10 Tips for designing a market research questionnaire

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The purpose of a questionnaire is to help you gather information that will allow you to make an infomed decision to help solve a marketing problem or gather useful marketing information. It can be challenging to identify precisely what your information needs are, what types of questions to ask and how to best measure different concepts you want to learn about. Designing and writing a useful questionnaire is partially an art and partially a science. Below are some tips to help you navigate through this challenge.

1. Include a brief (two or three sentences) introduction to the questionnaire telling the respondent about the questionnaire, thanking the respondent, detailing the estimated time to completion and assuring respondents of the confidentiality of their answers. This will help increase the response rate.
2. Begin the survey with a screening question(s), to make sure the person you are going to interview is qualified to answer your questions. You want people that are familiar with your product/brand/service/topic to be participating in the survey. The key to the qualifying question(s) is that if the respondent's answer is 'no' to being familiar with or using the product or service, then the survey is terminated and the person does not participate. (Example: I am interested in the perception of customer service at Publix. My target market is current Publix shoppers. Therefore, my screening question could be: "Have you shopped in Publix in the last month?" If yes, continue, if no, terminate.)
3. As you develop questions, ask yourself the following to determine if you should use the questions: "Does each question produce information that is necessary to address the research topic and meet the goals of the study?" If the answer is no, do not include them.
4. Use a variety of survey question types including ratings, rankings, forced choices, and semantic differential scales, to answer your research questions. Keep in mind the types of questions you ask may limit the method of analysis and quality of the information you can get from analyzing the data.
5. Related to point four, consider using Likert-type questions when measuring attitude and satisfaction. They are easy to construct and easy for respondents to fill out. (Example: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements using the 1 to 5 scale below).
6. When using semantic differential questions, make sure that the descriptors are true opposites of each other. Semantic differential scales use polar opposites that respondents are asked to choose from to best describe something. For example, weak and strong, indecisive and decisive, cheap and expensive. (Example: If asking their perception of a new item on a menu, the polar opposites should not be excellent and ok, as these are not true opposites and will skew the results).
7. Demographic questions go at the end of the questionnaire. Ask demographic questions that are relevant to your research. These might include age, income, family size, employment status, geographical location, and other information. These answers will provide useful cross tab analysis by showing response differences between men and women, purchase interest in a product by income level, or influence of family size on product attributes.
8. Be sure that response categories have no problems with mutual exclusiveness. (Example: Your age choices should not be 18-25 and 25-30 because if someone is 25, which category do they belong to?) Also be sure categories have equal breaks. For example, the age break of 18-24 has seven ages so all of the age breaks should have seven age breaks.
9. The questionnaire should be easy to complete with clear instructions, clear and simple wording and be neat looking. For example, if a respondent answers a particular question with a no, they are clearly directed to a different follow-up question than if they answered yes. (The pretest will help with this part!)
10. Always pretest! But be sure to pretest among the target respondents. If you are conducting research among mothers with children who are heavy users of laundry detergent testing the questionnaire among college students can give you misleading results.

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