

## Assessing Survey Quality

Many factors contribute to a survey's quality. Included here are six questions to ask to help determine how sound a survey really is.

**T**he number of surveys being conducted today has sharply expanded when compared to the number from just a decade or two ago. Beyond the more seasoned uses of survey research carried out by groups such as the Census Bureau, professional research firms and university researchers, active participants in the collection of survey data now include the news media, organizations of various stripes and Internet users.

In light of all the research that is currently being generated, many surveys simply fall short of being quality projects. Good surveys follow scientifically prescribed methods in the manner in which their data are collected. Others, unfortunately, do not. This article is intended to help assess the quality of a survey by proposing six questions to ask of every survey research project.

### How many people were surveyed?

Generally, more people taking part in a survey translates into better survey data. One of the key issues relating to survey quality is the amount of sampling error. The most direct way to reduce sampling error is to include more people in the study. Of course, many other factors influence survey quality, but noting a minimum of several hundred respondents is the place to start when judging a survey's legitimacy.

### How were the people chosen?

Quality surveys select the people who will be asked to take part through a random process of probability sampling. This means that among the individuals eligible to be a survey respondent due to possessing certain characteristics of interest, their selection is carried out such that each person has a known and equal chance of being chosen. Surveys of lesser quality will select their respondents through non-random methods, including a self-selection process.

### How many people were nonrespondents?

A consistent truism of surveys is that respondents differ from nonrespondents. If the difference between the two groups is related to key measures of interest, such as the number of meals cooked at home in a

typical week, the inability to reach people at home will compromise data quality the lower the rate of response. Lower response rates do not always mean poor data. Still, surveys with response rates below 75% or so should be cautiously considered.

### How was the data collected?

Most surveys collect data through in-person and telephone interviews, over the Internet or by respondents completing a paper questionnaire. Certain data collection methods are better suited for particular types of surveys. For instance, complex survey topics tend to favor interviews, while surveys that require respondents to gather information prior to answering questions suggest a paper form. In addition, with the explosive growth of the Internet, it is important to note how web surveys are used, particularly among the general public where computer and Internet access remains less than universal.

### How are questions worded?

Most of us can apply a "sensitivity meter" to survey questions to judge their balance. A quick check includes whether a question is loaded or leaning, whether it seeks an opinion on more than one topic, whether it asks for sensitive information that can cause respondents to skip or falsely answer, and do the response alternatives include all sides.

### What is the question order?

The order in which questions are presented can lead to what is referred to as *order effects*. Suppose a survey question attempts to measure how citizens rate overall highway conditions. To be sure, the findings will vary depending on whether this question precedes or follows one concerning potholes in the pavement. The same "sensitivity meter" used to judge wording must also be engaged when considering how questions are ordered.

With so many surveys being conducted by individuals and organizations of varying survey research skill levels, it is important to separate the good studies from the bad. Asking these six questions will help to distinguish quality surveys from those that may not measure up.

## From the Field...

A summary of recent survey findings from across the country.



When dining out, baby-boomers are demanding more health-conscious meal selections. Seven in ten want more fiber, 60% want to consume less fat and cholesterol and 40% are trying to eat fewer fried foods.

Source: NPD Group



When asked whether U.S. individuals are ahead, behind or equal to people in other countries in terms of being "green," 43% of Americans say we are behind, 27% believe we are ahead and 22% think we are even.

Source: GfK Custom Research



Fifty-five percent of teens have online profiles such as MySpace. Most restrict access to their profile in some way, including 66% who say their profile is not visible to all Internet users - including parents.

Source: Pew Internet Project



Google accounts for 64% of all U.S. Internet searches, followed by Yahoo Search (22%), MSN Search (9%), and Ask.com (3%).

Source: Hitwise



One in ten shoppers leaving a store without making a purchase cited the wait to check out as a leading factor in their decision not to buy. Men are more likely than women to pass on a purchase due to check out time.

Source: M/A/R/C Research



More than one-third of American television viewers (35%) spends a sizable amount of their TV watching hours at locations other than their own home.

Source: Arbitron, Inc.