

How to SCORE big with your online surveys: 5 Tips for maximizing the quality of your survey questions

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Smart marketers realize “it’s not what you know, it’s what you ask.” In an environment in which consumers are demanding more from brands, online surveys help keep you up-to-date on your customers’ needs and attitudes. Good surveys help implement marketing strategies that grow your bottom line. Poor surveys, on the other hand, mislead your marketing team. What steps can you take to ensure high quality surveys?

This paper focuses specifically on **question design**. Often considered an “art” by marketing researchers, good question design is essential to ensuring that your surveys yield quality information. So, what can you do to create quality survey questions?

Think **SCORE** – **S**imple, **C**lear, **O**ne Question, **R**elevance, and **E**liminate Bias

Simple

In order to get accurate information from your customers, they need to be able to understand the questions you are asking. Thus, survey questions should be simple and use a familiar tone. This is not the place to show off your fancy grammar or mastery of marketing terms. When survey takers do not understand the meaning of the question at hand, they may guess at the meaning, or worse yet, quit your survey out of frustration.

With this in mind, the best survey questions use the language of their respondents. If your customers are medical doctors, the survey language and terminology will vary from one designed for teenage music fans.

One strategy for keeping your survey question wording simple & natural is to pre-test questions with a non-marketer, preferably with an actual customer. Ask the tester to identify any words or language they do not regularly use.

Example: When you shop at shop.com, are you a high involvement shopper?

Better: Thinking about your last visit to shop.com, which of the following did you do, if any? (Respondent is provided list of high involvement activities.)

Clear

For respondents to accurately answer your survey questions, directions and response categories must be clear and precise. This means using words that have a single meaning known to all respondents.

Question Directions:

Question directions should state the exact information that is requested. For example, if the objective of your survey is to learn about the online shopping patterns of your customers, you will need to clearly identify the shopping behavior for which you are seeking information.

Example: Have you shopped online in the past year for any of the following products?

Problem: Online users will have different ideas about what constitutes shopping. For some, shopping means browsing; for others, it means making a purchase; and for others, both meanings represent shopping.

Solution: Think carefully about the type of information you wish to collect and use clear and precise question wording: Have you purchased any of the following products online in the past year?

Response Categories:

Experienced researchers know that one key to clear and precise survey questions is avoiding ambiguous response categories. Words such as “regularly,” “often,” “sometimes,” etc. mean different things to different people. If you’ve collected information based on these terms, you will not know what the data really mean.

Example: How often do you go online to check stock quotes?
Extremely often
Very often
Not too often
Never

Problem: First, the time frame is not specified which means that respondents will assume varying time frames. Second, the response wording is ambiguous.

Better: In the past week, how often did you go online to check stock quotes?
Everyday
Less than everyday, but at least 3 times
1 or 2 times
I did not check stock quotes online last week

A common mistake is to create survey response categories that overlap. Not only are such responses unclear, but they compromise data quality and underestimate key customer segments.

Example: Which of the following best describes your total household income before taxes in 2001?

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000-\$50,000
- \$50,000-\$75,000
- \$75,000-\$100,000
- \$100,000 or higher

Better:

- Less than \$25,000
- \$25,000-\$49,999
- \$50,000-\$74,999
- \$75,000-\$99,999
- \$100,000 or higher

One Question

Good surveys ask one question at a time. If a survey question asks about multiple issues at the same time, your respondent may agree with part of the question but not the other. In such cases, the answers cannot be accurately interpreted.

Example: How satisfied are you with the cost and convenience of your online subscription?

Better: 2 questions: How satisfied are you with the cost of your online subscription?
How satisfied are you with the convenience of your online subscription?

Relevance

Make sure that you ask survey participants only those questions they are qualified to answer and are relevant to them. Otherwise, respondents may guess at or make-up a response, and you run the risk of being misled. An easy solution is to include a “don’t know” response option. However, it is sometimes more precise to ask a qualifying question and limit further questioning to those who qualify.

Example: Using the following scale, please rate your satisfaction with the Customer Care team at oursite.com:

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied

Better: Using the following scale, please rate your satisfaction with the Customer Care team at oursite.com:

- Very satisfied
- Somewhat satisfied
- Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
- Somewhat dissatisfied
- Very dissatisfied
- Don't know

Better: Use qualifier: Have you communicated or interacted with the Customer Care team at oursite.com? If answer is “yes,” respondent receives satisfaction question.

Eliminate Bias

Question bias occurs when the wording of the question influences how the respondent answers. Examples include statements implying approval or disapproval or “loaded” questions that suggest answers.

Example: What did you dislike about the ad you just saw?

Problem: The respondent is not given a “way out” if she or he found nothing to dislike.

Better: Use a qualifying question first: Did you dislike anything about the ad you just saw?

Example: Is PhoneCo. your long distance carrier for your home phone service?

Problem: The use of a brand or company name in a question may cause the respondent to believe that the brand is the sponsor of the survey. Respondents tend to express positive feelings toward the survey sponsor, which can result in biased responses.

Better: Which of the following companies is your long distance carrier for your home phone service?

Wrap-up

Question wording is the critical link between your research needs and the information that will help meet those needs—the responses of your survey respondents. It is essential that you and your respondents assign the same meaning to the wording of your survey questions. To create high quality survey questions that will yield rich, actionable data, think SCORE!