Got time to answer a few questions?

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Research

As a researcher, I've travelled down a (mostly) qualitative path. It's a good fit because I find the question of why people think and do what they do to be always and forever fascinating. Quantitative research, on the other hand, aggravates my neurons and for the most part, greatly fatigues them. While I can claim reasonable quantitative proficiency, it's really not my cup of tea.

So given my qualitative bent, it may surprise you to hear that I'm going to write about quantitative questionnaires. Online questionnaires to be precise. And what's more, I'm going to take them to task. Why? Because someone's got to do it. It beggars belief that we, as an industry whose core business is to understand people and what motivates them, continue to develop (and subject research participants to) user-unfriendly questionnaires. I call them Terrible Question-naires. I'm writing this in the hope that those developing or commissioning these Terrible Questionnaires will stop doing it, and start producing Engaging and Easy to answer questionnaires.

WHY ARE THEY TERRIBLE?

There are two ways a questionnaire might be terrible. 1, It's uninteresting and difficult to answer, which is terrible from a respondent's point of view. 2, It fails to collect useful data, which is terrible from a business point of view.

I'm going to focus on the uninteresting and difficult to answer issue. Why? Because besides poorly defined research objectives, no other variable has as much impact on the usefulness of the data as an uninteresting and difficult to answer questionnaire. Terrible Questionnaires are easy to identify: – they're too long and, or they're grid-heavy and, or they haven't been test-driven.

TOO LONG (LESS IS MORE)

I often see 20-minute, and sometimes longer, online questionnaires. Even if I'm interested in the topic, 20 minutes is far too long.

"But I can't make it shorter. I need to know about X, Y and Z!" you say, emphatically. Well you also need to know that if the questionnaire is too long, the quality and usefulness of the data will be compromised.

Five minutes maximum. In most cases, I reckon that's about how long you've got before respondents tune out or get annoyed.

Believe me, if the questionnaire is too long, and respondents tune out or get annoyed, you'll get rubbish.

GRID LOCK

Another issue is grids. Those god-awful grids with the brands listed along the top of the page, and a string of brand attributes down the side.

I've seen grids with 100 odd cells (or more) to complete. You even have to scroll and scroll down the page to see the whole grid. And then there's another 100+ cell grid on the next page.

Do you really think respondents will go through each brand and each attribute and rate them thoughtfully? If they don't throw up their hands and collective mice in horror, and drop out of the questionnaire then and there, chances are they'll be clicking randomly, just so they can complete the damn grid and get to the next page. And then it'll be a race to get past all the other grids just to get the incentive. Reliable, quality data? No. Not by a long stretch.

LAST, BUT BY NO MEANS LEAST

They can't be piloting the Terrible Questionnaires I'm seeing. They really, really can't.

They can't be checking that they're engaging and easy to answer because they aren't engaging and easy to answer. Piloting and refining a questionnaire to ensure user-friendliness will improve the quality of the data collected immensely. Why isn't it happening?

Let's get rid of Terrible Question-naires once and for all. Developing an engaging and easy to complete question-naire is not an impossible task. It just takes a bit of thought and a respondent-focused approach. The output is useful, quality data. There are companies doing it right now in the UK, eg Newvista Research (check out their website). Are any local quantitative researchers up for it? I live in hope. ■

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