiple choice questions are too simplistic for complex planning initiatives.

Why is a standard multiple choice survey often the most used tool to gather public input? Traditional surveys are easy to create and familiar to planners ... but complex planning decisions must be supported by trustworthy, actionable data.

Government outreach projects deal with multifaceted subject matter where constraints and tradeoffs must be well understood for the input to be meaningful. Citizens are not planners. Multiple choice questions are too simplistic to help them understand the nuances of planning to provide reliable input. The risk? When it comes to engaging the public on multifaceted initiatives – like comprehensive plans or transportation projects – multiple choice data can fail when scrutinized by public officials.

TIPS

✓ Go beyond traditional multiple choice surveys.

✓ Select a tool that is specifically designed for transportation and city planning.

✓ Make it simple for participants to provide informed input on complex planning projects.

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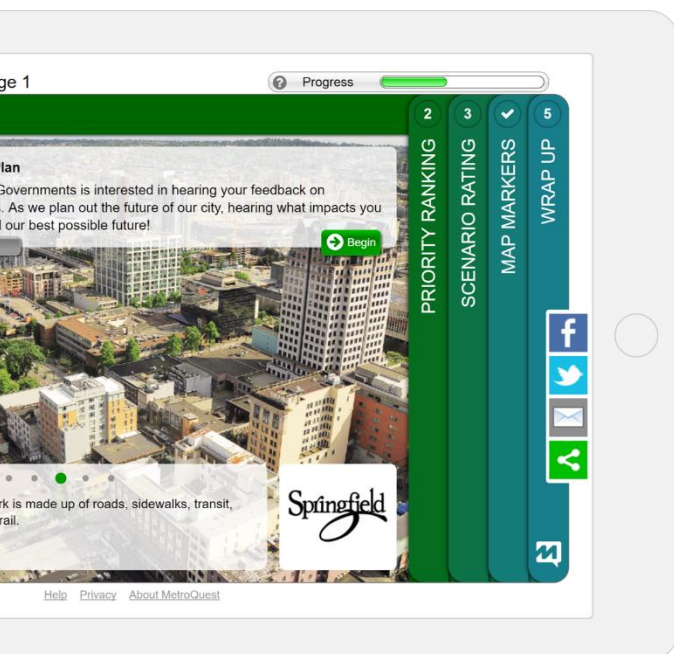
Boring surveys yield low participation rates.

After conducting interviews with planning and engagement practitioners, it became clear that the primary motivation for community engagement is to provide decision makers with confidence in making the right choices on planning investments. More specifically, they told us that public participation programs that engage a large number of people across a broad demographic provide decision makers with the confidence to make critical decisions.

The trouble with traditional surveys is they often yield low participation. Text-based surveys are not very compelling. To aggravate matters, if a survey starts by asking for personal information, participation rates plummet to below 5%. Requiring participants to sign-in first is a show stopper. It's imperative to design a survey to draw in participants – captivating them into the engagement process. The reward? Participation rates that jump to over 60%.

TIPS

✓ Black and white is boring! Make the experience fun, interactive, and colorful.

✓ Start with an easy question that focuses on ranking priorities that matter to participants.

✓ Avoid sign-up and demographic questions upfront, making them optional at the end of the survey when participants are already engaged.

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Long surveys have lower completion rates.

The length of the survey matters! This is because the drop off rates on long and complicated surveys is so high.

Ultimately, the challenge is that to get meaningful data on public preferences for complex issues, most agencies find it takes many questions and lots of text to get the information they need. Participants get distracted long before they complete the survey.

A typical multiple choice survey for planning projects averages over well 10 minutes to complete. Based on participation data, this timeframe decreases participation rates by over 70% and has a compounding effect with even lower completion rates.
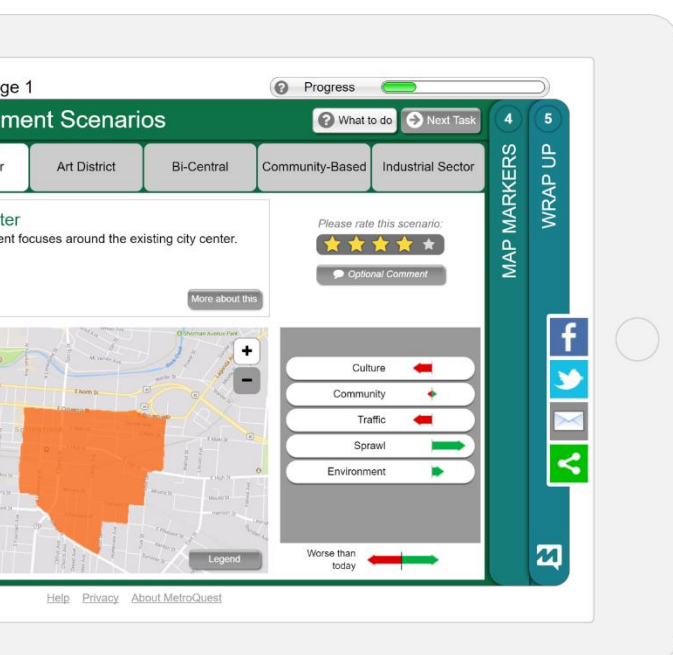
TIPS

