Asking Questions

On the surface, it seems a fairly simple task to write up a set of questions to collect information, but there are many pitfalls to be avoided if you want to develop a good survey questionnaire.

The key to developing a good survey questionnaire is to keep it short while also ensuring that you capture all of the information that you need. This is not an easy task. Before you even begin to come up with questions for your survey questionnaire you should make sure you are clear on the goal of your survey. Once you know what you are looking for, you can begin to structure the questions that will help you capture the information. Any questions that are not providing necessary information should be removed.

Types of Questions:
There are two different types of questions that can be used to collect information.

1. **Open questions** – where the respondent formulates their own answers.
   These types of questions can be useful for finding out an individual's reasons for making a particular choice or as a way of coming up with new ideas.

   A common mistake made by people who are not used to writing questionnaires however is to include too many open questions. This can:-
   o make a questionnaire take a lot longer to complete as people have to think up their own answers
   o lead to a lower response
   o make analysing and coding the responses difficult, particularly with a large number of responses.

   If you find that you need to ask a large number of open questions maybe a questionnaire is not the best method to use.

2. **Closed questions** - which give the respondent a number of alternative answers to choose from, known as 'fixed response' questions. A lot of surveys are based around a series of fixed response questions as they are usually:-
   o quicker to answer
   o easier to code and analyse.

   A lot of thought needs to be put into developing good closed questions as the list of alternative responses should be cover all options so that everyone can find a suitable answer. This is sometimes done by using an 'other (please specify)' category to allow for unexpected answers. Some people also include a 'don't know' option but this can encourage people to take the easy way out and lead to a lower response rate for that question.

Different types of Closed Questions

Multiple choice questions

When writing the selection of responses for a closed question, you should make certain that the list covers *all possible alternatives* that the respondent might select AND that *each of the answers is unique* (i.e. they do not overlap).

> For Example - How many hours a day do you spend watching television?
>
> ( ) 0 to 1 hour   ( ) 2 to 3 hours   ( ) 4 to 5 hours   ( ) more than 5 hours

Rating scales

Another way to ask a question is to provide people with a statement, and then ask them to indicate how strongly they agree or disagree (or how important it is to them).

> **For example:** We live in a fair society
>
> Strongly agree   not sure   strongly disagree

Similarly you could use adjectives to represent two extremes and asking respondents to circle the number that they feel is most appropriate.

> **For example:** Would you describe your best friend as?
>
> | | | |
> |---|---|---|
> | Generous | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Not at all generous |
> | Confident | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Not confident |
> | Happy | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 | Unhappy |

Checklists

Here you give a list of items and respondents are asked to circle which are relevant to them.

> **For example:** What new activities would you like to see at the Community Centre?
> (Circle all that apply)
>
> | | | | | |
> |---|---|---|---|---|
> | Karate | Cooking Class | Bingo | Playgroup | Youth club |
> | Tea Dances | Art classes | Homework help | Lunch Club | Band practices |

Ranked Formats

Here respondents are asked to rank the importance of items from a given list.

> **For example:** people are given a list of 10 qualities (e.g. good health, friends, money etc) and they are asked to rank them in order of how important they are for a 'good quality of life' by placing a 1 next to the most important, 2 next to the second most important, and so on down to 10 being the least important.

However, often long lists are too exhausting to rank and can produce meaningless results so it can be more useful to ask people to rank their top three.

Attitude Choice questions

Instead of asking people to agree or disagree with a statement such as 'The government should provide financial grants to help students whose parents have a low income attend college or university' the question could be broken down into different parts.

> **For example:** 'Some people think the government should provide financial grants to help students whose parents have a low income attend college or university. Others think the government should provide grants that should be paid back while others believe that there should be no government assistance at all.
>
> Which option do you favour?
>
> ( )   Government gives grants   ( ) No government assistance
>
> ( )   Government makes loans   ( ) Cannot choose

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