



Questionnaire Length

How Many Survey Questions Can We Ask?

One of the easiest inquiries to anticipate from a group that is beginning the process of conceptualizing a survey research project is, "How many questions can we ask"? Typically, this question is promptly followed by a comment from someone else along the lines of, "We need to keep the questionnaire short so people will answer it." In today's culture of so many competing interests and seemingly little time to accomplish all we want (or need) to do, the concern about asking too many questions is reasonable.

But, how much concern is justified? Sparse research has been conducted on the topic and generalizations about the appropriate length of a questionnaire are hard to make. What is too long for one person is the perfect length for another. An extensive question set about healthy lifestyle choices administered to a population of physically active baby-boomers will be better received than a short list of questions about increased postal rates. Unfortunately, there is no guidebook that decrees 40 questions as the optimum survey length but ask 41 questions and do so at your own peril.

The concern about questionnaire length is really a concern about response rates. Logic suggests that asking more questions leads to a higher incidence of respondents failing to stay with the survey until the end. However, most of the challenge comes, not in getting respondents to finish the survey once they have started, but in having them agree to take the survey in the first place. The decision to be a survey participant hinges predominantly on issues like the rationale for the study, its relevancy to potential respondents, its visual appeal, and the altruistic benefits of taking part. The number of questions included on the form is found further down the list.

The public, perhaps surprisingly, tolerates long questionnaires much better than it is often given credit for. Think about it for a moment - we are a society that generally likes to express our opinions to others. Most people relish the notion that someone actually wants to know what they think. The reality is that frequently in the rush to reduce our questionnaires down to postcard size, we are missing out on some really good information that people are willing to give if only we will ask them.

The implication here is not that the number of questions one can ask in a survey is boundless. There are limits to the patience of study respondents. Developing survey questions ultimately becomes a balancing act between asking all questions that need to be asked while not placing heavy demands on the survey subjects. Yet, telephone surveys lasting 15 to 20 minutes, face-to-face interviews of more than a half hour and paper questionnaires of two to four pages in length are common - with few, if any, ill effects according to response rate data.

Techniques are routinely used to give the perception of a shorter questionnaire. Question clustering, page layout choices, and verbal cues are examples of three of the most common. The data collection method also impacts the perceived length of a survey. The way we interpret and understand communication is affected by how we see and hear words, so the length of a questionnaire may appear longer (or shorter) using one data collection mode over another.

The process of conceptualizing, planning and administering a survey requires a commitment of time and other resources. Too much goes into the endeavor to accept less than what the stated objectives of the project require. We should respect a respondent's time while striving to achieve all the goals that initially prompted the survey to be conducted.

What it all eventually comes down to is putting oneself in the place of the survey respondent. Is the survey topic relevant? Does the questionnaire look appealing and inviting? Is the benefit of providing input worth the investment of time? If potential respondents can answer affirmatively, then the number of questions asked matters far less. Most of us would much prefer a long, interesting questionnaire over one that is short but irrelevant.

Survey Tip

Often, questionnaires are developed by a group or committee that has been designated as the "survey team." Varying points of view and experiences can lead to a wide assortment and long list of potential questions. As the time approaches to finalize the questions that will be used in the survey instrument, decisions must be made regarding those to keep and the ones to omit.

A fairly simple and straightforward way to narrow the list is to designate each question as either "need to know" or "nice to know." Those that fall into the former category remain as viable survey questions, while questions from the latter group are left for another time.

Did you know...

With the continuing rise in oil prices, American consumers are rapidly accepting flex-fuel vehicles powered by ethanol as an attractive alternative choice. In a January 7-9 survey among 2,057 vehicle owners, 90% said they would prefer a flex-fuel vehicle (one that runs on both bio- and fossil-fuels) over a strictly gasoline or diesel version.

Eighty-seven percent of vehicle owners surveyed said they would feel much or somewhat better about any manufacturer that offered flex-fuel vehicles as well as those that supported an ethanol delivery infrastructure.

Ethanol is typically produced from renewable, domestically raised grain. It is priced about the same or lower than gasoline and offers reductions in tailpipe particulate and toxic emissions. Consumers perceive a renewable resource (42%), clean fuel (24%) and an American-produced product (19%) as the most important benefits of ethanol powered vehicles.

Source: Phoenix Automotive

Comments, suggestions and questions related to survey research should be directed to Doug Cox - NCDOT Market Research Manager at (919)733-2083.