Behavioural Insights Guidance

Best practice survey design

Consider how you write your survey questions and how you present responses

The way survey questions and responses are presented affects people's choice of response. Behavioural insights recognises this, and provides concrete suggestions on how to correct for these biases to generate more accurate responses. .

- ✓ When seeking the real state of affairs, or actions, of the respondents, ask for revealed preferences (past behaviour) or collect data from third-party sources that have no vested interest in the outcome being measured, e.g. real electricity bills for energy usage data are preferable to self-reported behaviour.
- ✓ Include different questions about the same construct to check that responses are correlated, that variations in responses reflect individual differences in the construct rather than random measurement error, and to address the default effect (where respondents choose the pre-selected option) and primacy effect (where respondents are more likely to select options that appear near the beginning of a list).
- ✓ When exploring new responses to hypothetical situations, ask for stated preferences (preferences based on what people say they prefer), e.g. when introducing a new government service, a survey can be used to ask if people would actually use it.

Make it easy

Reduce the friction costs associated with completing a survey.

- ✓ Direct respondents straight to the form/survey (not to a landing webpage)
- ✓ Include short, simple and helpful instructions
- ✓ Use titles as instructions
- ✓ Use plain language when developing questions and responses
- ✓ Place instructions where relevant, e.g. a user activated help button "i" or "?" positioned next to the question the additional information relates to, which expands when clicked.

Make it logical

The way questions are ordered will also affect how people respond as they will seek to provide answers that are consistent with prior responses. Address question order bias by grouping related questions together.

- ✓ Group instructions logically
- ✓ Group related questions together and randomise the order of questions within this group
- ✓ Present general questions before more specific questions, or only write specific questions
- ✓ Use different and multiple questions about the same construct

✓ Pre-test the survey to get feedback on the order of questions.

Make it attractive

There are ways to improve the response rate to surveys and to improve the reliability of survey data.

✓ Personalising requests to complete the survey

✓ Offering incentives or rewards.

Make it anonymous

Where there is a high number of sensitive questions, or if the survey explores sensitive issues, make the survey anonymous to illicit more truthful responses.

✓ Use anonymous surveys or online surveys as opposed to face to face or on the phone

✓ Remind respondents that there are no right or wrong answers.

Consider how questions and options are framed

The way that questions are framed will influence the way we respond. Even where the monetary value is equal, respondents will react negatively to losses and prefer gains. For instance, people prefer “insurance premiums” over “sure losses” of the same amount and “rebates” over “deductibles”.[1]

✓ Include different questions about the same construct as respondent discrepancies are usually found by accident

✓ Further surveys may be needed to understand these differences and to identify the best way to measure the specific construct that researchers seek to understand

✓ Phrase some items in the negative to disrupt the flow of yea-saying.

Use layout and messaging to prevent errors

✓ Use immediate validation messages to warn users before errors are made

✓ Use physical constraints to prevent users entering incorrect data

✓ Use automatic formatting

✓ Use visual cues to visually indicate the length of input required

✓ Use helpful messaging and phrasing that doesn’t blame users or imply they have done something wrong.

[1] The classic risky choice problem is the well-known Asian disease. When presented with positive wording, most research participants prefer to save 200 people for sure over a gamble with a 1/3 probability of saving 600 and a 2/3 probability of saving no one. When presented with the equivalent negative wording, most prefer a gamble of 1/3 probability that nobody will die and a 2/3 probability that 600 will die over losing 400 for sure.

Things to avoid

Avoid using “Don’t know” in a Likert scale

- ✗ Unless the survey item comes directly from another empirically validated survey, separate “Don’t know” from the Likert scale so it is an alternative response, rather than the mid-point of the scale (‘neutral’ in the below example), e.g.

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Don’t know

Do not offer asymmetric responses

Asymmetry occurs where respondents have less extreme attitudes, particularly where available responses presume antonyms, e.g. “Not hot” is seen to be a less extreme response than “Cold”[2] or where similar questions may result in different responses e.g. ”inflation” may be perceived as more complex than “prices in general”.

- ✗ Ensure that scale items are symmetrical, ranging from very negative to very positive. Don’t include items that range from neutral to one-side of an extreme unless there is good reason.

Avoid making timeframes ambiguous

One respondent’s interpretation of “most of the time” may differ from another’s.

- ✗ Attach an objective scale to each possible response, e.g. daily, 2-3 times a week, once a week, etc.

[2] de Bruin, W.B., Baldassi, M., Figner, B., Fischhoff, B., Fleishman, L., Hardisty, D., Johnson, E., Keren, G., Konnikova, M., Levin, I. and Li, Y., 2011. Framing effects in surveys: How respondents make sense of the questions we ask. *V Perspectives on Framing, ured. Gideon Keren. Psychology Press,* accessed online: https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/5bb4/316006e63b9d7ae300cbfbc3d741c825eb1e.pdf