Evaluation Take Aways

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Survey Item Design Best Practices

Surveys are often used to collect information and data because they can provide designers or authors with information and feedback in a short time frame. But surveys can be tricky: Well-written surveys can provide valid, accurate, and reliable feedback but a poorly written survey can be uninformative or even damaging. So how can survey designers or authors maximize their survey to ensure that the information they gather will be useful? One of the first steps is to consider how individual survey items are designed. Below are six survey item design best practices that can enhance the usability of survey data:

Use Specific and Straightforward Language

In general, survey designers want to minimize the likelihood of multiple interpretations of individual survey items. If there is consistency in how survey respondents understand survey items then the resulting responses will make more sense. One way to minimize multiple interpretations is to use specific and straightforward language in survey items.

For example, a survey item might read, *"I model good reading habits for my child."* Unfortunately, individuals might have varied interpretations of what *"good reading habits"* are: one person might feel that reading the newspaper to themself is a good reading habit, another might feel that reading a book to their child is a good reading habit, while a third might not have thought about what reading habits might be 'good.' To improve the question – and the resulting data – the survey designer could identify a number of 'good reading habits' and ask parents and care providers about each of the habits. An improved version of the survey item might be, *"I read to my child at least once a week."*

Do Not Lead the Respondent

Because the purpose of surveys is to obtain respondents honest and true opinions, survey designers should carefully construct and edit survey items so that respondents are not led to a predetermined response. And this applies to both the item *stem* (the survey item) and the *response options*. For instance, someone might read the

following survey item, *"How bad were the presenter's communication skills?"* Unfortunately, this item presupposes that the presenter's communication skills were, in fact, bad. After reading this item, survey respondents are likely to also believe that the presenter's communication skills *were* bad and respond accordingly. To improve the item in order to obtain more accurate responses, the item should be worded more neutrally, such as *"What did you think about the presenter's communication skills?"*

Some surveys also include items with options where an individual chooses their response. Poorly written survey items often have skewed or slanted response options – that is, an imbalance in the number of positive vs. negative response options – that lead respondents. For example, a set of poorly written survey item and response options might look like this:

> *"How bad were the presenter's communication skills?*
> > *Extremely bad*
> > *Significantly bad*
> > *Very bad*
> > *Bad*
> > *Neutral*
> > *Not at all bad"*

In this example respondents can choose from four options that emphasize the poorness of the presenter's communication skills but only one neutral and positive response option. A better response scale would be balanced and have the same number of positive and negative response options, such as, *"Very bad, Bad, Neutral, Good, Very good."*

One Concept per Survey Item

If a respondent was asked, *"How would you rate the <u>accuracy</u> and <u>usefulness</u> of the information you received?"* they may not know how to respond especially if they have differing opinions about accuracy and usefulness. For example, if the user found the information to be highly accurate but not useable, the respondent could give a very favorable rating, an unfavorable rating, or a rating somewhere in the middle. Ultimately, when multiple concepts are included in a single survey item, survey takers often do not know how to appropriately answer the

item. As a result, survey responses tend to be highly variable. In general, all survey items should be limited to one concept and all multi-concept survey items should be split into two or more items. For example, rather than asking the about the *'usefulness and accuracy'* of the information, the item could be split into two questions, *"How would you rate the accuracy of the information received?"* and *"How would you rate the usefulness of the information received?"*

Avoid Duplicate Items

Duplicate survey items refer to asking the survey respondent identical or highly similar items. For example, a survey might include the following two items, *"How did the weather impact your event?"* and *"How did the snowstorm impact your event?"*

The challenge with duplicate items is that they increase survey length and, in general, respondents are more likely to respond to shorter surveys. In addition, survey respondents often get frustrated when they are asked to respond to duplicate or very similar survey items; as a result they may not complete the survey in it's entirety. In addition, longer surveys can be more expensive: they require more paper and duplication (for paper-and-pencil versions) and there are more items to be analyzed and summarized. Whenever possible, avoid duplicate items.

Use an Appropriate Timeframe

Human memory for unique events is fascinating: the amount of information people can and do remember is detailed and specific. However, for mundane events like taking out the trash or folding laundry, human memory is often fuzzier. Details for mundane events tend to get lost and often get blended together. This unique characteristic of human memory is important whenever a survey item asks the respondent about events which have occurred over time. In general, respondents are going to give more accurate responses for a recent, brief timeframe but will give less accurate responses for an extended or distant timeframe. For instance, consider the following two questions:

"How often have you exercised (total) over the past 2 weeks?" versus

"How often have you exercised (total) over the past 12 months?"

Survey respondents are much more likely to give an accurate response to the first question because they are much more likely to remember the previous two weeks than the prior 12 months. For the second question, respondents are likely to estimate, often inaccurately, how often they exercised. And, as was mentioned above, the more accurate the responses the more useful survey results will be. Therefore, brief and recent timeframes are recommended for surveys and should be used whenever possible.

Prioritize Survey Items

Last, survey items should be prioritized to separate what 'needs to be known' from what would be 'nice to know.' As mentioned earlier, survey respondents are much more likely to fully complete a shorter survey than a longer one. Usually surveys are lengthy with just the 'needs to be known' items and adding the 'nice to know' items further lengthens the survey. Restricting the survey to what 'needs to be known' ensures that necessary data is collected and that a large number of individuals respond completely to the survey.

Resources

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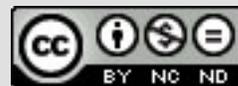Haladyna, T. M., & Rodriguez, M. C. (2013). *Developing and validating test items.* New York: Routledge

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