Conducting Member Surveys With Sensitive Topics

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One of the primary objectives of member research is to provide insight into members' behavior and opinions that management can use to guide the direction of the organization. In order to have reliable information, data must be collected in the most accurate way possible. There are a number of areas in which error can be introduced at various stages of the research process (e.g. sample being used, non-representativeness of the respondents to the overall membership, incorrectly worded questions, faulty data analysis, and making incorrect conclusions from the data).

While there are entire books dedicated to conducting reliable research, this paper focuses on how to get the most accurate data possible when the topics being addressed are of a sensitive nature. When survey questions ask individuals about behaviors that respondents believe they should be doing (socially desirable), behaviors that they believe they should not be doing (socially undesirable), situations that are potentially embarrassing, or attitudes they hold which may not be popular, there is a tendency for respondents to reply in a way they believe is more socially acceptable. By being less than 100% truthful, a bias is introduced into the system, known as response bias.

Sources of Response Bias

Researchers, such as Alreck and Settle (1985), provide a listing of a number of sources of response bias.

Social Desirability – Response based on what is perceived as being socially acceptable or unacceptable. When personal preferences, opinions, or behavior deviate from what is socially prescribed, respondents are prone to report what is socially acceptable, rather than their true answers. Some issues such as sexual deviance, drug or alcohol abuse or tax evasion have historically been affected by social desirability.

Acquiescence – Response based on respondent's perception of what would be desirable to the sponsor of the research. Stated differently, this is when the respondent provides answers they think the researcher wants to hear.

Yea- and Nea-saying – Response influenced by the global tendency toward positive and negative answers (i.e. some individuals are predisposed toward giving more positive or more negative responses.)

Prestige – Response intended to enhance the image of the respondent in the eyes of the others.

Threat – Response influenced by anxiety of fear instilled by the nature of the question, or by how the information might be used.

Hostility – Response arising from feelings of anger or resentment engendered by the response task (i.e. resentment for having to complete the survey.)

Auspices – Response dictated by the image or opinion of the research sponsor rather than the actual question.

Mental set – Response based on cognitions or perceptions based on previous items as they influence the response to later ones.

Order – The sequence in which a series is listed affects the responses to the items.

How to determine if a particular topic is sensitive.

Over the years, researchers have developed a list of topics that are generally accepted as sensitive (e.g. drug and alcohol use, sexual activity, spousal or child abuse) (Lee, 1993). While they admit that some items are intuitively sensitive, other topics may not be quite as obvious. Some researchers classify gun ownership as a sensitive topic, not because their respondents are ashamed to admit it, but rather, that a relatively small fraction of gun owners do not want to admit it. In some cases, asking an individual to divulge his/her age, gender, level of formal education, or household income, can be sensitive because of the personal nature of the question.

One way to determine if a topic is sensitive to your audience is to look at the results of previously administered surveys. If respondents are reluctant to answer a particular question, this could be a sign that the topic of the question is sensitive. This reluctance may manifest itself by having a higher incidence of being skipped (not answered), or is the point at which surveys are being terminated at a higher rate.

Using external checks, if available, can determine if socially acceptable behavior (e.g. seat belt usage, charitable donations) is overstated, or if socially unacceptable behavior (e.g. driving over the speed limit) is understated. As an example, survey responses concerning donations to an organization's foundation can be validated by cross checking those responses against actual donation records. Also, email open statistics can be used to validate those who claim to be reading the organization's email communications. While external checks are useful for estimating the amount of overstatement or understatement

of socially acceptable and unacceptable behavior, there are no direct methods for validating survey responses that deal with sensitive attitudes/opinions.

If a researcher suspects that a survey question may be dealing with a sensitive topic, an additional question can be added to the end of the survey asking respondents about the sensitivity of that question (e.g. "Do you think most people would consider the previous question regarding household income as a sensitive subject?" or "Did you find the question asking about your income to be a sensitive subject?")

How to Word Questions That Are Sensitive

(The following is a checklist provided by Sudman and Bradburn (1983)

1. When asking questions about the frequency of behavior that some may consider to be socially undesirable (e.g. drinking), open questions are better than closed questions. Closed questions consist of a pre-list of frequency ranges, in which the respondent is asked to select the appropriate response. The tendency is for respondents to avoid the extreme responses on a list, even if the extreme response is the appropriate selection. The open question prevents the respondent from having to select the most frequent occurrence in the scale. Open questions dealing with frequencies are relatively easy to code, and intervals can be assigned as part of the coding process. Open questions allow the really heavy drinkers to state numbers that exceed the highest response in the precoded condition. The precoded alternatives in the closed ended question also provides cues to the respondent regarding what the researcher considers to be a high frequency for that behavior.

