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Business Outlook

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Open- versus Close-Ended Survey Questions¹

Dr. Michael R. Hyman, NMSU

Dr. Jeremy J. Sierra, Texas State University

A questionnaire is only as good as the questions it asks. You must ensure your questionnaires are as well designed as possible and your questions are as precise and as easy to answer as possible.

Although it is easier to assume ‘the respondents know what we mean, so don’t worry about exact wording’, you should care about the precision of your questions. Imagine an advertising slogan that proclaims Brand X personal computers are preferred 2-to-1 by service people. Is that good? Do service people prefer Brand X because it fails repeatedly and thus gives them many opportunities to earn maintenance fees, or do they prefer Brand X for their own use because it is relatively reliable? Clearly, this advertising slogan is ambiguous. Similarly, you should strive to avoid such ambiguity in your questions.

The first step toward ensuring you ask good questions is to plan what you will measure. You must know the required information and the targeted respondents for your questions. Different respondents will have different abilities to answer different types of questions. Once you identify and understand your target, you will have a better sense for how to position your questions. Then, you must choose the data collection method. You can ask far more complex questions in a self-administered mail questionnaire than you can in a telephone-administered questionnaire, for which response choices must be few and straightforward.

Comparing Open-Ended to Close-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions are analogous to the essay or short answer questions you probably dreaded as a student and close-ended

¹ Note: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. published Mike and Jeremy’s *Marketing Research Kit for Dummies*. It is available in paperback [ISBN: 978-0-470-52068-0] and Kindle [ASIN: B003CNQ4LG] versions. The following text is based on Chapter 9 of that book.

questions are analogous to the multiple-choice questions you probably preferred. The reasons for your preferences parallel the advantages and disadvantages of both question types.

Close-ended Questions

Advantages

Communication skills of respondent less critical. Because they merely require respondents to select from a set of alternatives, relatively inarticulate people will not struggle trying to answer close-ended questions.

Speedy response. Respondents can answer close-ended questions quickly, giving them the sense they are making good progress. Speedy response time per question means you can ask more questions on a broader range of topics.

Easier to answer. As any parent will attest, it is easier for children to choose one option among several alternatives than to make an unstructured decision. Similarly, close-ended questions about attitudes and behaviors are simpler to answer. By easing their task, you increase respondents' enthusiasm for returning a completed questionnaire.

Data quickly coded, entered, and analyzed. Close-ended questions are easily pre-coded, which means entering an answer into your response database merely requires you type a number (corresponding with the answer provided). Subsequent basic analyses like frequency distributions are straightforward in spreadsheet software like Excel.

Less-skilled or no interviewer needed. Either little or no interviewing skill is needed to administer close-ended questions, which is why such questions dominate self-administered surveys.

Disadvantages

Cannot obtain in-depth response. Respondents merely read through several options and pick the one most representative of their opinions and/or behaviors.

Poor at providing new insights. Such questions assume you already know the likely answers and you are asking respondents to pick one. Any answer beyond what you provided respondents is beyond the scope of the study and it is unlikely respondents will volunteer insights about unlisted reply options.

Harder to write. It is harder to write good close-ended questions because you must anticipate all possible answers. Respondents who repeatedly fail to find suitable answer options for your questions will almost certainly abandon your questionnaire before they complete it.

Answer may not fully reflect respondent's attitude. You can ask respondents to indicate the answer option that is most reflective of their attitude, but that option could be 'spot on', vaguely appropriate, or something in between.

Categories hint at right answers. By providing possible responses, you are hinting at the right answer. Perhaps respondents would have answered differently, but once they read the list of alternative answers, they sense what comprises an appropriate answer and respond accordingly.

Here is an example of the problem introduced by suggesting the correct answer. Suppose you want to ask undergraduate marketing students at State U. how many hours per day they study and watch television. You could use one of two different answer sets for indicating these hours. In one five-option set, answers range from less than *½ hour daily* to *more than 2½ hours daily*. In the other five-option set, answers range from *2½ hours or less daily* to *more than 4½ hours daily*. The answer set you use will influence students' responses about their daily studying and television viewing time. If you ask the question as *2½ hours or more* versus *less than 2½ hours* for studying, then far fewer students will report studying *more than 2½ hours daily*. Similarly, self-reported television viewing varies by answer format; students will indicate they watch fewer hours of television daily if you use the first answer set (with more shorter periods) rather than the second answer set (with more longer periods).

Open-ended Questions

Advantages

The relative advantages and disadvantages of open-ended questions largely mirror the advantages and disadvantages of close-ended questions. Open-ended questions offer respondents an opportunity to provide a wide range of answers. Because some of these answers will be unexpected, they will suggest follow-up questions in person-to-person interviews.

Disadvantages

Biased by respondent articulateness. To some extent, responses to open-ended questions are weighted unintentionally by respondent articulateness, as more articulate respondents will say more. Given the way responses are entered into a computer, more words will count more than fewer words.

Interviewer bias. Open-ended questions do not lend themselves to self-administered questionnaires. They are best used with a live interviewer—either in person or via telephone—and interviewers are not alike. Thus, inter-interviewer differences introduce additional response bias.

Hard to record answers. Imagine asking people questions and then writing what they said. Although audio or video recording seems a great alternative, many people are reluctant to allow themselves to be audio or video recorded. As a result, the only record of their answers is whatever interviewers can scribble as quickly as they can scribble it. Often, such scribbles are incomplete and erroneous.

Coding inconsistency and difficulty. Any post-data-collection numerical analysis requires examining every response to every question, developing basic categories representing all possible responses, revisiting all the answers, and then assigning a numeric code to each answer. Such a process requires much additional time and effort.

This disadvantage, more than any other, is why we urge you, if you conduct or sponsor a survey, to use close-ended questions if possible. They may take longer to write, but they make subsequent data analysis far easier.

Reduced cross-study comparability. Open-ended questions are more difficult to use for cross-study comparisons because choices and contexts change over time. This problem is especially severe for cross-cultural studies. For example, the descriptions of similar behavior by Hispanic and Asian consumers may differ meaningfully, hence disguising that similarity.

Tabulating complexity and costliness. Open-ended questions are more costly because their best use requires live—and expensive—interviewers and additional costly data handling (associated with recording, coding, entry, and tabulation).

About the Authors

Dr. Michael R. Hyman is Distinguished Achievement Professor and Ph.D. Coordinator of Marketing at NMSU. He is Executive Editor of *NMSU Business Outlook* and Marketing Ethics Section Editor for *Journal of Business Ethics*. Attesting to his writing compulsion are more than 80 academic journal articles, 50 conference papers (10 which won a 'best paper' award), four co-authored/co-edited books, 30 other academic contributions, and 60 non-academic works. He is known for his collection of Looney Tunes shirts, inability to chip a golf ball correctly, encyclopedic knowledge of classic Hollywood movies, overly neat office, and loyalty to the New York Yankees.

An avid golfer and ardent Nebraska football fan, Dr. Jeremy J. Sierra is Associate Professor of Marketing at Texas State University. He serves on six editorial review boards, including *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, and *Psychology & Marketing*. He has published his scholarly work in such outlets as *International Journal of Market Research*, *Journal of Advertising*, *Journal of Business Research*, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, *Journal of Product & Brand Management*, *Journal of Services Marketing*, and *Psychology & Marketing*. Dr. Sierra also has published, with Michael R. Hyman (his mentor and long-lost golfing buddy), *Marketing Research Kit for Dummies*. His research interests include advertising effects, brand tribalism, dual-process theory, and superstitious beliefs.