Good and Bad Survey Questions

Good survey questions can give you important insights about your need, but bad survey questions can confuse the respondent and, worse, send the project team in the wrong direction. Wording matters and can truly change the insights you get and, ultimately, the actions you take.

When people were asked whether they would "favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule," 68% said they favored military action while 25% said they opposed military action. However, when asked whether they would "favor or oppose taking military action in Iraq to end Saddam Hussein's rule even if it meant that U.S. forces might suffer thousands of casualties," responses were dramatically different; only 43% said they favored military action, while 48% said they opposed it.[1]

Below are some examples of "the good, the bad, and the ugly" for a variety of problematic survey question types.

The Leading Question

Leading questions use biased language that can influence your respondent. Biased language can be present in the question or in response options.

- Good: Rate your experience with our new product offering.
- Bad: Did you enjoy our amazing new product offering?
- Ugly: On a scale from great to amazing, how would you rate our new product offering?

Use questions that are clear and simple – and refrain from using adjectives like "amazing" that are highly subjective or you will surely lead your respondent.

The Assumptive Question

Assumptive questions assume something about respondents that may or may not be true. Like leading questions, they can influence the respondent, or turn them off entirely from the survey. Avoid making assumptions by initially asking "big picture" questions, which can then potentially be followed with more specific inquiries once you've learned about respondent preferences.

- Good: Do you ever drink hard liquor?
- Bad: Which hard liquor drinks do you prefer?
- Ugly: When you drink scotch, do you like it on the rocks?

The Confusing Question

If you're not careful, you may create questions that are confusing to respondents. Confusion can results from poorly worded or formatted questions and/or responses, or when the wrong type of question is used for what you're trying to achieve.

- Good: On a scale from poor to excellent, please rate the effectiveness of your service experience.
- Bad: Was your service experience not helpful or helpful?
- Ugly: Was your service experience not unhelpful, or was it helpful?

Using negatives can be confusing, and double negatives should be avoided at all costs! Try to use clear, concise statements and questions, and test them on a subset of your target audience before publishing your survey to the entire group to be sure they're appropriately understood.

The Double-Barreled Question

Double-barreled questions squeeze too much into a sginle question, and make it difficult for the respondent to answer accurately. Double-barreled questions ask respondents to rate/rank two or more things in one question, or combine two different ideas into one question but only allow respondents to provide a single answer.

- Good: True or false: The onboarding experience easy to understand.
- Ugly: True or false: The onboarding experience was easy to understand and very comprehensive.

Make sure your questions result in one answer to one single idea.

The Ambiguous Question

Ambiguous questions are hard for the respondent to understand and leave room for interpretation. They are often too broad, causing the respondent to guess or to default to whatever makes the most sense to them personally. Ambiguous questions usually lead to ambiguous answers, which don't help you understand your area of interest any better.

- Good: On a scale from poor to excellent, please rate the following: The taste of the ice cream; the texture of the ice cream; the flavor of the ice cream; the color of the ice cream.
- Bad: Did you enjoy the ice cream?

Instead of a general yes/no question, get more specific so you can garner more actionable responses. Yes/no questions should only be used when there really are only two responses to the question. When time and space allow, use open-ended questions to ask the "why" behind a response.

Notes

[1] "Questionnaire Design," Pew Research Center, https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/u-s-survey-research/questionnaire-design/ (January 25, 2021).