

# Designing Effective Customer Questionnaires

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 11/14/2007

Effective market research depends on a clear, well-defined set of questions. You could spend large sums of money carrying out a research project, but, if you ask the wrong questions or if respondents find your questions difficult to answer, that investment could be wasted. Market research reduces the risk in developing new products or planning marketing campaigns, so it is essential that the research provides the information you need.

## What You Need to Know

---

### Which type of research questions provide the best answers?

There is no single type of question that provides the “best answer.” Multiple choice questions, for example, allow researchers to measure respondents’ preference for a product or attribute (75% preferred product B), while questions that include a scale can be used to assess attitudes (35% of customers were completely satisfied with the service).

## What to Do

---

### Define Your Goals

Before you start writing questions, you need to decide what you want to find out. That determines who you survey and what you ask them. If your goals are unclear, the results of the survey will probably be unclear. Begin by writing down the broad and general goals of the study. These might include:

- the potential market for a new product or service;
- ratings of current products or services;
- customer attitudes;
- customer satisfaction levels.

These sample goals represent general areas. The more specific you can make your goals, the easier it will be to get usable answers.

## **Keep the Questionnaire Short**

Your questionnaire should be short and simple. More people will complete a shorter questionnaire, regardless of the interviewing method. To keep the number of questions in check, ask what you will do with the information from each question. If you cannot give a satisfactory answer, leave the question out. You can also manage the number of questions by placing them into three groups:

- essential to know
- useful to know
- good to know

If your questionnaire is too long, you can discard questions from the last group.

## **Include an Introduction**

Your questionnaire should start with an introduction. A good introduction will encourage people to complete your questionnaire. The introduction should state who you are and why you want the information in the survey. Include instructions on how to complete and return the questionnaire. Include the name and telephone number of someone the respondent can call if they have any questions.

The most effective introductions explain why the survey will improve some aspect of the recipient's life, for example by helping to improve a product or making an organization better able to meet his or her needs.

## **Name the Sponsor**

It may help to mention the name of the organization sponsoring the survey. If you are surveying customers or prospects, they may be more likely to respond if they think the organization is asking their opinions on how it can best meet their needs. If your survey covers a number of different brands, it may be better to give the name of the research company rather than the various sponsors.

## **Allow Respondents to Include Their Name**

If you leave a space for respondents to add their name and title, point out that this is optional. Some respondents will be happy to put in their names, making it possible for you to recontact them for clarification or follow-up questions. However, if some of the questions are sensitive, respondents

may feel reluctant to reveal their identity and this could lower response rates. You should reassure respondents that their identity will not be revealed to the survey sponsor or any third party.

## Choose the Right Type of Question

You can use a variety of different type of questions, depending on the information you are looking for:

- demographic questions, for example, “Location, company size, type of business”
- yes/no questions, for example, “Have you purchased a laser printer in the last 3 years?”
- multiple choice questions, for example, “How did you hear about our products—radio, television, newspaper, retailer?”
- ranking order questions, for example, “Which of the following factors you would use in choosing a laser printer—speed, reliability, cost, paper capacity? Please rank them 1–4 in order of importance”
- rating order, for example, “Which of the following phrases best describes your experience in buying a laser printer from Company X—completely satisfied, satisfied, dissatisfied, very dissatisfied?”
- open-ended questions, for example, “What do you look for when you are buying a laser printer?”

## Make Questions Specific

Your questions should be as specific as possible. For example, the question, “Have you ever purchased a laser printer?” does not give you enough information about the type of laser printer or the prospect’s purchasing time frame. A better question might be, “Have you purchased a home office laser printer in the last 3 years?”.

You should also avoid putting two questions into one. For example, a question like, “How often do you buy laser toner and paper?” has two possible answers. It is better to separate the questions, “How often do you buy laser toner?” and, “How often do you buy laser paper?”

## Allow “Don’t Know” Options

For some questions, you should include a “Don’t know” or “Not applicable” response. Although this does not give you any worthwhile research information, it can avoid frustrating the respondent who may not have a clear answer. If you are asking for personal data or information that may be commercially sensitive, you should also include a “decline to state” option.

## Use Relevant Rating Scales

Where questions include a scale, “How do you rate this service on a scale of...?”, make sure that the scale is relevant and understandable. For example, if you use a scale of 1–5, make it clear what the various points on the scale stand for. “How do you rate this service on a scale of 1–5, where 1 is very poor and 5 is excellent?” If you use a larger scale, 1–10 for example, you may have to specify what the intermediate points mean as well.

## Begin with Easy Questions

Industry experience indicates that the questionnaire should begin with questions that are easy to answer. Easy questions encourage people to continue completing the survey, and, in telephone or personal interviews, they help to build rapport with the interviewer. If your survey includes difficult or commercially sensitive questions, you should place these at the end of the questionnaire. If respondents have felt comfortable with the questions up to that point, they may be more inclined to answer the difficult questions.

## Create a Practical Layout

The layout of your questionnaire can influence the quality of response. The questionnaire should be clear, legible, easy to understand, and easy to complete.

If you require written answers, you must leave sufficient space for the variables of handwriting. A recommended format is to provide 3–5 lines for a written response with sufficient space between the lines to avoid cramped writing. If you are providing a box for a written response, the box should offer the equivalent of 3–5 lines. At the end of the questionnaire, you may wish to include a box “Other comments,” which offers respondents the opportunity to provide qualitative information that may not be covered by the questions.

If you are carrying out a survey online, you must also take into account other design factors.

- Do not make respondents scroll horizontally to view part of the survey page.
- Make sure your page and question layout are consistent. Do not put answer choices on the right for some questions and on the left for others.
- Use color consistently. For example, always use the same color to represent an instruction, which is not part of a question.
- Allow space for long replies to certain types of question.

- Use drop-down lists for multiple choice questions to save space, but be careful that they are not difficult to use.

## Test the Questionnaire

Before you carry out your survey, you should test the questionnaire with a few sample respondents to ensure that it is understandable, easy to use, and provides useful answers. Ideally, your sample respondents should share the same characteristics as the survey audience. If that is not possible, ask the respondents to make up the answers. You are not looking for valid research data at this stage, the objective is to highlight any difficulties in the questionnaire. For example, if one of the respondents asks what a question means or points that he or she is not sure how to answer a question, you will need to modify that question.

## What to Avoid

---

### You Ask the Wrong Questions

It is wrong to begin a survey by writing the questions. Well-designed surveys always begin by looking at the objectives and framing those as broad questions to be answered. The questions included in your survey questionnaire are designed to help answer the broad questions. An objective or broad question might be, “How do customers feel about our service?” In the questionnaire, the related questions might be, “How do you rate the service on a scale of 1–5?” or, “How satisfied were you with the service you received?”

## Where to Learn More

---

### Book:

Brace, Ian, Questionnaire Design: How to Plan, Structure and Write Survey Material for Effective Market Research. Kogan Page, 2004.

### Web Site:

QuestionPro: [www.questionpro.com](http://www.questionpro.com)

Copyright © 2007 CNET Networks, Inc. All Rights Reserved.