

Case article	The ideal questionnaire
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You talkin' at me? The ideal questionnaire.

At one of my recent talkshops (I much prefer this term to that of 'workshop' - see my Case Notes on the Recession) someone asked me to give them an example of the 'ideal questionnaire'. Good call! Because there are innumerable articles and books on how to write a questionnaire there is little point in my going down that road, but what did occur to me was that for many practitioners and commissioners of research the problem is not simply one of questionnaire design, rather it is one of questionnaire positioning. There is little point in developing the Rolls Royce of questionnaires if we then direct it down a blind alley.

Ideal for whom?

For any survey to be successful it must get absolutely right all four basic aspects of survey design; that is, it must define its universe realistically, it must draw and size its sample meaningfully, it must use the appropriate fieldwork method, and field the most effective questionnaire...yet it is the last aspect which constitutes the only interface between the surveyor and the respondent. If this interface is iffy, then the survey will fail no matter how sophisticated are its other design features.

But the problem is that there are three parties involved in assessing the merits of any questionnaire, and they tend to have quite separate agendas. There is

- the client, who wants only his or her issues addressed and doesn't want raised those things to which they cannot, or don't want to, respond. There is also, I think, a worryingly increasing trend for clients to be consulting, not on a particular problem, but with a particular solution in mind. This can make questionnaire design somewhat troublesome.
- the agency, who seek at all costs to produce an unbiased set of questions, to please the client, and to maximise response rate so as to show both an effective fieldwork programme and to produce the most robust set of data.
- the respondent, who looks for a set of questions which he or she can answer sensibly on a topic of some relevance and which allows all their own views on the subject to be recorded.....and achieves all this in, say, ten minutes.

The challenge is however, that while the client and agency can concoct a mutually acceptable set of questions, the respondent will react to a poor compromise by simply abandoning the interview, refusing to participate, or most worryingly of all, start to answer in a less than truthful or thoughtful manner. So for whom should the questionnaire be 'ideal'? Clearly, it is the respondent!if he or she doesn't take part, or perseveres in the wrong frame of mind, then the whole exercise is a waste of time.....simple to say, but not so simple to accommodate.

But it does help when the clients are made to appreciate that the questionnaire is part of their customer experience, and as such a 'bad' questionnaire will reflect badly on whatever branding and reputation they are fostering.

The 3-way engagement party: everyone's happy

In my experience there are three essential elements to producing the respondent's ideal questionnaire. And in keeping with my earlier Case Notes on Survey Fatigue and on Incentives they revolve around seeking meaningful engagement.

With the client: the **objective of the survey** must be stated in no more than two sentences and it must set out how the exercise can affect

the respondent; if it is unlikely to be seen as affecting respondents – directly or indirectly - then there is little likelihood of their taking part; if it takes half a page or five minutes to set out the survey's objectives, then the client and the agency don't really know what they are doing either. The secret here is to keep the survey objective strategic in nature, not tactical; it means setting out the problem, not the solution. It means introducing the survey as being about the local environment, not dog fouling; it's about all aspects of travelling on buses, not personal safety after dark; it's about 'community cohesion' – a term I hope will disappear under the budget-driven realism of the new administration – not the village hall. The wider is the remit of the introduction then the wider becomes the range of people who feel that participation is relevant and worthwhile.

With the agency: to be 'ideal' the questionnaire must be **directed at the right people**. It is vital that the questions sit well with the survey universe, or that the survey universe is defined to sit well with the questions. It doesn't matter which way round it is done but there must be a good fit. If not, there will be little engagement.

With the respondent: moving towards engagement has seen questionnaire presentation change from that of me, the interviewer, asking you the respondent, to become a more 'conversational' me talking with you. At its simplest, and most effective, it means **rephrasing questions to make them as respondent-focused as possible**. It's not about how well the council collects household rubbish, it's about how well the council collects your/my rubbish...this is something you know about for sure, and something you care about should it change for good or bad. It's not about how good the lecturers are, it's about how good I think my lecturers are. The focus on 'you' or 'my' rather than on the generality means that respondents feel quite capable and comfortable in answering; do I really know how well the Council performs across its area, and do I really know enough about lecturing performance across the institution to make a sound assessment? – probably not, but I can respond as far as my own experience is concerned.

This observation may seem quite trite, but look at any recent questionnaire and see if you can make it more 'me' based, more narrowly defined hence more personal. Look at any bank of agree-disagree statements and just see how many you can turn from wide generalities into focused specifics. I expect that most of you will see what I am getting at.

So, it's all about the preposition!

While it is true to say that the ideal questionnaire is, by definition, unattainable, this should not stop us trying to get there. To me, the way forward is to replace 'interrogation' in our satnav with 'conversation'. To interrogate is to ask (Latin – *inter roggare*); to converse is to take turn about or discuss (Latin – *con versare*). To interrogate is to **talk at** someone, to converse is **talk with** someone. Clearly, if engagement is the name of the game, then the latter is the preferred option.

Perhaps the best way to get a handle on what the ideal questionnaire might look like is to look at one, any example, then ask yourself –

- does it set out clearly and succinctly at the outset what the survey is about and why I should get involved? (In many cases interrogation studiously avoids setting out its main purpose.) So, does it set out **the topic of conversation**?
- does it allow me to put in my twopenceworth, probably by having open-enders at strategic points throughout the conversation? (rather than the token catch-all open-ender at the end of the interview.) So, does it offer me **the chance to converse**?

If it doesn't, then there is little opportunity for meaningful interaction, or engagement, or conversation, and the experience descends into interrogation. We end up with interviewers who might well have been in the mind of George Bernard Shaw when he noted of one lady that

"She has lost the art of conversation, but not, unfortunately, the power of speech".

So that's the real test: with which preposition do you feel you are talking, is it 'at' or 'with'?

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