2. Long questions are better than short questions for obtaining information on frequencies of socially undesirable behavior, because it allows the researcher to ease into the question. Longer questions increased the reported frequencies of socially undesirable behavior about 25-30 percent, as compared with the standard short questions. Longer questions, however, had no effect on respondent willingness to report ever engaging in a socially undesirable activity, such as drinking liquor or getting drunk.

    a. Everybody does it – (Example – "It is common for people to occasionally drive their car without buckling their seatbelt"). The introduction to the question indicates that the behavior is very common, so as to reduce the threat of reporting it.

    b. Use of authority to justify behavior – (Example - "Many doctors now think that drinking wine reduces heart attack and improves digestion"). This technique uses a statement attributed to someone they respect. However, this technique will cause over reporting if used on a socially desirable behavior (e.g. seatbelt usage).

      c.   Casual approach – (Example - "Did you happen to vote in the latest local election?") This technique reduces the perceived importance of the topic in question and reduces over reporting of socially desirable behavior. It does not increase reporting of socially undesirable behavior and may have the reverse effect (e.g. happen to own a gun or smoke marijuana vs. happen to read a book or attend a concert.)

      d.   Reasons for not engaging in socially desirable behavior - (Example - "Many drivers report that wearing seat belts is uncomfortable and makes it difficult to reach the vehicle's controls. Thinking about the last time you got into the car, did you wear a seatbelt?") Research shows that when using this technique, respondents are less likely to over report socially desirable behavior such as voting or seat belt usage.

3.   For socially undesirable behavior it is better, before asking about current behavior, to ask whether the respondent has ever engaged in the behavior. For socially acceptable behavior, it is better to ask about current rather than usual behavior. For socially unacceptable behavior, events that have occurred in the past are less threatening than questions about current behavior. For socially desirable behavior, the reverse strategy should be adopted. It would be threatening to admit that they never did something, like wear a seatbelt or read a book. "Thinking about the last time you got into the car, did you wear your seatbelt?" is better than "Do you ever wear seat belts?"

4.   Embed the threatening topic into a list of more and less threatening topics, to reduce the perceived importance of the topic to the respondent. If more threatening questions have been asked earlier, the question may appear less threatening than if it had been asked first.

Microaggregation Techniques

Microaggregation techniques were originally designed to protect the confidentiality of data held in archives. Researchers have expanded this technique to apply to survey data. Miller and Cisin (1984) developed a microaggregation technique known as "item counts/paired lists" to determine the frequency of sensitive behavior while providing complete anonymity for respondents. Two lists of behaviors are constructed in which one list contains the behavior being measured, while the second list does not. The remaining behaviors are identical to both lists. Respondents are asked to indicate the number of behaviors in their list in which they have engaged, without admitting to engaging in any specific behavior(s). The sample is split into two groups, and each group receives one list.

The researcher averages the number of occurrences reported for each list. Since the only difference between the two lists is the one additional behavior in question, the difference between the two averages can be attributed to the average occurrence of the

sensitive behavior being tested. The shortcomings of this technique are that it requires a sufficiently large sample size, and the behavior cannot be attributed to any individual respondents, as their responses are anonymous. However, if the topic being studied is extremely sensitive, and knowing the prevalence of the behavior without identifying individuals satisfies the objective of the study, this technique is worth considering.

Sequencing Questions

Ask sensitive questions at the end of the survey. As respondents get deeper into a survey, and more of their personal time and effort have been invested into the survey, they are less likely to abandon a survey before completion. It is widely accepted that because of the sensitive nature of demographic questions, they should be placed at the end of the survey. However, demographic questions that are used to qualify other questions are generally placed near the beginning of the survey.

Summary

Researchers acknowledge that most of the time sensitive topics are intuitively obvious and easy to identify. However, past studies have found that some topics, such as formal education and gun ownership, can be sensitive for some respondents.

Once the sensitive topics have been identified, a variety of techniques can be used to mitigate the sensitivity of the question in order for respondents to feel comfortable in divulging their attitudes and behaviors accurately.

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