

Crafting Effective Survey Questions

School public relations professionals, board members, and administrators know how important it is to gauge the opinions of their stakeholders before making decisions. Conducting surveys is an effective method of gathering input from the community, but common mistakes in planning and execution can skew the results of your survey.

After deciding on the objective of the survey and selecting your participant group, the next step is to craft the questions. Not only must you decide *what* questions to ask, but you also must be careful about *how* the questions are presented. The phrasing of a question can be the difference between useful responses and misleading results.

Creating quality questions is both an art and science that requires a host of considerations. Here are just a few basic guidelines to keep in mind when crafting your questions:

Keep Questions Short

Phrase your question in the most concise manner possible. Keeping your questions short and simple decreases the likelihood that your respondents will become impatient with long lines of text and abandon the survey.

Avoid Using Jargon

Your respondents shouldn't have to decode elements of your question. Assess your audience when designing the question to ensure that acronyms, abbreviations, slang, culture-specific words, and technical terms are those that your respondents will understand instantly.

Avoid Ambiguous Terms

Do you exercise a lot? What does *a lot* mean? Does *a lot* refer to the amount of time or the intensity of the exercise? The term *a lot* is relative. An hour per day may be *a lot* to the average person, but it's not *a lot* to an Ironman triathlete. Avoid ambiguous terms such as *often*, *usually*, and *normally* that are subject to interpretation by the respondent.

Avoid Double Negatives

Isn't it true that you don't like traffic jams? is a poorly worded question that is begging to be misread. Rewrite double negative questions to make them clearer: *Do you like traffic jams?*

Avoid Double-barreled Questions

Do you enjoy Starbucks' Pumpkin Latte and Pumpkin Bread? Answering this question is a dilemma to someone who enjoys the latte but dislikes the bread. The respondent is forced to respond to one or the other question when the respondent may have different responses for each. Separate the questions so that only one concept is addressed.

Avoid Biased and Leading Questions

Most people use Google as their primary search engine. Is Google the best search engine you've ever used? Respondents now assume that most people think Google's the best, an assumption that could alter their opinions, and thus their answers. Drop unnecessary information or emotionally-charged language that could influence the respondent.

Don't Use Your Survey for Propaganda

Your questions should be objective instruments of information gathering, not a vehicle by which to promote your own message. Resist the urge to use your questions to promote specific causes or policies. Not only will your audience detect your ulterior motive, but you might cross the line into illegal activity if you are using public dollars to conduct your survey.

Ask What You Mean to Ask

Make sure the phrasing of your question accurately reflects what you're trying to ask. For example, if you ask, *Do you think the brakes on Zoom cars are reliable?*, don't presume that a "no" answer indicates that the respondent never again will buy a Zoom. Avoid making assumptions. If you want to know whether the

respondents will purchase a Zoom in the future, ask the very obvious question: *Do you plan to buy a Zoom car in the future?*

Consider Both Closed and Open Questions

When writing survey questions, you can employ closed questions, open questions, or a combination of both.

Yes/No, True/False, multiple choice, or ranking items on a scale (e.g., the Likert scale) are types of closed questions. Closed questions make it easier for you to statistically analyze the results, as there are only a fixed number of possible responses from which the respondent can choose.

Open-ended questions allow the respondents more freedom in their answers. The disadvantage of using open-ended questions is that the answers don't fit neatly into statistical analysis. The advantage is that you likely will gain greater insight into respondents' opinions, perceptions, knowledge, and suggestions than if the respondents had been limited by a predefined set of answers.

Give Your Questions a Test Run

It's a good idea to test your survey questions on a focus group to get feedback on questions that may be unclear, be confusing, have an incomplete list of possible answers, or have other hidden problems.

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