

Ask a Silly Question.....

The old adage "ask a silly question, get a silly answer" applies to the process of writing effective survey questions. At first glance, writing good questions does not appear to be a difficult task. Just figure out what you want to know, and write questions to obtain that information. As with many things, the easy solution is not always the best solution.

**Although writing questions is easy, writing good questions is not.**

Effective survey question writing will only happen in a larger framework of designing effective surveys. To learn more about designing effective surveys, please refer to Framework Partners Inc's document: "How to Write an Effective Survey." It is the aim of this document to assist readers in writing more effective survey questions.

## Wording of Questions

The focus of this document is the specific wording of questions. Here are some tips to remember when writing questions:

**TIP** Avoid abbreviations, slang, or uncommon words that your audience might not understand. For example, what is your opinion of NGOs?

It is quite possible that everyone does not know that NGO stands for Non-Governmental Organization. It is also possible that respondents might know what NGO stands for, but do not know what a Non-Governmental Organization is or does. If the question targets the general public, the researcher might run into problems. On the other hand, if the question is for those who work in the voluntary service sector, then the acronym NGO is probably acceptable.

**TIP** Be specific. The problem with vague questions is that they generate vague answers. For example, what is your household income? As respondents come up with numerous interpretations to this question, they will give all kinds of answers – is it last year's

income before taxes, is it last year's income after taxes, is it this year's income before taxes, or is it this year's income after taxes, etc.

Another example of an unspecific or vague question: How often did you attend sporting events during the past year?

- Never,
- Rarely,
- Occasionally,
- Regularly.

Again, this question is open for interpretation. People will interpret "sporting event" and the answer list differently - does "regularly" mean weekly, monthly, or some other frequency.

**TIP** Don't overdo it. When questions are too precise, people cannot answer them.

They will either refuse or guess.

For example, how many books did you read in last year? You need to give them some ranges:

- None
- From 1 to 10 books
- From 11 to 25 books
- From 26 to 50 books
- More than 50 books.

**TIP** Make sure your questions are easy to answer.

Questions that are too demanding will also lead to refusals or guesses.

An example of an inordinately difficult question is: Please rank the following 20 items in order of importance to you when you are shopping for a new car. You're asking respondents to do a fair amount of calculating. Don't ask people to rank 20 items; have them pick the top 5.

**TIP** Don't assume too much.

This is a fairly common error, in which the question-writer infers something about people's knowledge attitudes or behaviour. For example, do you tend to agree or disagree with the President's position on gun control? This question assumes that the respondent is aware that the President has a position on gun control and knows what that position is.

To avoid this error, the writer must be prepared to do some educating. For example: "The President has recently stated his position on gun control. Are you aware that he has taken a stand on this issue?" If the answer is yes, then continue with "Please describe in your own words what you understand his position on gun control to be." And, finally "Do you tend to agree or disagree with his stand?"

**TIP** Watch out for double questions and questions with double negatives.

Combining questions or using a double negative leads to ambiguous questions and answers. For example "Do you favour the legalization of marijuana for use in private homes but not in public places?" If this question precisely describes the respondent's position, then a "yes"

answer is easily interpreted. But a "no" could mean the respondent favours use in public places but not in private homes, or opposes both, or favours both.

Similarly here is an example of a question with a double negative "Shouldn't the police chief not be directly responsible to the mayor?" The question is ambiguous, almost any answer will be even more so.

**TIP** Check for bias. A biased question can influence people to respond in a manner that

does not accurately reflect their positions. There are several ways in which questions can be prejudiced. One is to imply that respondents should have engaged in certain behaviour. For example "The movie The Lion King is the most popular animated movie of all time. Have you seen this movie?" So as not to appear "different" respondents may say yes even though they haven't seen the movie. The question should be "Have you ever seen the movie The Lion King?"

Another way to bias a question is to have unbalanced answer choices. For example "Currently our country spends XX billion dollars a year on foreign aid. Do you feel this amount should be:

- Increased,
- Stay the same
- Decreased a little,
- Decreased somewhat,
- Decreased a great deal?"

This set of responses encourages respondents to select a "decrease" option, since there are three of these and only one increase option.

**TIP Offer appropriate response choices.**

To elicit the correct response, respondents must be given appropriate response options. A major airline recently asked for opinions on that day's flight. Among other things the traveler was to rate their experience with various employees on how well they: used the traveler's name when addressing them, acknowledged the traveler with a smile and pleasant greeting, used good eye contact when speaking to the traveler, and thanking the traveler for flying with the airline. Each experience was to be rated from very poor to excellent. However, doing so makes little sense. How can a respondent rate how well an employee used (or failed to use) the respondent's name? An employee either did or did not use the respondent's name (thank them/ acknowledge them. etc.) and the respondent either liked or disliked the experience or didn't care one way or the other. An intensity or degree of satisfaction rating simply doesn't make much sense in this context.

