Constructing a survey questionnaire

Preparing to develop a survey questionnaire

This guide is designed to help you write questions for survey research. However, many principles of question design for surveys will also apply to interviews and discussion groups. This information sheet is most suitable for agencies and individuals who have:

- conducted a preliminary assessment of their information needs (e.g. program logic, evaluability assessment, information scan, needs assessment)
- determined that a survey is the most appropriate method to collect the information sought (i.e. you're sure that other sources of data (e.g. administrative, performance) won't yield the necessary information
- written a survey research plan with clearly defined objectives, research questions and target groups
- considered how information will be collected and analysed.

Questionnaire utility

Surveys are only useful when people respond to them. The rise of feedback forms and insight research has increased the risk of survey fatigue, respondent burden and non-response. Respondent-conscious surveys recognise that every question must count, yield useful data, be brief, timely, relevant and easy to understand, and attempt to capture only the information needed to answer the research questions.

For each question you write consider:

- Will respondents be willing and able to answer this?
- Do the questions suit the survey's mode of delivery (e.g. online vs telephone)?
- Is this question critical to the survey's purpose?
- Will the answer to this question result in measurable and actionable information?
- What do I really need to know?

In general, the shorter the questionnaire, the better. To ensure accuracy and encourage survey completion, telephone and online surveys should not exceed 15 minutes.

Another important consideration is to ensure that the questions asked don't raise expectations or create 'false hope' among respondents. Avoid asking for opinions about issues, programs or policies where change is unlikely to occur.

Early exploratory consultations (e.g. through interviews or discussion groups) with your target group may help to clarify what questions to ask, how to ask them, and the answers you may receive.

Question wording and form

Clear questions, clear answers

Questions are easier to interpret when the wording is simple and the terms used have a clear meaning. Avoid long, complex, double-barrelled questions as well as undefined concepts, acronyms and jargon words. Consider the following examples.

Hypothetical question: Rate the effectiveness of the online training modules developed by your organisation to become more agile and responsive.

Potential problems with this type of question:
It relies on the respondent to:
- be aware of the training
- understand what is meant by terms such as *agile*, *responsive*, and *effectiveness*
- summarise their assessment of all training and undefined terms into a single response, which may include negative ratings for some training modules and positive ratings for others.

Example of a clearer approach:

Instead of asking one single complicated question, break it into a series of simpler questions such as the following:

In response to a recent review, the organisation implemented Online Training Module (OTM) A1 and OTM A2 to become more *agile*, which the organisation defines as *the capacity to act quickly*.

Q1: Have you completed OTM A1?
    □ Yes
    □ No
    □ Don't know

Q2: (Asked only of respondents who answered *Yes* in Q1). To what extent has OTM A1 assisted you to become more *agile* in your work?
    □ Not assisted me
    □ Assisted me a little
    □ Greatly assisted me

→ *Repeat agile questions for OTM A2.*

→ *Repeat questions for training modules relating to responsiveness, defined as 'addressing the needs of our customers'*

Benefits of a clearer approach
- ensures an informed response from those who have some knowledge of
    o the training
    o what is meant by the terms 'agile' and 'responsive'
- assesses each training module to determine its individual contribution to effectiveness.

Avoid leading and biased language

Well-written questions avoid making assumptions about a respondent's knowledge, attitudes or experiences. Don't use language that:

- forces the respondent to a certain view:

> **Hypothetical example:**
> Q: How attractive is the Sydney Harbour Bridge?
>
> **Better example:**
> Q: How would you describe the Sydney Harbour Bridge?

- forces respondents to answer a certain way:

> **Hypothetical example:**
> Q: What concerns you about measles vaccination?
>
> **Better example:**
> Q: Do you think children should be immunised against measles? Why or why not?

Match response options to questions

Ensuring response options match each question makes questions easier for respondents to answer**.**

> **Hypothetical example:**
> Q: Are you a member of the library?
>   □ Student
>   □ Teacher
>   □ Private
>   □ Business
>
> **Better example:**
> Q: Do you hold a current library membership?
>   □ Yes
>   □ No
>   □ Don't know
>
> Q: (If yes) What type of membership do you hold?
>   □ Student
>   □ Teacher
>   □ Business
>   □ Private
>   □ Other (please specify)

Special categories

Respondents should be able to answer each question posed. Skip functions as well as 'Not applicable' and 'Other' categories are useful when questions or response options may not apply to all. A 'Don't know' category may be required for surveys that ask respondents to recall non-recent events or are answered by people on behalf of others (proxies). For example, surveying a parent about their child's activities.

Finalising your questions

When evaluating each question for inclusion consider**:**

- Is the question hard to understand (e.g. ambiguous, vague, has undefined terms)?
- Is the question timely (i.e. does it rely on memory of recent events)?
- Do response options allow for a variety of answers?

- Do interviewer/respondent instructions suit the survey's mode of delivery (e.g. online vs telephone)?
- If answered as intended, will the question give me the right information for analysis?

Ordering your questions

Arrange questions in a meaningful and logical order, thinking about relevance, interest, available knowledge and ease to answer. It is advisable to:

- make the first question relevant to the survey's central topic, applicable to most respondents, and interesting enough to motivate respondents to continue
- ask any controversial or sensitive questions in the middle or end of the survey (i.e. not up-front)
- organise questions into common themes (with introductory statements and definitions if needed)
- ask demographic questions (e.g. age, gender, regional locality) at the end of the questionnaire to reduce perceptions of intrusiveness
- ask questions about respondent awareness, personal views or knowledge of a topic before questions that offer information or views on that same topic
- avoid concepts or response options in early questions that may alter the interpretation (or influence the answer) of later questions.

Layout and format

The layout and format of a questionnaire should enhance the efficiency of the survey's completion. Poorly formatted questionnaires may lead to respondents or interviewers missing questions, being confused about the answers expected, or misinterpreting response options.

Modern online surveys should have responsive, portable designs that adjust the questionnaire's display for viewing on multiple devices (e.g. computer, laptop, tablet or mobile phone).

Questionnaires for interview surveys should be clearly formatted with instructions to guide phone or face-to-face interviewers on what information to reveal, when to prompt for greater detail and when to skip over redundant or irrelevant questions.

Pre-testing your survey

Until the draft questionnaire has been tested it's hard to tell whether it will achieve the desired results. A good way to test a questionnaire is in-field with a sample of target respondents (pilot study).

However, time and budget restraints may mean this is not possible. In such cases, it's wise to send draft questionnaires for internal or external review (ideally to a mix of people – with and without knowledge of the survey's topic and/or to those with characteristics of its target group).