

Issues Regarding Surveys

Some Do's and Don'ts

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What I Will Cover

- Some reasons to do a survey
- Some cautions about doing survey
- Provide information useful in assessing the value of survey research as a method for data collection
- Focus on practical aspects of survey design

What I Hope You Get

- Improved understanding of when surveys are an appropriate tool
- Improved understanding of what is required to conduct a high-quality survey
- Limited information on survey design
 - Sampling
 - Types of questions

Types of Surveys

- Differences in survey methods
- Types of surveys
 - Marketing
 - Polls
 - Policy
 - Science
- Quality is not related to types

What Does it Mean to “Do a Survey”

- Not all data collection that looks like a survey is a survey
 - Writing a questionnaire and mailing it does not constitute a survey
 - Data collection can be done without conducting a survey

Surveys as Engineering

- Survey designs are based on science
- Designing a survey is engineering
 - Creating a system that is practical and useful
 - Designed with the users in mind

Survey Do's and Don'ts

- There are relatively few absolute “do’s” and “don’ts”
- Many “should do’s” and “shouldn’t do’s”
- Varieties of designs and formats can be used

When To Do a Survey (a survey “don’t”)

- First consider alternate data collection methods

Focus groups

Library/database/Web searches

Informed conversations with a purpose

- Enough information can often be gathered through less intensive research

When To Do a Survey

When you expect a reasonable response

- It is possible to identify appropriate respondents
- Respondents are willing to participate
- Respondents will be able to participate effectively; they can answer the questions
- The respondent burden is reasonable

When To Do a Survey

When there are sufficient resources

- Money, staff time, staff personnel
 - These are generally underestimated
- Time
 - Allow 4 – 6 months

When To Do a Survey

- When you have access to expertise
- Surveys require
 - Technical knowledge
 - Tacit knowledge

Don't try to do this at home without help

Contract or In-House

Contract

- Expertise
- Available staff
- High cost
- External validity

In-House

- Limited (but perhaps enough) expertise
- Re-allocate staff
- Reduced costs
- Validity may be a concern

Survey Error and Survey Quality

- Sampling Error
- Coverage Error
- Nonresponse Error
- Measurement Error
- Researcher Error
- Sampling Accuracy
- Adequate Coverage
- High Response Rates
- Accurate Measurement
- Researcher Skills

Survey Design Principles (Important Do's)

- Excellence – survey contains the best design elements
- Efficiency – requires minimal resources to generate desired outcomes
- Ethics – complete inclusion of ethical principles regarding human research (when appropriate)

Selecting a Survey Mode

Interviewer-Administered Surveys

- In-person
 - Not often used – expensive, hard to conduct
- Telephone
 - Requires considerable resources
 - Relatively fast data collection
 - Cooperation declining

Selecting a Survey Mode

Self-Administered

- Mail
 - Used most
 - Relatively inexpensive
 - Requires a good list of respondents
 - Long field time
 - Requires many followups

Selecting a Survey Mode

Self-Administered

Web

- Relatively fast and inexpensive
- Difficult to program and administer
- Lower response rates
- Technical problems for users

Issues in Choosing a Mode

- Questionnaire content
 - Complex – interviewer-administered or Web
 - Simple – mail
- Quality of sample frame or list
 - Telephone can be most flexible
 - Other modes require high quality lists
- Funds and other resources

Samples/Lists

- Random sampling necessary for statistical analysis
 - Larger numbers generate reduced sampling error
 - Population estimates and statistical significance
- Random sampling from lists
- Entire target group be can surveyed

Question Types

- Data
- Behavioral
- Knowledge
- Attitudes/opinion
- Demographic

Data Questions

- Asks for information about groups, organizations, establishments, firms
- “How many people are employed full-time in your organization?”
- Providing definitions is very important
- Use sparingly unless establishment survey **AND** the respondent is very well informed

Behavioral Questions

- Important for establishment surveys, eg, “How many times did you contact local government agencies ...?”
- Definitions are important
- Numbers are better than ranges, which are better than scales
- Time frames are necessary

Knowledge Questions

- “How many times was your organization contacted for technical help last year?”
- Should not sound like “test” questions
- Response set should reflect expected knowledge
 - Very knowledgeable – actual number
 - Not so knowledgeable – range or scale

Attitudes/Opinions

- Often the most interesting – good first questions
- “In your opinion, how important is your organization to economic development in your target area?”
- Time frames are usually helpful, eg, “Based on your experiences in the past six months, how often was your organization’s input important for ...?”

Demographic Questions

- Respondents' characteristics, eg, gender, age, class standing, occupation
- Generally placed at the end of the questionnaire

Question Format

- Open/closed
 - Open – more information but difficult to use
 - Closed – less information but easier to analyze
- Open are more burdensome
- Some mixture recommended for most questionnaires because respondents need opportunity to express themselves

Question Format (2)

- Scales
 - Many kinds
 - Generally preferred over yes/no questions
- Rank orderings
 - Burdensome
 - Much error

Question Format Summary (An Important “Do”)

- Questions are the core of the survey; they require the most time and care in development
- Good questions are more important than very precise sampling
- There are no rules, only guidelines, but some formats work better than others
- Ask fewer than you think you need

Test, refine, test, refine, test, refine

Summary

- Surveys are not always needed for data collection (Don't)
- Surveys require significant resources to be done well (Important Do)
- Surveys are designed so that all pieces fit together and work together (Do)
- I haven't described how to conduct a survey but how to think about designing a survey

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