

Market Research Questionnaires

Business Information Factsheet

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Introduction

A market research questionnaire is a useful tool for collecting and understanding the opinions, preferences and buying behaviour of customers or potential customers. It is also a means of adding structure to a customer interview or focus group. The questions asked assist with estimating levels of demand and opinions on pricing in relation to a product or service. Questions must be constructed carefully in order to obtain unambiguous answers from respondents about their needs and opinions.

This factsheet outlines the most common methods of using questionnaires to gather market information, what types of questions can be asked and what styles of questionnaire there are. It also explains how to comply with data protection legislation and includes hints and tips and sources of further information.

Uses of market research questionnaires

A well-thought-out questionnaire, which asks the right questions and is properly completed, can be a useful means of revealing, analysing and understanding factors relating to a product or service, such as:

- Consumers' awareness of a product or service.
- Consumers' attitudes towards a product or service.
- Consumers' attitudes towards a competitor's products and services.
- Consumers' perceptions of product performance.
- Consumers' buying behaviour.

Questionnaire techniques

There are three main questionnaire techniques:

- Personal survey (that is, face-to-face).
- Telephone questionnaire.
- E-mail/online questionnaire.

The choice of technique will depend on the type of customer group being targeted and the type of information that is being sought. Each has its own benefits and drawbacks. The techniques, and their advantages and disadvantages, can be usefully compared in the following table.

Questionnaire techniques	Advantages	Disadvantages
Personal survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater flexibility and control - opportunity to clarify misunderstandings. • Can ask supplementary questions. • High response rate. • Can watch body language as well as verbal response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming. • Expensive. • Respondents have little time to think.
Telephone questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More flexibility and often a higher response rate than e-mail/online. • Reach people who won't give personal interview. • Fast. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews must be fairly short. • Respondents have little time to think.
E-mail/online questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheap/free. • Respondents have time to think. • Useful when respondent is difficult to contact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible low response rate. • No flexibility to clarify answers. • Limited information obtained.

Questionnaire structure

A questionnaire can fall into one of three categories - structured, semi-structured or unstructured.

- A structured questionnaire is a series of closed questions asked in the order in which they are laid out. (Closed questions are those to which the only answers are 'Yes', 'No' or 'Don't know'. Open questions allow the respondent to answer freely. See below for more information.) These questionnaires are best suited to research that involves questioning large numbers of people, such as an online survey.
- A semi-structured questionnaire (a mixture of closed and open questions) enables the questioner to retain control while also allowing for a wider range of responses.
- An unstructured questionnaire is a series of open-ended questions, the order of which can be changed by the interviewer. This type of questionnaire is often used with narrow or specialist target audiences, either face-to-face or over the telephone. While the unstructured approach can provide valuable insights, it can be difficult to analyse and draw meaningful conclusions from the findings.

There are a number of issues to consider when deciding what structure of questionnaire to use, including the aims and objectives of the survey. The method of data collection must suit the nature of the audience sample and the questions that are being asked. With telephone and face-to-face questionnaires, for instance, the questioner will be able to answer any queries about the questions, whereas an online or e-mail questionnaire will be expected to be easy to follow and self-explanatory.

It is also necessary to decide how the data will be analysed and incorporate this into the design of the questionnaire (for instance, by including boxes to tick or pre-coded questions).

Types of market research questions

There are five main types of market research questions:

- Closed questions - where the only answers are yes/no/don't know. For example: 'Are you planning a holiday this year?' It is possible to anticipate the answer and results can be easily summarised.
- Open questions - where the respondent is given the chance to answer freely. For example: 'What is your opinion about this new brand of soap powder?' This produces more realistic information, but is harder to interpret.
- Multiple-choice - where a series of set answers is given and the respondent chooses one. These are easy to summarise, but it is hard to design these questions without missing out other alternatives. For example, 'If you had a choice of restaurants, which would be your first choice? (Indian, Chinese, Mexican or Italian?)'. One way around this is to have an option for the respondent to select 'Other'.
- Direct questions - relating to the respondent's own behaviour. For example: 'Which TV channel do you watch most?'
- Indirect questions - by asking questions about other people, the respondent's own attitudes are revealed. For example: 'Where do you think the average parent would prefer to buy disposable nappies? (At a chemist, a supermarket or via a delivery service?)'. Indirect questions should be used in cases where people might mislead the researcher about their own behaviour; for example, they may say that 'The Sun' is the most popular newspaper, but might not admit to reading it themselves.