✓ Plan your online survey experience for participants to take about 5 minutes.

✓ Take more time up front designing your survey to make it simple and quick for participants to provide their feedback.

✓ By designing a captivating online engagement experience, you can achieve 60% to 70% completion rates!

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Bland surveys are rarely shared.

According to the agencies we interviewed, social sharing – whether via Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, or other sites – allows for compelling surveys to reach and engage with broader audiences. Seems straightforward, right?

The trouble is that multiple choice surveys aren't perceived as being fun nor interesting enough to go viral. Like it or not, social media has become a popularity contest and winning is measured in likes and retweets. Because of this, agencies face a significant challenge. They must compete with all the other goodies on the internet vying for public attention.

Multiple choice surveys about government planning projects that feel like homework are seldom shared. The result is that agencies must then rely on first hand contacts they already have and don't end up broadening their outreach by any significant margin.
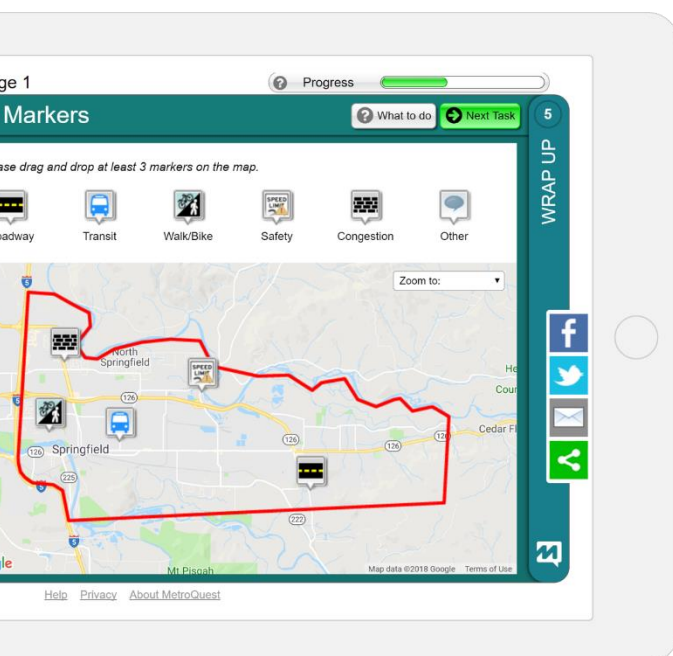
TIPS

✓ Make your survey stand out in the already crowded social media marketplace.

✓ To increase shareability, ensure that your survey is visually compelling, fun, interactive, and gamified. If they like it, they'll share it.

✓ Give social media buttons prominence and make it easy to share surveys with one click.

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# Traditional surveys rely primarily on language.

The majority of traditional surveys use text-based questions. With today's increased focus on inclusivity, relying on language can alienate citizens who struggle with English as a second language. Images are better understood, leaving less room for misinterpretation.

To make matters worse, many issues facing government agencies are spatial or visual in nature, often involving scenarios, tradeoff decisions, or dynamic information like budgeting. To accurately represent these types of issues in text-based questions – without interactive, visual, or map-based elements – is difficult or nearly impossible.

Many agencies report being challenged by decision makers on how the questions may be misinterpreted or fail to convey the true nature of the choices. These kinds of challenges can be difficult to overcome and may result in the plan being delayed, or worse, rejected.

TIPS

✓ Make your survey visually appealing.

✓ Use images – a picture is worth 1000 words.

✓ Implement the use of maps, pictures, colors, or star ratings to minimize reliance on language and individual interpretation.

