

Qualities of a Good Question and Keys to an Effective Survey

There are good and bad questions. The qualities of a good question are as follows:

1. Evokes the truth.

Questions must be non-threatening. When a respondent is concerned about the consequences of answering a question in a particular manner, there is a good possibility that the answer will not be truthful. Anonymous questionnaires that contain no identifying information are more likely to produce honest responses than those identifying the respondent. If your questionnaire does contain sensitive items, be sure to clearly state your policy on confidentiality.

2. Asks for an answer on only one dimension.

The purpose of a survey is to find out information. A question that asks for a response on more than one dimension will not provide the information you are seeking. For example, a researcher investigating a new food snack asks "Do you like the texture and flavor of the snack?" If a respondent answers "no", then the researcher will not know if the respondent dislikes the texture or the flavor, or both. Another questionnaire asks, "Were you satisfied with the quality of our food and service?" Again, if the respondent answers "no", there is no way to know whether the quality of the food, service, or both were unsatisfactory. A good question asks for only one "bit" of information.

3. Can accommodate all possible answers.

Multiple choice items are the most popular type of survey questions because they are generally the easiest for a respondent to answer and the easiest to analyze. Asking a question that does not accommodate all possible responses can confuse and frustrate the respondent.

4. Has mutually exclusive options.

A good question leaves no ambiguity in the mind of the respondent. There should be only one correct or appropriate choice for the respondent to make.

5. Produces variability of responses.

When a question produces no variability in responses, we are left with considerable uncertainty about why we asked the question and what we learned from the information. Design your questions so they are sensitive to differences between respondents.

6. Follows comfortably from the previous question.

Writing a questionnaire is similar to writing anything else. Transitions between questions should be smooth. Grouping questions that are similar will make the questionnaire easier to complete, and the respondent will feel more comfortable. Questionnaires that jump from one unrelated topic to another feel disjointed and are not likely to produce high response rates.

7. Does not presuppose a certain state of affairs.

Among the most subtle mistakes in questionnaire design are questions that make an unwarranted assumption. An example of this type of mistake is:

Are you satisfied with your current auto insurance? (Yes or No)

This question will present a problem for someone who does not currently have auto insurance. Write your questions so they apply to everyone. This often means simply adding an additional response category.

Are you satisfied with your current auto insurance?

Yes

No

Don't have auto insurance

One of the most common mistaken assumptions is that the respondent knows the correct answer to the question. Industry surveys often contain very specific questions that the respondent may not know the answer to. For example:

What percent of your budget do you spend on direct mail advertising? ____

Very few people would know the answer to this question without looking it up, and very few respondents will take the time and effort to look it up. If you ask a question similar to this, it is important to understand that the responses are rough estimates and there is a strong likelihood of error.

8. Does not imply a desired answer.

The wording of a question is extremely important. We are striving for objectivity in our surveys and, therefore, must be careful not to lead the respondent into giving the answer we would like to receive. Leading questions are usually easily spotted because they use negative phraseology.

9. Does not use emotionally loaded or vaguely defined words.

This is one of the areas overlooked by both beginners and experienced researchers. Quantifying adjectives (e.g., most, least, majority) are frequently used in questions. It is important to understand that these adjectives mean different things to different people.

10. Does not use unfamiliar words or abbreviations.

Remember who your audience is and write your questionnaire for them. Do not use uncommon words or compound sentences. Write short sentences. Abbreviations are okay if you are absolutely certain that every single respondent will understand their meanings. If there is any doubt at all, do not use the abbreviation.

11. Is not dependent on responses to previous questions.

Branching in written questionnaires should be avoided. While branching can be used as an effective probing technique in telephone and face-to-face interviews, it should not be used in written questionnaires because it sometimes confuses respondents.

12. Does not ask the respondent to order or rank a series of more than five items.

Questions asking respondents to rank items by importance should be avoided. This becomes increasingly difficult as the number of items increases, and the answers become less reliable. This becomes especially problematic when asking respondents to assign a percentage to a series of items. In order to successfully complete this task, the respondent must mentally continue to re-adjust his answers until they total one hundred percent. Limiting the number of items to five will make it easier for the respondent to answer.

Conducting a Survey

The goal in conducting a baseline survey is to learn the current situation of the people and place.

Instructions:

Before you write questions, start asking yourself questions:

1. What do you want to know?

Before you can write a question, you need to know what you want to learn from your survey.

2. What do you already know?

Think about those things you have already learned. Have you already tried to conduct a survey?

3. Whose opinion matters?

You'll need to decide before you start whose opinion you are seeking.

4. Where will you find them?

If your target respondents have email addresses, you may want to choose an email survey as this is a cost effective way to reach them. If you don't have email addresses, you need to meet them and interview.

5. What topics will you cover?

The title of your survey is important.

And now, you are ready to write questions:

6. Keep it short.

Above all, your questionnaire should be as short as possible. Draw a mental line between what you "must know" and what would be "interesting to know."

7. Keep it simple.

Plain language is a must. If your questions read like they are meant to impress, they will not elicit the right answers as respondents simply won't interpret them correctly.

8. Spell it out.

Don't assume that everyone knows or understands your industry or your company. Titles, abbreviations and product names are often sources of misunderstanding.

9. Start with easy questions.

Start the survey with questions that are likely to be easy to answer to get the respondent involved. Yes/No questions or simple multiple choice questions are ideal for the beginning of the survey.

10. Don't double-up.

A common error in survey design is creating a complex question that has more than one possible answer.

11. General before specific.

The issues raised in one question can influence how people think about the next question. That's why it's a good idea to ask general questions first and move on to more specific questions later. For example, ask general questions about shopping preferences before asking about what hours the interviewee prefers to shop in your store.

12. Test-drive your survey.

Before you send the survey to real respondents, ask a sample group of respondents to take the survey. After they've completed it, ask them if they had problems understanding any questions or had answers that were not available on the list of choices. It's much easier to change the questionnaire before you send it than after.

