

## Questionnaires

*Survey: "A system for collecting information which describes, compares, or explains knowledge, attitudes, and behavior. Surveys involve setting objectives for collecting information, designing research, preparing a reliable and valid data collection instrument, administering and scoring the instrument, analyzing data, and reporting the results. The questions in survey instruments are typically arranged into mailed, taped, or self administered questionnaires."*

Questionnaires should address the following:

- **Sample your audience:** When undertaking any survey, it is essential that you obtain data from people that are as representative as possible of the group that you are studying (even with the perfect questionnaire, your survey data will only be regarded as useful if it is considered that your respondents are typical of the population as a whole).
- **Use rough drafts:** In order to produce a good questionnaire, like with any project, you should prepare a couple of sample drafts that are to be finally polished into the questionnaire you will use. The drafts are tested with sample audiences (focus groups), in order to see if you're getting the answers you need. Use at least 10 similar participants to those who will be surveyed in the main study. In a pilot test, the ease at which respondents complete the questionnaire, their level of understanding of the questions, and the appropriateness and adequacy of the background information should be observed (are the questions easy to understand? do respondents know how to indicate responses? is privacy respected and protected?). Also, the rough drafts can be reviewed by professionals for grammar, formatting, content, etc.
- **Nothing is perfect:** a researcher can rarely design a questionnaire that will be completely applicable to all respondents. It is also unlikely that a questionnaire study will be completed without the researcher asking the question 'why didn't I ask about that?'
- **Delivery:** A questionnaire does not have to be printed and handed out; it can be e-mailed. However, e-mail should not be used if it is important for the researcher to observe the respondent (to observe how easily he/she completes the survey, or to make sure he/she does not receive any help in filling out the form), or to influence him/her somehow (will your presence make it easier for him/her to fill out the survey?; the strength of the relationship between surveyor and respondents). Apart from this, in general, there are reasons why it is better to present a survey in digital (as opposed to paper) format (to be filed on-screen): Respondents can use the keyboard and mouse instead of having to write in longhand (they are more likely to answer detailed/ open-ended questions), and they tend to view electronic surveys as more important, more interesting, more enjoyable, and more relaxing than paper based surveys. Digital input also makes it easier to transfer results to database (with fewer errors as well).
- **Not too long:** Ask only those questions that are absolutely necessary. If the questionnaire is too long, people will be reluctant to answer it.
- **Well written:** Use courteous and clear/concise/direct language. Avoid questions that may seem like prying. Avoid jargon, technical terms and abbreviations. Avoid leading questions (questions that suggest a certain answer), complex questions, and negative questions. Ask simple questions, each about a single point (relevant and necessary): When deciding what questions to ask, you should be constantly asking, "How will I use this information?" Decide whether you will get the most useful response by using multiple choice questions or open questions. Tick-box responses are quicker to answer and easier to process. Consider the order in which you place questions. Make sure they follow a logical sequence, as this will affect how they are answered. Use filter questions wherever possible (e.g. "If no, go to question..."; this will save the respondent's time). In scaled or multiple-choice answers, make sure that your response categories cover the full range of possibilities (always provide a catch-all option such as "other (please state)", "not applicable" or "don't know").
- **Instructions:** Every questionnaire, whether self-administered or administered

by interview, should contain clear instructions on how it is to be filled out.

- **Analysis/ Conclusions:** At the end of a questionnaire, decide how you are going to process and record the responses. Keep a record of the number of questionnaires administered or sent out, and the number of responses received. If the survey population is made up of groups with distinct characteristics (e.g. urban/rural, different ages or ethnicities) you may want to know the response rate from each group. Be sure to explain the questionnaire process and results thoroughly in your research paper. The importance of questionnaire design is frequently ignored in published research literature. Published results often fail to reproduce the exact wording of key questions used to define exposures or outcomes, nor do they always provide adequate information on how the data collection instruments were developed, or if procedures such as pre-testing, validity checks, or pilot studies were used to ensure accuracy.

### **Recommended readings:**

Lazarsfeld, P.F. (1935), "The art of asking why." (Library Issue Desk)

Martilla, J.A. & James, J.C. (1977), "Importance-Performance analysis", *Journal of Marketing*, 41, January.

Oppenheim, A.N. (1992), *Questionnaire Design and Attitude Measurement*, London, Pinter.