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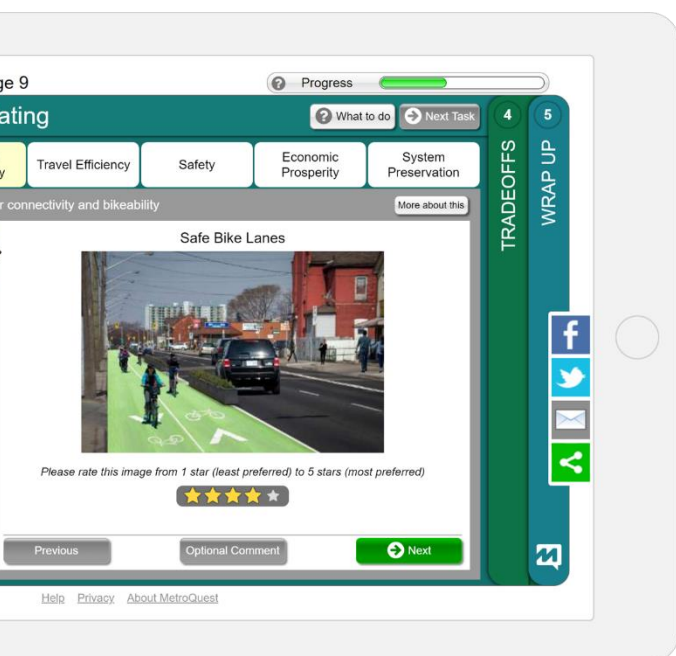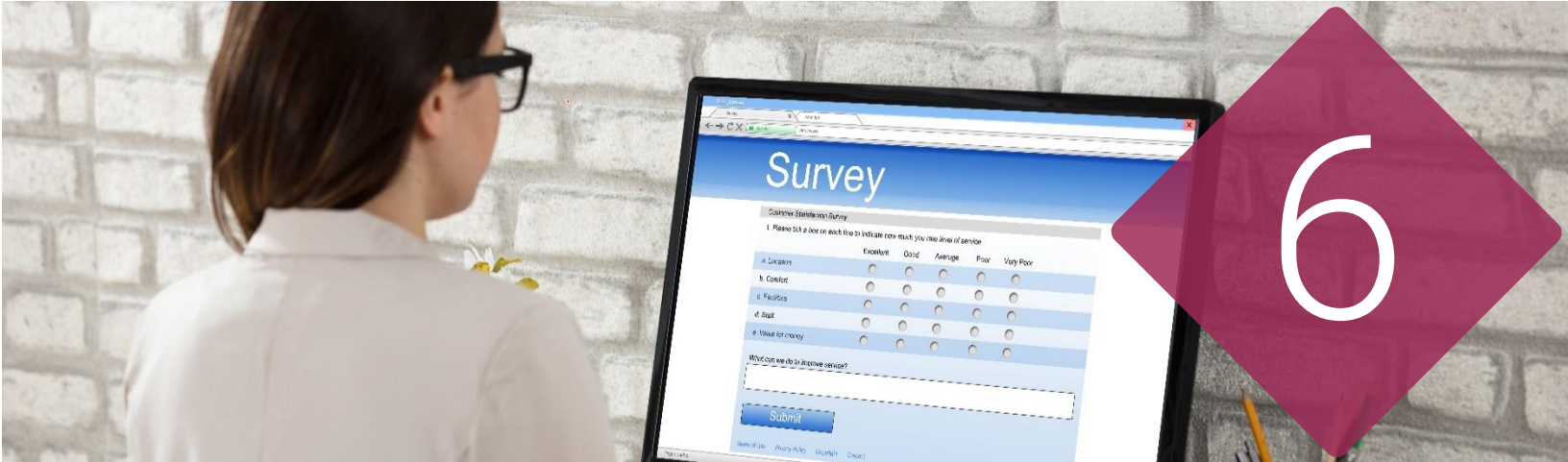
Multiple choice questions are not educational.

One of the most troublesome challenges facing project leaders when defending traditional survey results is the lack of education built into the process. Can the answers be trusted?

While many online engagement sites contain a great deal of documents that people can sift through to inform themselves of the constraints, choices, and tradeoffs of the decisions facing the agency ... few reviewers are convinced that people read them. These fears are well-founded. By evaluating page view data, many agencies found that despite best efforts to provide rich information alongside surveys, most citizens head directly to the questions.

