

Fifth Edition

Questionnaire Design

How to plan, structure and write survey
material for effective market research

Ian Brace and Kate Bolton



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Introduction

At times it can seem as if everyone is writing questionnaires. Those wanting answers to questions are varied and diverse. Some are big players, eg multinational companies needing information to develop commercial strategies, or governments to inform policies. Other instigators of requests are much smaller entities, like a school trying to understand how best to involve parents in their child's education, or individuals such as students collecting evidence for a thesis. New technologies also continue to increase the ways – and immediacy – of delivering a survey request, eg popping up during everyday activities like viewing a website.

Asking questions may be the only way of getting the information that is needed – because it is not available via any other source – or it may be the most feasible way in terms of cost and time. But the information gathered is only as good as the questions that are asked. The question writer faces a wide range of challenges that can undermine the value of the questionnaire. At an overall level, decisions need to be made about what question topics to include and exclude – with pressure to keep the interview as short as possible to encourage participation and hold attention. They need to decide in what order to ask the questions and for each individual question they will need to choose an appropriate question type, select wording, add instructions and consider the visual layout. The decisions they make at every point will have an impact on the answers given.

Many other aspects of survey design have an impact on information quality and usefulness, for example, the sampling approach and the robustness of the analysis. Steps to improve these elements (eg increasing sample size) often have a substantial impact on costs. Better questionnaire writing is a low-cost or no-cost improvement that has major rewards in delivering more accurate answers.

The purpose of this book is to provide some general rules and principles that can be applied to writing any type of questionnaire. The book is written principally with students and practitioners of market research in mind, but it should also be of use to social researchers, political opinion pollsters and anyone else who needs to write a questionnaire.

What is a questionnaire?

A questionnaire collects information through a structured interview in which each respondent is presented with a series of questions according to a prepared and fixed interviewing schedule. Thus, this book will not apply to qualitative research interviews. Although qualitative interviews involve a topic guide, the interview schedule, although prepared, is not fixed. It will, however, apply to the recruitment interview, usually used in qualitative research to identify eligible subjects to participate in later depth interviews or focus groups.

In market research the term ‘questionnaire’ is used to refer both to those for self-completion by survey participants and also to survey instruments administered by an interviewer – either face-to-face or by telephone. In other disciplines a questionnaire involving an interviewer is often referred to as an ‘interview schedule’, with the term ‘questionnaire’ reserved for self-completion. Throughout this book the market research common usage of questionnaire encompassing both self-completion and interviewer-administered surveys is used.

The term ‘semi-structured interview’ will be avoided as it can mean different things to different people. For some it implies a questionnaire consisting almost entirely of open, verbatim questions with probing instructions. This provides a framework for a degree of consistency between interviews conducted by different interviewers, while providing them with scope for greater exploration than is normally possible. For other people the term simply means a questionnaire that contains open verbatim and closed questions.

When the first edition of this book was written, face-to-face interviewing was still probably the most common form of data collection in commercial and social research. In the intervening years there have been massive changes, with face-to-face interviewing now unusual for most commercial research surveys, and increasingly so in social research wherever a credible online alternative is available. This edition recognizes the primacy of online research in discussion of techniques, but still acknowledges the importance of face-to-face and telephone data collection. Each of these modes has its own opportunities and problems, but the general principles of questionnaire construction and writing apply to all of them.