Setting market research questions

- Ask questions in a logical order. The first question asked should help to decide whether it is appropriate to continue with the respondent. For example, if the target group is coffee drinkers, 'Do you drink coffee?' could be asked first.
- Put the easy and interesting questions at the beginning of the questionnaire.
- Confidential, personal and complex questions should be listed at the end and only asked if necessary.
- Make the wording of questions as simple as possible and clearly define all regional and technical terms.
- Questions should be precise, related to time, place and so on.
- Ensure that questions are relevant to the information that is being sought.
- Filter questions to allow the respondent to move quickly through the questionnaire, ignoring questions that are irrelevant to them. For example, if a respondent answers that they don't drink coffee, the questionnaire should direct them past the next questions that deal only with coffee drinking.
- Avoid double-barrelled questions such as 'What do you think about the colouring and design of this product?' These can be confusing to answer and difficult to analyse.

- Avoid leading questions that imply an answer (for example, 'Most people choose Brand X for its quality, why do you buy it?' or 'Would you buy this product if a percentage of the price went to charity?').
- Be careful when phrasing questions relating to age, income or status. For example, instead of 'Can you afford a holiday?' ask the respondent 'Will you be going on holiday this year?'
- Avoid asking questions beyond the respondent's span of memory (for example, 'What TV programmes were you watching this time last year?'). Rather, ask the respondent a question that they can answer with confidence.
- Do not ask questions such as date of birth, school attended, mother's maiden name or town of birth as the answers to these questions are routinely used for accessing bank and personal information. Inclusion of them in a questionnaire might lead to distrust and result in a poor response rate.

Testing a questionnaire

Test the effectiveness of a questionnaire before using it as a tool for market research. To do this, the questionnaire should be tried out on a small sample of people. Ensure that the questions are easily understood so they will lead to the desired kind of response. This testing should expose any ambiguous or unnecessary questions, and reveal which questions are suitable for the purpose of the survey.

Using the questionnaire

Individuals value their time. Their willingness to devote any effort to answering a questionnaire will largely depend on who is asking, what they want to know, why they want to know and what's in it for the respondents. So, no matter how the survey is conducted (online, face-to-face, telephone, etc.) the following information should be provided:

- Brief details of the business (name of business and what it does).
- Why the survey is being conducted (testing a new product idea, product enhancement, etc.).
- An indication of the time it will take to complete the questionnaire.
- Details of any incentive to participate (such as entry into a free prize draw, etc.).

Analysing questionnaire results

Although individual responses can give some interesting insights, it is the collective questionnaire result that is of most use for market research and the development of marketing plans. Analysing means using raw data to work out how many people and what sort of people give each kind of response.

To do this, information can be entered onto a spreadsheet to enable easy comparison of responses. With large numbers of replies it is easier to code and analyse the data using a database. There is also the option of handing over questionnaire responses to a specialist market research agency that will have data analysis software; however, this can be expensive. Depending on the structure of the questionnaire and the number of responses, results can be displayed in charts or tables along with a report of findings and recommendations based on the results.

Data protection

As part of the questionnaire process, it may be necessary to collect personal information from respondents, such as their name, age and contact details.

Anyone who collects, stores or uses personal information must comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. For example, personal information must be stored securely and individuals must be provided with clear details about how their personal information will be used and who (if anyone) it will be shared with.

For more information about the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018, go to <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/guide-to-the-general-data-protection-regulation-gdpr/>.

Hints and tips

- Keep the number of questions as low as possible - too many questions may affect the response rate.
- Test that the meaning of the questions is easily understood and unambiguous.
- If using an independent market research agency, ensure that they are members of a reputable trade association that has a defined code of practice. The Market Research Society provides information on research agencies and consultants in its Research Buyer's Guide (www.mrs.org.uk/researchbuyersguide).
- Where an online or e-mail questionnaire is used, it is a good idea to give the respondent an incentive to complete it - for example, a prize draw or a discount on a purchase. A return rate of 10% of the questionnaires mailed is considered to be a good response.
- It might be beneficial to conduct a follow-up survey using the same group of respondents, so respondents should be asked if they are willing to be contacted again and what their preferred mode of contact is.
- Provide direct contact details of the person responsible for the survey as this may help to overcome any issues of trust that respondents might have.
- If the results show up something negative or unanticipated, look at this positively as a foundation for changing a product or market focus.
- There are several online survey tools that are quick and easy to use, such as SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), Typeform (www.typeform.com) and Zoho (www.zoho.com/survey). Surveys are typically free to create, but there is normally a charge of between £25 and £100 per month for additional services such as statistical analysis of survey results.

Further information

BIF003 A Guide to the Data Protection Act 2018

BIF044 Developing a Marketing Plan

BIF047 Sources of Statistics and Market Information

BIF107 Profiling your Target Audience

BIF185 Checklist for Start-up Market Research

BIF536 A Guide to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)

Useful publications

'The Guide to Market Research for SMEs'
The Market Research Society
Website: www.mrs.org.uk/researchbuyersguide/research-for-smes

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