In our extensive research, we found that the average online participant who contributes input for a project spends just 5 minutes reviewing the material AND contributing feedback. That doesn't leave much time for learning about the alternatives.
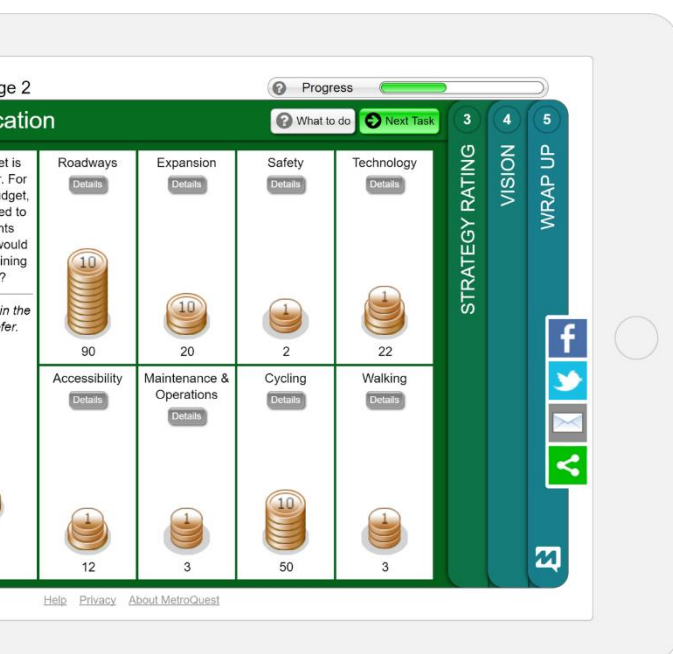
TIPS

✓ Gamify learning to keep participants engaged.

✓ Embed education within your survey experience.

✓ Use buttons and pop-ups to offer more detailed information.

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Conclusion

If you're considering, or are in the process of implementing, an online survey for your planning project – please think beyond multiple choice questions!

When it comes to online engagement, interactive and visually-rich tools like scenario ratings, visual preferences, map markers, tradeoffs, and budget allocation games perform best in terms of public participation and completion rates. These tools are fast and fun to use, and since they embed education into the experience, decision makers have greater confidence that the public input is informed and can be trusted.

Transportation agencies, local governments, and consulting firms who use well-designed online public engagement tools, like MetroQuest, have frequently engaged thousands of participants and collected actionable results to inform and support their plans!

"We got just tremendous response to MetroQuest … we had about **5,000 survey responses**. We were very, very pleased with that. Certainly, it made a tremendous impact in being able to demonstrate that the plan we had responded to what the community wanted for the future of Nashville."

– Greg Claxton, Nashville Next Planner, Metro Nashville Planning Commission

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ABOUT METROQUEST

MetroQuest is the leading solution for online public engagement. Planners and public participation practitioners rely on MetroQuest to optimize citizen participation for all their outreach and planning projects.

Maximize Participation – Tired of input from the same narrow group of people? With MetroQuest, it's common to engage 2,000 to 10,000+ participants across a broad demographic including hard to reach and traditionally underrepresented audiences.

Collect Informed Input – MetroQuest is optimized to educate the public and collect informed input quickly. Participants can see the impact of their choices in real time and learn about the alternatives and tradeoffs based on their own priorities.

Deliver Actionable Results – MetroQuest is optimized to give decision makers the confidence they need to make critical choices. That means both quantity and quality – engaging thousands of people from a broad demographic and collecting quantifiable and trustworthy input to support decisions.
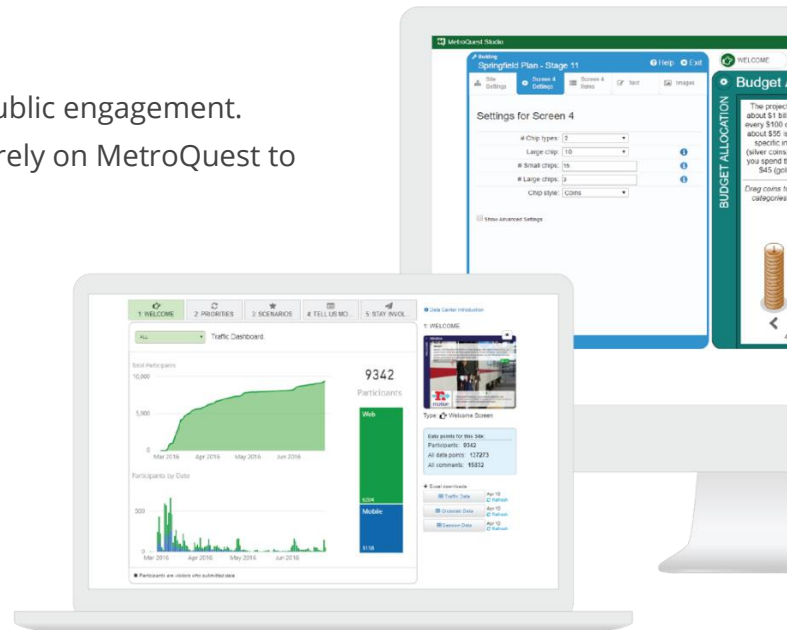
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