Survey Design and Strategies for Questioning

Developing an effective survey is a fine art. It involves important decisions about questions, content, wording and format. There isn't a perfect way to design and conduct a survey but the following tips and reminders will help guide your thinking and develop your skills.

There are two main types of survey, which have slightly different aims:

- **Questionnaire** - usually a public survey which provides basic information
- **Interviews** - tend to be longer in length and provide more detailed and in-depth information

When writing questions you should consider

1. The question content, the scope and the purpose (why are you asking this question)
2. What format for the response (is it a scale, ranking, extended response, multiple choice, etc.)
3. The wording of the question so that you can obtain the information you want (open and closed questions)
4. Placement or order of the questions

Types of questions

- **Open-ended questions** encourage respondents to respond to a question broadly, in some detail and in their own terms. These can be time-consuming to develop and analyse, but allow for the greatest variety of responses

- **Closed questions** give respondents a limited number of possible responses which might be provided to them or require just a yes or no answer. These are less likely to be skipped but may not provide as much detail or depth as open-ended questions

- **Rating Scales** give a chance to scale opinions and data, usually across five points. Points on the scale should be labelled with clear language words such as 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree', 'strongly disagree')

- **Rankings** can help get orders of preferences and opinions about topics, such as ranking four different solutions or choices
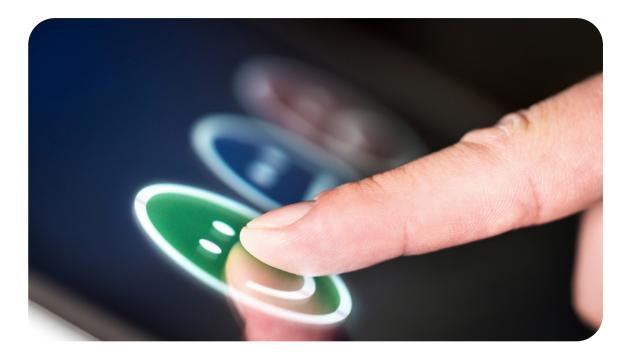
For more information and examples, see this link

Other tips for designing a survey:

- Start a survey with a brief introduction and a title for each section if these exist
- General questions should be placed earlier in the survey, while any sensitive questions, including demographics (especially if about income), should be near the end
- Avoid technical terms and jargon
- Avoid vague or imprecise terms
- Define things very specifically
- Avoid complex sentences that might be difficult to understand
- Provide reference frames that ensure all respondents are answering questions about the same time and place, such as "in the last week, how often…" rather than simply "how often…".
- Avoid double-barreled questions that try to measure more than one thing
- Avoid questions using leading, emotional, or evocative language.

Consider the format:

- Is your survey going to be distributed and collected in hard (paper) copies or distributed electronically?
- Is an online survey using a program like www.surveymonkey.com?
- Are you going to survey people in person at a chosen location?

Source: Harvard University Program on Survey Research