

Notes on Latest Survey Research Techniques
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I. Web-based Survey Research and Internet's Impact on Society

- A. Who uses the internet? The trend is that online usage is increasing dramatically but the group online is not yet representative of the US population. They tend to be more affluent with more education than the US average. 43% of households have computers. For college education folks, 80% have computers. 60% of internet users go online everyday.
- B. Response rates to Web-based surveys? Significantly lower overall in all populations. Some groups prefer web surveys to other modes, but response rates can be less than half the rates received by other modes. Many experiments were presented at AAPOR with these same results. Populations which were used included students at universities.
- C. E-mail surveys are not preferred by anyone.
- D. For a discussion of the “digital divide” (Commerce Dept) see www.digitaldivide.gov

II. Questionnaire Design

- A. Likert scale items should have labels for each anchor rather than left alone as a number. Response rates are better if anchored with a label.
- B. Skip pattern experiments illustrate that more specific instructions lead to fewer skip errors. All that is needed is the instruction: “If no, go to question 10” rather than “go to question 10.” Skips should be avoided, but if necessary, try the “if no” version.
- C. Agreement scales should not be used. The basis of the agreement scale is a non-neutral base question which leads to positively biased results in split ballot experiments. In future, all questions should be worded as neutrally as possible to avoid positive bias. Example: The government does a good job in delivering social security benefits (agreement scale question with positive bias). Rewrite: Rate how well the government delivers social security benefits (neutral question).
- D. When a middle (neutral) alternative is offered, the proportion of satisfied customers and dissatisfied customers decrease to about the same extent.

- E. In visual presentation surveys (like self-administered), experiments show a tendency for the respondent to use a “primacy” effect (selecting the first category) in categorical (non-ordinal) variables. In oral presentation surveys (like telephone), experiments show a tendency for respondents to use a “recency” effect (selected the last category) in categorical variables. There is no known pattern with ordinal variables.
- F. Reduce the burden on the respondent by “priming” the R with knowledge questions prior to the “target” question. This also reduced response order effects.
- G. Name order effects (like on a voting ballot): experiments show that explicitly listing the party affiliation of the candidates and the amount of news media attention received by the candidates reduces name order effects.
- H. There is a common assumption that the attitudes people report are real and that people without attitudes will say “don’t know.” Experiments show that people will feel pressure to lodge an opinion if given no choices. Evidence shows that people use the Don’t know option for a myriad of reasons, but mostly NOT due to complete lack of information. Sometimes they offer DK instead of reporting minority opinions, or to avoid reporting opinions that might be unflattering to them. These people could offer meaningful responses if they were probed appropriately. A follow-up question after a DK response may further elicit a valid response. More DK responses are logged when questions are complex, when a dichotomous response is offered, when longer rating scales are offered, and there are more DKs later in a long questionnaire (due to fatigue). The best solution seems to be to omit DK “filters” (like, “Have you had the chance to think about this very much”) and responding “I’ll note that, but if you had to choose, would you say...” In other words, a probe after the DK option is offered.
- I. How to reduce the phenomenon of Social Desirability: (1) use anonymity (2) mode control (self-administered creates the least amount of this bias); (3) with especially embarrassing or personal questions, let R randomize the questions to answer; (4) less bias when R is of the same race as Interviewer.
- J. Advice on question order: (1) early questions should be easy, pleasant, and build rapport; (2) put open-ended questions early; (3) early on in survey should be questions on the survey topic; (4) group questions on the same topic together; (5) put sensitive questions toward the end.

III. Maximizing Response Rates to Mailed Surveys

- A. Recognize social exchange theory: that the actions of a respondent are motivated by the return these action are expected to bring; note rewards, cost, and trust; these evoke reciprocal obligation.
- B. To increase rewards: (1) show positive regard; (2) say thank you; (3) seek advice or consultation; (4) support group values; (5) give tangible rewards; (6) make the

- questionnaire interesting; (7) give social validation; (8) communicate scarcity of response opportunities.
- C. To reduce social costs: (1) avoid subordinating language; (2) avoid embarrassment; (3) avoid inconvenience; (4) make questionnaire short and easy; (5) minimize necessity to reveal personal information; (6) invoke authority for making request; (7) emphasize similarity to other requests.
 - D. To establish trust: (1) provide token of appreciation in advance; (2) sponsorship by legitimate authority; (3) give importance to response task; (4) invoke other exchange relationships
 - E. The conventional wisdom in today's competitive world is that a \$5.00 token of appreciation IN ADVANCE increases response rates dramatically, even for academic institutions.
 - F. Schedule of mailed contacts:

(1) prenotice	week one
(2) questionnaire	week two
(3) thank you	week three
(4) replacement	week five to six
(5) special contact	week eight to ten
 - G. Content and appearance changes with each contact; send all items first class. Special contact may be by federal express.
 - H. Personalization of mailing: Surveys of the general public need to be personalized, but special interest groups don't need to be personalized.

IV. Principles of Design of a Web Survey

- A. Introduce web questionnaire with a welcome screen that is motivational, emphasizes the ease of responding, and instructs respondents on the action needed for proceeding to the next page. Put company logo in bottom right hand corner.
- B. Provide a PIN or "access code" to limit people only in the sample
- C. Begin the questionnaire with a question that is likely to be interesting to most respondents, easy to answer, and fully visible on the first screen of the q-naire
- D. Present each question in a conventional format similar to that normally used on paper self-administered q-naires
- E. Restrain the use of color to maintain readability, navigational flow is unimpeded, and measurement properties of questions are maintained
- F. Avoid differences in the visual appearance of questions that may result from different screen configurations, operating systems, and tiling vs full screen displays
- G. Put specific instructions on how to take each necessary computer action for responding to the questionnaire placed where they need to be

- H. Use drop-down boxes sparingly and if used, identify each with a “click here” instruction
- I. Do not require respondents to provide an answer to each question before being allowed to answer any subsequent ones.
- J. Provide skip directions in a way that encourages marking of answers and being able to click to the next applicable question
- K. Construct web questionnaires so they scroll from question to question unless order effects are a major concern.
- L. Use a graphical symbol or words that convey a sense of where the respondent is in the completion process, but avoid ones that require significant increases in computer memory
- M. Exercise restraint in using problematic question structures (like open-ended questions, or check all that apply)

Citation for recent publication of interest to survey researchers:

Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, Don A. Dillman, John Wiley and Sons, 2000.