

Case article The open-ender; an easy option or a missed opportunity?
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Sometimes when drafting a questionnaire you can find yourself being led up a blind alley (or indeed find you are leading the respondent), or it becomes clear that things are becoming just too complicated.....so, what do you do? Well many is the time that researchers respond by inserting an open-ended question. And needless to say, many is the time that the analysis of the responses to such open-enders yields nothing but confusion and heartache. Why is this?

The top and bottom of it

Sometimes an open-ender can be used to open an interview; 'what do you think about living in this area?' Here the respondent can spout off about whatever is of importance to him/herself and is in no way being led by the agenda of the client as reproduced through the subsequent questioning. This top-of-mind response is particularly useful if the topic is contentious or 'hot' because it allows the respondent to settle down having 'made his/her point'. That is, the reason for asking such an open-ender may be as much about getting the respondent on-side as it is about finding out what his/her views might be.

Again a very broad catch-all open-ender is often placed at the end of the interview; it is a kind of sweeper-up designed to identify any issues the respondent might feel have been ignored in the interview. This is a fairly

blatant sop; if the burning issues are not being raised in the questioning then the respondent is highly likely to consider the whole enterprise to be a waste of time and either curtail the interview or refuse to complete it. While asking for views after the questions might indeed deliver more informed and thoughtful insight into the issue, it does not follow that this is a more representative view of the universe under the spotlight.

And of course, sometimes we get very clever and ask two open-enders, one at the start and one at the end, just to see how attitudes and opinion might change as a result of considering the issues raised by the interview. The analysis of such questioning is extremely complicated and tends to yield very little. But, all in all, deep down, such use of the open-ender is essentially one of self-defence; by asking them we cannot be accused of presenting a closed agenda or disbarring respondents from having their real say.

Listening, or just listing?

Many researchers still persist in 'analysing' open-enders by simply listing, and perhaps grouping, the verbatims in an appendix. What a waste. Developing code-frames which allow the responses to be incorporated into the main survey database offers a huge opportunity for meaningful analysis and allows the presentation of simple, easily digestible results to clients. To ask 1000 people for their unconstrained views so that maybe three or four quotes can be dragged out to support the analysis of a quantitative survey does seem like a shameful misuse of effort. But let's be honest, it is not that unusual to start setting up code-frames for an open-ender only to find that many responses just don't appear to make any sense and the researcher is left wondering whether the respondent, the interviewer, or indeed both, have completely missed the point. It can be quite illuminating to read through research reports and look at the questionnaire in the appendix; it is not that uncommon to find that the open-enders have been totally ignored!

Ask a stupid question and....

.....that's right, you'll get a stupid answer. Unfortunately, it does not always follow that if you ask a sensible question you will get a sensible answer.

It's all Greek to me

Aristotle reckoned there are four different ways of answering a question; he called them the material, efficient, final and formal causes. For example, in response to someone pointing at a statue and asking 'What is this?' they could be told that....

'It is a marble statue'; the material cause stating what it is made of.

'It was made by Phydias'; the efficient cause stating who made it.

'It is for the temple'; the final cause stating its purpose.

'It is Apollo'; the formal cause stating what it is.

These are all valid answers; it's just that the question has been interpreted in different ways. Open-enders are particularly susceptible to this because they lack the implicit guidance of a code-frame of possible and acceptable answers. Yet what Aristotle is saying to us as researchers is that the more unconstrained are the possible responses, then the more finely focused must be the question. Much of the ambiguity in his four options could have been avoided if we had asked 'What is that for?', or 'Who made this?', or 'Where does this come from?'. Hence, even if you have little or no idea of what kind of responses you might get, be very precise in defining what you want to find out.

YYY

When I worked for Plessey in the late '60's business market research was still very basic, but I remember one piece of advice given to me by someone at the British Shoe Corporation; if you want to get to the truth ask why? at least three times.

'Why did you not call me last night?'

'Because I got in late.' Why?

'Because I was busy at work.' Why?

'Because something is bothering me and I couldn't concentrate.' Why?

'Because I don't want to you see you again.'

Clearly you could extend this line of questioning, but respondents, even well-shod ones, will only go so far!

I know both these examples are a bit contrived but the message is very clear. No matter how simple the open-ender might be, respondents can come at their answer from any of Aristotle's angles and come in at any level in the YYY dimension. Consequently coding of open-enders can produce a myriad of responses with many showing little apparent connection or relevance. However, answers which might appear just plain stupid, weird or wrong may well be ones coming from the less frequently referenced realms of these possible response options.

So what do we do?

Well, I used to compromise by applying a YY. The follow up to the open-ender would be 'And why do you say that?'. Where I went wrong was in coding and analysing these as two separate questions. While we should consider asking the YY, we should develop code-frames based on each pair of answers looked at as one. This certainly won't make the job of coding any easier but I feel it would yield a much more meaningful range of responses.

And we should remember the lesson of Aristotle and be very clear in framing the question precisely.

So, we can get much more out of open-enders; and yes, they do have an important, and perhaps a non-data-collecting role, in either settling respondents down, or offering researchers some protection, and they can be used to dig a bit deeper into the survey topic, but please don't just bung one in because the questionnaire is beginning to look a bit too busy or because you quoted for 'one open-ended question' in your bid. Open-ended questions are an expensive option for a questionnaire so make sure you use them to the full.

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