

## Creating Effective Survey Questions for Marketing Research

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper aimed to develop a model for creating effective survey questions for a marketing research. After a comprehensive review of literature in the areas of construction of the questionnaire, 12 guiding principles were derived to create effective survey questions. These principles are keep simple and clear language; prefer shorter questions; avoid leading questions; say 'No' to negatively worded questions; never ask double negative question; one question one idea; avoid value-loaded questions; ask specific questions; never ask hypothetical questions; ask respondent's ability centred questions; take care of sensitive questions and follow appropriate question order. These guiding principles are very usefull for researchers who are interested in developing an effective survey questionnaire for their research work.*

**Keywords:** Leading question, Hypothetical question, Sensitive question, Double barreled question and Negatively worded question.

### INTRODUCTION:

The most important part of a questionnaire is the question item. The most clear and understandable the question item; the better the results (Covert, 1984). Poorly framed question item produces meaningless responses. Writing questionnaire items are more of an art than a science (Neuman, 1997). It takes skill, practice, patience, and creativity. Neuman (1997) suggests two main principles for developing questions: "avoid confusion and keep the respondent's perspective in mind". After reviewing the literature on guidelines for questionnaire construction (Babbie, 1990, 2001; Biner, 1993; Brace, 2004; Dixon, 1990; Kent, 1993; Moran, 1990; Neuman, 1997; Newby, 1992; Oppenheim, 1992; Pershing, 1996; Peterson, 2000; Rea and Parker, 1992; Richardson, 1994; Smith, 1990; Thomas, 2004; Weisberg, Krosnik, and Bowen, 1996), ten general principles of question items writing were found that need to be used to avoid common errors in constructing question items. These general principles are very important to creating effective questions for survey research.

#### **Keep Simple and Clear Language:**

A simple and clear language question produces more response rate in a survey. Professional terms, technical terms and abbreviation may have different meanings to different background respondents ((Edwards, Thomas, Rosenfeld, and Booth-Kewley, 1997). Technical terms and abbreviations can be used if survey is targeted at specialized strata of respondents like doctors, managers and lawyers. Grammar is also an important element of question language. The question in active form receives more responses in comparison to passive form; nouns should be repeated instead of using pronouns. Many authors (Dillman, 2000; Dornyei, 2003) suggested in their studies to keep the grammatical complexities to a minimum. The use of appropriate emphasis tools such as boldfaced, italicized, capitalized, or underlined words or phrases within the context of a question can serve as a constructive way to clarify a potential confusion within the questionnaire (Rea and Parker, 1992).

#### **Prefer Shorter Questions:**

Number of words in a question is called the question length. Twenty five words or less are suggested for a

survey question (Payne,1951).A short question avoids the ambiguity, confusion, and vagueness (Neuman,1997) in the mind of a respondent.A respondent feels difficulty in answering a lengthy questions in comparison of short questions.A shorter question produces higher response rate (Pershing,1996), therefore Hobbrook (2006) suggested to keep questions as short as possible (Fink,2003) in order to increase respondents' comprehension.Brislin (1986) suggested a maximum of sixteen words while Oppenheim (1992) recommended twenty words per sentence whereby question have more than one sentence.

### **Avoid Leading Questions:**

A leading question is a question that leads to a respondent to answer in a specific way. In this type of question a researcher expects or desires a specific answer from the respondent. Examples of leading questions have some additional information that may influence the decision of a respondent. For instance, many people feedback that product X is of poor quality. Would you like to purchase product X or product Y? In this leading question researcher is expecting the answer product Y and information about product X may influence the decision of respondent. A study by Hong and Howard (2002) suggests that people with "emotional-based" copying were more likely to be influenced by a leading question. Fischer and Lewis (1983) find in their survey research that leading questions can influence the answer of respondents to another question on a survey. Leading questions influence the findings of surveys, decreases their reliability and usability because the findings do not reflect reality. Leading questions affect different people in different ways. Therefore, it is important to avoid the leading questions in a marketing survey.

### **Say 'No' to Negatively Worded Questions:**

A question with no or not is called negatively worded question.Should Indian government not raise service tax? This is an example of negatively worded question.The study of O'Muircheartaigh (2000) confirmed the undesirability of negatively worded questions as their analysis showed these to be less reliable than positively worded questions.A negatively worded question confuses the respondents and lead to inaccurate responses.The general advice is against the inclusion of negatively worded questions (Foddy,1993) as they takes longer time to process (Weems,2002) and have greater chance of mistakes by respondent (Dudycha & Carpenter, 1973).The word ' no or not' is used together with other words have negative meaning (Foddy ,1993).Such questions should be avoided.

### **Never Ask Double Negative Question:**

A double negative question is a question that uses of two negatives in question. Who do not agree that mobile should not be allowed on the campus? This is an example of double negative question. Double negatives in ordinary language are grammatically incorrect and confusing (Neuman, 1997). A double negative question always creates the problem of understanding in the mind of respondents.Such a question increases the non-response rate due to poor understanding of the question in the mind of respondent.Nonresponse and misunderstanding both together contribute to one type of survey error known as measurement error.Therefore double negative questions should be avoided (Bowling , 1997) in surveys.

