



Chapter 6: Questionnaire Design

Discussion

1. This problem was discussed briefly in the chapter, but ways of motivating people to respond to your questionnaire. While the subject of your research is of immense importance and interest to you, potential respondents more often than not couldn't care less! Unless the subject is of interest to, or will lead to a direct benefit to, your respondents, you should expect a low response rate. Two recent surveys in which the author was a principal researcher focused on the training activities of small businesses (technically called SME's – small to medium sized enterprises – that employed fewer than 250 people) yielded very poor rates of response. Both were less than 20%. The populations for each survey were different (one was a local survey while the other was an international survey involving five EU countries) so the only explanation for this low rate was lack of interest on the part of respondents. This is hardly surprising if my own experience is anything to go by. On average, I receive one or two survey questionnaires a month and many business people complain of being bombarded by people and organisations surveying them! Most simply throw the questionnaires straight into the waste paper basket.

Here are a few possible strategies for improving response rates.

- You could conduct a telephone survey rather than a postal one. Someone is more likely to spend 5 to 10 minutes talking to you on the phone than respond to a postal questionnaire. If you select this option, it is a good idea to contact the respondent first by letter to prepare the ground. In effect this is similar to a covering letter for a postal survey and it should say when you will telephone. Don't send this too far in advance because the respondent will have forgotten all about it. If the respondent isn't available when you phone, you can always arrange another time.
 - If you do opt for a postal survey, use the covering letter to make the project sound interesting to potential respondents. For example, if the outcome of the research is to improve a service they use, make this clear very early in the letter.
 - As stated in the chapter, always include a FREEPOST or pre-paid envelope and make the questionnaire as easy to complete as possible, without compromising the reliability and validity of its subject. Perhaps you could include a cheap pen so it can be completed there and then (if that is appropriate).
 - Offer something in return. One frequently used device is a 'prize draw'. Another, perhaps more useful method with respondents who are members of a groups who would benefit directly from your findings, or have a vested interest in it, is to promise them a copy of your report or a summary of it.
 - The timing of a survey is important. Proximity to holiday periods is not likely to yield much response. Also, some groups of respondents may have a life pattern or business rhythm that allows little room for social surveys. For example, a survey of caravan park owner/managers will produce a very small response in August! Any survey carried out over the Christmas break or other religious festival may not be very fruitful either.
2. If you have used probability sampling to generate your sample, but achieve a relatively small response rate, the whole purpose of this method of sampling may be lost if the final list of respondents is not representative of the population. You need to look at this problem from the other side of the response rate. 75% of potential respondents. It will be very difficult to argue that your responses are representative of the population. You will certainly have difficulty in generalising your findings to the population as a whole. There are a couple of strategies you can use to offset this effect.

- Create a sample size that will account for a lower response rate. In other words, you can use a larger sample size than you expect to respond to compensate for non-response. However, even this cannot address the problem of the sample being representative.
- The second approach is that of weighting cases in the database. To put this simply, the ratio of male to female in the survey population (and sample) may be 3:2, but the ratio of respondents may be 1:1. One technique to restore(?) the representation of the actual population ratio is to weight the responses accordingly. This is a little suspect because what you are now doing is making an assumption about those who did not respond. In all your calculations, male responses would be weighted by a factor of 3 and female responses by a factor of 2. In effect, the database is extended by duplicating male and female responses to make up the numbers. This is very dubious if carried out on the scale described here, but a small amount of weighting may be acceptable. Another example of weighting is given in chapter 5 on index construction. While the context is different the rationale behind it is the same.