



SURVEY DESIGN

WRITING GREAT QUESTIONS
FOR ONLINE SURVEYS

A QuestionPro Publication

Survey Design : Writing Great Questions for Online Surveys

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Writing great questions is an art that like all arts requires a great amount of work, practice, and help from others. The following discussion is one that identifies some of the common pitfalls in creating a great questionnaire.

Avoid loaded or leading words or questions

Slight wording changes can produce great differences in results. Could, Should, Might all sound almost the same, but may produce a 20% difference in agreement to a question (The supreme court could.. should.. might.. have forced the breakup of Microsoft Corporation). Strong words that represent control or action, such as prohibit produces similar results (Do you believe that congress should prohibit insurance companies from raising rates?) Sometimes wording is just biased: You wouldn't want to go to Rudolpho's Restaurant for the company's annual party would you?

Misplaced questions

Questions placed out of order or out of context should be avoided. In general, a funnel approach is advised. Broad and general questions at the beginning of the questionnaire as a warm-up. Then more specific questions, followed by more general easy to answer questions like demographics.

Mutually non-exclusive response categories

Multiple choice response categories should be mutually exclusive so that clear choices can be made. Non-exclusive answers frustrate the respondent and make interpretation difficult at best.

Nonspecific questions

Do you like orange juice? This is very unclear...do I like what? Taste, texture, nutritional content, Vitamin C, the current price, concentrate, fresh squeezed? Be specific in what you want to know about. Do you watch TV regularly? (what is regularly?).

Confusing or unfamiliar words

Asking about caloric content, bits, bytes, mbs, and other industry specific jargon and acronyms are confusing. Make sure your audience understands your language level, terminology and above all, what you are asking.

Non-directed questions give respondents excessive latitude

What suggestions do you have for improving tomato juice? The question is about taste, but the respondent may offer suggestions about texture, the type of can or bottle, mixing juices, or something related to use as a mixer or in recipes.

Forcing answers

Respondents may not want, or may not be able to provide the information requested. Privacy is an important issue to most people. Questions about income, occupation, finances, family life, personal hygiene and beliefs (personal, political, religious) can be too intrusive and rejected by the respondent.

Non-exhaustive listings

Do you have all of the options covered? If you are unsure, conduct a pretest using the "Other (please specify) _____" option. Then revise the question making sure that you cover at least 90% of the respondent answers.

Unbalanced listings

Unbalanced scales may be appropriate for some situations and biased in others. When measuring alcohol consumption patterns, One study used a quantity scale that made the heavy drinker appear in the middle of the scale with the polar ends reflecting no consumption and an impossible amount to consume. However, we expect all hospitals to offer good care and may use a scale of excellent, very good, good, fair. We do not expect poor care.

Double barreled questions

What is the fastest and most convenient Internet service for you? The fastest is certainly not the most economical. Two questions should be asked.

Dichotomous questions

Make sure answers are independent. For example the question “Do you think basketball players as being independent agents or as employees of their team?” Some believe that yes, they are both.

Long questions

Multiple choice questions are the longest and most complex. Free text answers are the shortest and easiest to answer. When you increase the length of questions and surveys, you decrease the chance of receiving a completed response.

Questions on future intentions.

Yogi Berra once said that making predictions is difficult, especially when they are about the future. Predictions are rarely accurate more than a few weeks or in some case months ahead.

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