When respondents do give a rating, the analyst is at a loss to interpret the results. A "poor" rating might reflect one of several reasons. For example, the respondent might not have liked the tone used by the employee, might have felt it was an insincere gesture, or might not have liked the employee mispronouncing their name. These are all very different reactions with very different implications that are hidden by the nature of the response choices. The solution to this confusion is to rework the questions into a more appropriate "yes/no" format.

**TIP Offer full-response choices.**

Using an inappropriate rating scale, as in the airline survey, also tempts respondents to leave questions unanswered. Self-administered surveys are particularly prone to non-response, since there is no interviewer to control the situation. Special care must be taken so that non-response is not encouraged.

For example, the airline survey questions should not only be reworked into a "yes/no" format, but should include a "do not recall" option. Including "do not recall" will help reduce respondent frustration by providing a fuller response choice. The analyst will now also be able to quantify how unaware airline customers may be of the various events (being greeted by name, being thanked for flying the airline, etc.). Some people may argue that expanding the response choices to include "do not recall" is unnecessary, as it can be inferred from the level of non-response. However, if tracking awareness levels is important to the airline, then it should be worthy of a committed, unambiguous response.

**TIP Offer intuitively appropriate response choices.**

In a recent interviewing project, respondents were asked to use a scale from 1 to 5 to indicate how much they liked something; "1" was for something they liked a lot and "5" was for something they didn't like at all. After the first few interviews, it was evident that respondents wanted to use a larger, rather than smaller, number for something that they liked a lot (the "more is better" mindset).

Another consideration is that the number of response options given in a scale should relate to a respondent's level of familiarity with the subject being rated. Someone who is intimately knowledgeable about the subject can more finely differentiate a one-point difference and can handle a scale with more options than someone who is

less familiar with the subject. In fact, the more knowledgeable respondent will probably want more response freedom to more accurately reflect their feelings. Even with a 10-point scale. Surveyors have frequently heard respondents say, "Can't I give it a rating of 7 and a half?"

**TIP** Beware of "and." The seemingly innocuous use of the word "and" can lead to some ambiguous analytical situations. For example, in a school district survey, parents were asked, "Is there enough safe and accessible parking at your child's school?"

Use of the word "and" requires that both components be considered together, as a unit, and not separately. Thus a "yes" response means there is enough safe and accessible parking. However, a "no" response is vague, as a respondent could answer "no" for several reasons. For example, there is not enough safe parking (but accessibility is fine); there is not enough accessible parking (but safety is fine); or perhaps there is not enough parking, period.

A more straightforward, although more lengthy, approach would be to ask:

- Is there enough parking?
- Is the parking safe?
- Is the parking accessible?

Using the word "and" needs to be a conscious decision that can be aided by first considering each element separately before combining the two elements into one. This exercise will often help determine if combining the attributes into one statement makes sense. It will also help identify possible interpretative restrictions ahead of time. If two elements are to be joined into one statement, then the analyst needs to

make sure the respondent is aware that both elements are to be considered. Underlining or bold facing the word "and" can help communicate the combined elements.

**TIP** Be specific about the audience.

Surveys associated with product purchase and usage can be very tricky because the respondent may not be the purchaser or the user. Unfortunately, many self-administered product registration surveys fail to make that distinction. For example, one such survey from a large toy manufacturer asks, "Is this the first race set you have purchased for the recipient?" followed later by, "Where do you play with your race set?" and "Do you watch auto racing on television?"

If I were responding to this survey, I would certainly be confused. Who are they referring to in these questions? The first question is about the purchaser, while the second is about the user (which, in the case of a car race set is probably not the same person as the purchaser), and the third could be about either. The vague use of the word "you" requires the respondent to either interpret it literally or reinterpret it to make sense. In either case, it becomes an analyst's nightmare. The whole problem could have been avoided by eliminating the word "you" or more precisely directing the question; for example, "Is this the first race set purchased for the recipient?" "Where does the recipient play with the race set?" and "Does the recipient watch auto racing on television?"

The reality is you will get answers to even faulty questions. Not asking the question is actually preferable to getting an incorrect, and potentially misleading, answer.

**The only thing worse than not asking any questions is to ask an erroneous questions, and then to act on the resulting erroneous data.**