

Questions about questions: Tips on how to construct a survey to get you the best responses

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Overview

- Is a survey always appropriate?
- When are surveys best used?
- The importance of a coherent agenda
- Are all these questions necessary? Really?
- Writing questions
- The importance of pilot testing

Is a survey always appropriate?

- No
- In-depth questions require alternate modes of data collection
- When we don't know much...
- Very small groups – person X said WHAT?!

So when are surveys best used?

- If topic is sensitive
- If you need to collect data from a lot of people at once
- If you sample appropriately-can provide unbiased representation
- If time is a factor (with a large caveat*)

Why a coherent focus is important

- What is the purpose of this survey? What do we want to find out?
- As Fink (2006) recommends, you should not collect information you do not plan to act upon
- The tendency is to “fit everything in” when you have the chance

Coherency

- Consider the survey as a conversation
- What could happen if data not used?
- Reliability – “providing consistent measures in comparable situations”
- Validity – “answers correspond to what they are intended to measure” (Fowler, 2009, p. 87)

Too many questions?

- Short survey or concentrated topic?
- Introduction of substantial error
- Balance works - high response rates + survey data quality

An example from the research

- “Critical thinking” – what is it? (Porter, 2011)
- How might this differ from person to person?
- Pilot testing is important – cognitive interviews (Fowler, 2009)
- Consider sitting with a sample of your intended audience members (one way to do this)

Another example: a definition

- A sample: “Next we need to get an estimate of the total income for you and family members living with you during 1993. When you calculate income, we would like you to include what you and other family members living with you made from jobs and also any income you or other family members may have had from other sources, such as rents, welfare payments, social security, pensions, or even interests from stocks, bonds, or savings. So, including income from all sources, for you and family members living with you, how much was your total family income in 1993?” (Fowler, 1995, p. 16, cited in Porter, 2011).

Designing questions

- Design, as you can see, is very important
- Two major issues – the question and the response
- Close ended and open ended questions
- Advantages and disadvantages to both (Fink, 2006)

The survey question

- Closed-ended advantages
- Open-ended advantages
- Carolyn Fink (2006) -“ seven skills”
- Two things she starts with – 1) “Each question should be meaningful to respondents” and 2) “use Standard English”

Along those lines: Avoid jargon

- Skill 3...
- Introducing jargon may not translate to those actually taking the survey – affecting the data quality (more important than response rate!)
- Best to avoid abbreviations (Fink, 2006)

Concrete questions = concrete data

- Example (from Fink 2006): “Do you think other people would enjoy the book?” versus “Have you recommended the book to anyone else?”
- Such a thing as “too concrete”
- Example: TV viewing for a week and the error of extrapolation (Royal wedding?)
- Keep close to survey-taker’s experience

The four letter word: bias

- Best to avoid biased words in the survey question (4)
- Example (Fink, 2006): “Would you vote for Roger Fields?” Or “Would you vote for Dr. Roger Fields” or “Would you vote for Dr. Roger Fields, a <insert political view>” (p. 19)
- Words can radically alter the responses...

Our own biases

- The research or assessment focus might be motivated by them...
- Skill (5) is to check these biases (Fink, 2006)
- Example: “Do you think that liberals and conservatives will soon reach a greater degree of understanding?” (p. 20)
- Where’s the bias?

Personal information is just that...

- Income example – rather than ask it explicitly, what might you do instead?
- Why use skill 6, of course – use categories
- Example 0-10,000/year, 10,000-20,000/year, etc.

Finally – 1 question, 1 thought

- This is the final skill (7) Fink (2006) identifies for writing a survey question
- (Bad) example: “Should the United States cut its military or domestic spending?” (p. 20)
- Wait...what?
- (Good) example: “Should the United states allocate more money to domestic programs?” (p. 20)

A word on response scales

- There has been a lot of research on scaling
- It all depends on your assessment or research intent
- Most common is a “likert-type scale”, some closed-ended questions also use a yes/no
- Also, multiple choice questions, branching questions
- Bigger picture – quality of data – what scale is meaningful?

Conclusions

- This is a huge area of research, but with some tips, one can create a “good survey”
- Quality of data is as important, if not more so, than response rate
- Good resources abound on this topic
- Tip of the iceberg in survey research
- Seven steps (Fink, 2006)
- Pilot, pilot, pilot

References/Resources

- From easiest to advanced:
 - Fink, A. (2006). How to conduct surveys: A step-by-step guide. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
 - Specifically, pages 11-23.
 - Step-by step guide to survey process
 - Dillman, D.A., Smyth, J.D., & Christian, L.M. (2009). Internet, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method (3rd ed.). Hoboken: Wiley.
 - Specifically, pages 65-151. More in depth than Fink
 - Many examples of “good and bad” survey moves
 - Fowler, F.J. (2009). Survey research methods (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks: Sage.
 - Specifically, pages 87-106
 - Very clear examples, also describes research processes

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