Guide: Market research survey planning

For a market research survey to be truly effective you will need to plan exactly what information you need and how you're going to get it.

Planning your questions

Built-in features

If you are using online survey software, these programmes will often come with suggested questions depending on subject area.

These questions may be a great starting point.

For example, the Customer Satisfaction questions on SurveyMonkey include:

- How convenient is our company to use?

- How professional is our company?

- Compared to our competitors, is our product quality better, worse, or about the same?

- Compared to our competitors, are our prices more reasonable, less reasonable, or about the same?

- How responsive is our company?

- How well do the customer service representatives at our company answer your questions?

- Overall, are you satisfied with the employees at our company, neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with them, or dissatisfied with them?

- Do you like our company, neither like nor dislike it, or dislike it?

- How likely are you to recommend our company to people you know?

Objectives

Start out by writing down the objectives of your survey. This will provide a platform from which to develop your questions.

For example:

- I want to know how my service is regarded

- I want to know how the product is performing, and

- I want to gather new ideas from customers

Writing your questions

Keep it simple

Your questions need to be easily understood and worded simply.

Put yourself in the position of the least educated respondent.

You will get the best results if your questions are:

- Clear

- Direct

- Brief

Eliminate ambiguity

Ensure that your questions can only have one meaning.

Think about wording

Ask sensitive questions in different ways. For example some people may have reservations disclosing their age. Instead you could ask:

> • What age range do you fall into?

Question intent

Keep these things in mind when developing your questions:

> • Will respondents be able to understand the question?

> • Will respondents be able to answer the question?

Ask questions that read well and are quick and easy to answer. If questions are too long or complex, the respondent may write the answer without really reading the questions and you will end up with irrelevant information.

Make sure that all questions asked are relevant to all respondents and the survey's purpose. In addition, avoid hypothetical questions.

If questions require too much thinking to answer, respondents may just click the same option each time to finish the survey faster.

Constructing good questions

There are four key principles in developing good questions:

> • Be brief

> • Be objective

> • Be simple

> • Be specific

Try avoiding biased or loaded questions for example 'We recently launched our fabulous new Product X, what do you think?' Instead try 'What do you think of the new Product X?'

Stay away from absolutes e.g. 'never', 'always', and avoid words with a negative overtone like 'only' or 'just'.

Choosing question types

Open-ended/essay

These types of questions are great for getting an answer in the respondents' own words and picking up attitudes and feelings, but watch out for people just putting 'I don't know' or skipping the question.

Open-ended questions can also be harder to analyse.

Closed-ended

Multiple choice or yes/no questions are very straightforward and easy to answer and analyse.

Programmes like SurveyMonkey also have the ability to add skip logic, meaning that if the answer to a question is 'yes' it leads on to another question, but if the answer is 'no', it skips on to a different one.

This means you have the ability to skip irrelevant questions.

For multiple choice questions, these work best if you make the choices mutually exclusive (or unable to all be true at the same time).

Ranked questions

This is where the respondent ranks a list of qualities for example from 'most important' to 'least important',

with each ranking only used once.

For example: Importance of Individual Fruits

	Not important	Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
Apples	○			
Oranges			○	
Pears				○
Pineapples		○		

Matrix/rating scale

This is where the respondent is given a statement and asked to rate it e.g. 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.

If you set up the rating scale in your survey in this format, make sure that the rest of the survey is consistent and all rating scales go from the low to the high frequency throughout (or vice versa).

In addition, some surveys may only label the outliers or endpoints of the scale, but it is good practice to assign a label or number to each rating scale.

A rating scale is a great way to collect subjective information.

If you wish to have a neutral midpoint, use 5 or 7 options e.g.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Disagree
○	○	○	○	○

If you want the respondent to make a decision either way, use an even number of options and remove the neutral ground e.g.

Not important	Important	Very Important	Extremely Important
○	○	○	○

Also think about adding a 'Non Applicable' or N/A option. This will give the respondents the ability to opt out and will increase the relevancy and accuracy of the data collected.

Question Sequence

Opening questions

Your opening questions should be simple, short and interesting. This will help the respondent build confidence and familiarity with the survey before asking them hard or complicated questions.

Grouping questions

If you have more than one main topic or areas, ask all the questions about one area before moving on to the next. Arranging your questions on pages is a good way to naturally divide different topics.

Demographics

Sensitive questions around demographics e.g. age, income etc, may be best left to later in the survey.

If you ask these questions too early, your respondents may abandon the survey.

Collection & Communication

Introduction

How you send out your survey and collect the data is important to the results you will receive.

First decide if you are sending it out to an existing customer database or opening it up to the general public.

Existing database

If you are using an existing database with email addresses, you may wish to let the programme, such as SurveyMonkey, manage the process for you.

You can upload a file of contacts and send both the survey and the invitation together.

The benefits of this approach are that you can easily send reminder/follow up email to the customers who have not yet responded, and you can see who has responded without asking them for their details, as the link is unique to each respondent.

Alternatively a programme like SurveyMonkey will give you a generic link which you can send to everyone on your database.

Website

You can also post a link to your survey on your website, so that anyone who comes across it fills it out. Some companies do this for months at a time.

This approach works well for e-commerce, where after the purchase, the customer is redirected to a survey. Sometimes the customer is sent a follow-up email a week after the order is placed, which contains a link to a feedback survey.

You can also embed the survey pages into your web pages.

Social media

You could also paste a link to your survey on your Facebook wall. Additionally, SurveyMonkey contains the ability to embed surveys into Facebook using a special Facebook App.

Phone

Programmes like SurveyMonkey also let you enter data manually, which means you can answer on behalf of the customer, if you need to take the survey over the phone.

The benefit of this is that the data is still collected and analysed along with data from email and web respondents.

Incentives

An incentive will go a long way to ensuring your survey is answered.

For existing customers, consider offering one great prize. For example, a new gadget, an experience or holiday or a shopping spree.

For a wide reaching survey such as a web survey open to anyone, consider offering a small gift to anyone who contributes. For example a gift or discount voucher for your product or service.

Collecting data

Ensure that you collect as much general information for the respondents as you can — this will allow you to make your database more robust.

Analysing Survey Data

At a glance

Many survey programmes will show you at a glance what the survey results are, at any point during the process.

SurveyMonkey has automatic graphs which can be downloaded. These are an excellent way to see the response very quickly.

You can also filter quickly by responses e.g. demographics.

Complete information

You can also download full responses in a spreadsheet and analyse results using Excel tools or additional online software.

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Last reviewed on 13 July 2020