### **One Question One Idea:**

A question in itself contains two questions is called "double barreled" question. Brislin (1986) describes as two verbs in a question, Babbie (2001) describes as two questions into one and Brace (2004) describes as two concepts in a question. Are you satisfied with your computer and printer? This is a double barreled question because it asks two separate questions at the same time. In this double barreled question, how a respondent can answer if he is satisfied with the computer, but not with the printer or vice versa. It is always advisable to separate double-barreled question into separate questions: (1) are you satisfied with your computer and (2) are you satisfied with your printer .Therefore, each question should be related to only one idea.

### **Avoid Value-Loaded Questions:**

Bias is a characteristic of a question that encourages respondent to give a false answer. Respondent might do this because he do not want to look 'bad' in front of the researcher. For instance, what is your salary? Response to this type of questions may force subjects to give false answers. So a researcher needs to be careful about how he has to obtain this type of information. The way in which questions are worded, or the inclusion of certain terms, may encourage some respondents more than others. Such questions are called "biased or loaded" and should be avoided in question development (Babbie, 2001).

### **Ask Specific Questions:**

A general question does not convey clear message to respondents. If a researcher asks the question, what is your income? This general question may be interpreted differently (whether monthly income or annual income) by different respondents. Questions with specific and concrete wording are more appropriate to communicate the same meaning to all respondents. The more general the question, the wider will be the range of interpretations (Converse and Presser, 1986). Instead of this, research should ask, what is your monthly income? Or what is your annual income? Breaking down more complex questions into simpler ones (Jobe & Mingay, 1989) and use specific rather general questions (White, 2005) due to their accuracy and objective nature of interpretation. Avoid words that indicate vagueness, such as 'probably', 'may be' or 'perhaps' (Dillmann, 2000).

### **Never Ask Hypothetical Questions:**

A question based on assumptions instead of facts is called hypothetical question. It is used to predict the behavior of a respondent. If you won a ten crore of lottery, how will you spend it? This is an example of hypothetical question. When such questions are asked, the respondent tries to give imaginary answers because he never experienced about it. Answers to a hypothetical circumstance are not very reliable, but being explicit will reduce respondents' frustration (Kent, 1993). Therefore, imaginary answers can not be analysed for making scientific inferences. A researcher should avoid to ask the hypothetical question because these questions produce invalid data for the study.

### **Ask Respondent's Ability Centered Questions:**

A question should be framed keeping in mind the ability of the respondents otherwise our survey will be useless. A researcher should not ask the general manager of a company about day to day working of the company because he may not have knowledge about that. In making questions, a researcher should continually ask himself whether the respondents are able to provide useful information (Babbie, 2001). Asking such questions makes respondent frustrated and researcher gets poor quality of responses. Asking the respondents to recall past details, answer specific factual information, and make choices about something they know little or nothing about may result in an answer, but one that is meaningless (Neuman, 1997).

### **Take Care of Sensitive Questions:**

Survey questions about sexual behaviours, income, drug uses and affairs are considered as sensitive questions. A sensitive question produces a comparatively lower response rate as compared to questions on other subjects. Asking sensitive questions on questionnaires has always been a difficult issue (Edwards, Thomas, Rosenfeld, and Booth-Kewley, 1997). People tend to under report unhealthy life style practices and over report healthy ones (Brace, 2004) because of social prestige. Foddy (1993) states fear of being identified or revealing details about the private facts that are considered embarrassing are responsible for the non-response of the respondent. In order to reduce respondents' hesitation, Brace (2004) suggests indirect questioning such as 'what do you believe other people think about....?' In this situation it is assumed that respondent will more easily accept the views that he will not share with the larger society without projecting others. Therefore, a special take care should be given to sensitive questions.

### **Follow Appropriate Question Order:**

Question order refers to the sequencing of questions in a survey questionnaire. Each question should follow comfortably from the previous question. Transitions between questions should be smooth. When a question jumps from one unrelated topic to another it produces low response rates. Various authors suggested that the order of the question can affect the way of responding by the people. General questions must be presented before specific ones to avoid response contamination. It is found in various studies when specific questions were asked before general questions, the respondents' shows greater interest for the general questions. Question order effects arise when answering behaviour changes depending on the position of a question during the interview (Baker 2003).

### **CONCLUSION:**

A questionnaire is only as good as the questions it contains. This paper discussed a model of 12 guiding principles for creating effective survey questions for marketing research. Creating effective survey questions involve a concerted effort, a certain amount of time, and careful attention. When the principles of survey question writing presented in this paper are followed, the questionnaire becomes a powerful tool for survey

research. The paper is very useful for researchers who are interested in developing a survey questionnaire for their research work.

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