



A Question of Validity

Do the Questions Measure What We Think They Measure?

We have all seen those pictures that play tricks on the eyes, such as the one that appears to be an elderly woman at first glance, but when viewed again has mysteriously become a flower vase. If you look carefully at the questions contained in many surveys you will see something strikingly similar - questions that have one meaning the first time read but can be interpreted to mean something else when read again.

One of the common pitfalls of surveys is the lack of time and effort spent developing good questions. Often, too little attention is given to ensuring that the questions are sound and that all survey respondents will take them to mean the same. This raises the concern of question validity. In other words, are we measuring what we think we are measuring?

Not too long ago my sister e-mailed me a list of headlines that purportedly had appeared in various newspapers. The list is one that has floated around on the Internet and through e-mails, so authenticating its origin and accuracy is difficult. Still, it serves as an amusing illustration of how a collection of words can be interpreted differently by each of us.

Girl Turns in Parents for Marijuana and Cocaine
Toronto Law to Protect Squirrels Hit by Mayor
Iraqi Head Wants Arms
Safety Expert Says School Bus Children Should be Belted
British Left Waffles on Falklands
Farmer Bill Dies in House
Siamese Twins Join Parents at Home
Include Your Children When Baking Cookies
Police Begin Campaign to Run Down Jay Walkers
Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case
Panda Mating Fails; Veterinarian Takes Over
Eye Drops Off Shelf
President Wins on Budget But More Lies Ahead
Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
Miners Refuse to Work After Death
Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant
Two Sisters Found After 18 Years in Checkout Line
Red Tape Holds Up New Bridges
New Study of Obesity Looks for Larger Test Group
Kids Make Nutritious Snacks
Chef Throws His Heart into Helping Feed the Needy
Local High School Dropouts Cut in Half
Hospitals Are Sued by 7 Foot Doctors

These newspaper headlines show how easy it can be for a passage to have more than one meaning, and for it to be interpreted differently by each reader. Developing valid survey questions should always result in every respondent being exposed to the same question experience. If this is properly done, any variability in the answers can be correctly attributed to differences between respondents and not differences in the process that produced the answers.

Regardless of whether we are talking about newspaper headlines or survey questions, conveying information accurately requires careful attention to the use and placement of words. The challenge in developing a questionnaire is to do so in such a way that each question means the same to all people. That can be a very tall order!

Survey Tip

To better ensure that all respondents understand the questions being asked and that they interpret them in the same way, use wording that is simple and direct. One method frequently used is referred to as Fleischman's Fog Index. This is a wording index that keeps all questions at a seventh grade reading level.

For example, use *main* rather than *principal*, *clear* instead of *intelligible*, and *part* rather than *proportion*.

The goal is to see that every survey respondent, regardless of his or her background, comprehends all survey questions in precisely the same manner.

Did you know...

As children prepare to return to school this fall, parents have reported their spending plans in a recent nationwide online survey. According to The NPD Group, 34% of parents surveyed will spend more this year on each school-age child for back-to-school than in years past. Forty-three percent will spend about the same as in previous years, while 21% say they will spend less this year.

School supplies, such as notebooks, bookbags, paper, and pencils, top the list of planned purchases (79%). Clothing (71%) and footwear (60%) will also be high on parents' lists of planned purchases. Electronics, including computers, printers, cell phones, MP3 players, and DVD players and recorders, show the most growth from previous years as 36% of parents say they plan to make these types of purchases for their children.

Overall, close to one-half of the respondents (47%) expect to spend less than \$250 per child, while 28% will spend \$251 to \$500 and 7% anticipate spending more than \$1,000 per child.

Source: The NPD Group

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