

CHAPTER 10

SPECIAL QUESTIONNAIRES



The bulk of this book has been devoted to designing structured and semi-structured questionnaires of a type which find application in telephone or face-to-face situations and where there are dozens, probably hundreds of respondents. In this chapter we turn to two contrasting types of questionnaire. One is the check list which is employed in the more loosely structured work of the qualitative researcher, the other is the self-completion questionnaire which is a very tightly structured form used in postal surveys.

Check lists

Qualitative researchers work with small samples of respondents and do not attempt to interview masses of people in order to arrive at measurements of how many said one thing and how many said the other. Their interest is in explaining why and how things happen and understanding buyers' motivations. The qualitative researcher works in a more unstructured fashion, interviewing

small numbers of people in group discussions¹ or in one-to-one depth interviews. The wide ranging responses which are obtained may be recorded on tape or in note form on a pad and some considerable skills and experience is required to interpret and diagnose the findings.

In many respects the check list (sometimes called a topic list) used by the qualitative researcher is much easier to design than the structured questionnaire. It is really an aid memoir, and the chances are that the researcher who designs it is the same person who will use it. In these conditions, the questions are already in the researcher's head and the check list is simply a reminder to jog the memory or to tick off the points which have been covered.

There are no hard and fast rules for the design of check lists. Some researchers do not couch the questions in a form ready for asking and they are just listed as subjects. Some have lengthy lists with reminders as to the lines of questioning which will result from certain answers; others simply list a few points to raise in discussion. The following check list was used to guide discussion groups of householders to find out if they had any views on the environmental aspects of milk carton packaging. In this example the researcher placed a note on the check list as a reminder about the time to be spent on each subject area.

CARTON PACKAGING

1 INTRODUCTION (5 mins)

- 1.1 Who we are. What we do. What we will be doing tonight.
- 1.2 Introductions all round.

2) TALK ABOUT MILK PACKAGING (10 mins)

- 2.1.1 How many different types of milk packaging can people think of.
PROBE: glass, plastic, cartons, sachets.

¹ Group discussions (or focus groups) are a research technique used to find out about people's attitudes. They are particularly appropriate for testing new products or concepts. A group comprises 6 to 8 people specially recruited, perhaps because they are a target for the product. The group is led by a researcher (sometimes referred to as a moderator) who uses a check list to guide the discussion. The group generates ideas and sparks thoughts which would not arise in one to one interviewing.

- 2.2 What are the advantages/plus points of each. Why? (*Note any mention of environmental issues for later discussion*).
- 2.3 What are the disadvantages/minus points of each. Why? (*Note any mention of environmental issues for later discussion*).

3. TALK ABOUT PACKAGING MATERIALS IN GENERAL (10 mins)

- 3.1 What are the advantages of glass, tin, paper, card, plastic as packaging materials?
- 3.2 What are the disadvantages of glass, tin, paper, card, plastic as packaging materials?
- 3.3 Which are most environmentally friendly? Why?
- 3.4 Which are least environmentally friendly? Why?
- 3.5 Which types of packaging materials are avoided if there is a choice? Why?

4. TALK ABOUT CARTON PACKAGING IN GENERAL (10 mins)

- 4.1 What products are packed in cartons now-a-days?
- 4.2 What are the good points about carton packaging?
- 4.3 What are the bad points about carton packaging?
- 4.4 Do people actively seek cartons in preference to other types of packaging?
- 4.5 Do people avoid buying products in cartons, preferring other types of packaging?
- 4.6 Could more products be sold in cartons? PROBE: doorstep milk, bottled water, sauces, soups, beans, pet food, flour. What would be the advantages? What would be the disadvantages?
- 4.7 Which manufacturers of carton packaging are known?

5. NOW TALK ABOUT GLASS AS A PACKAGING AS A PACKAGING MATERIAL (10 mins)

- 5.1 Is glass environmentally friendly/unfriendly?
- 5.2 What are the environmental problems of using glass - both in production, in use, and in recycling?

6. TALK ABOUT CHEMICALS USED IN PACKAGING MATERIALS MANUFACTURING (10 mins)

- 6.1 Is there anything about the *manufacturing process* of any packaging material that is environmentally unfriendly? What is it?
- 6.2 Why is it unfriendly? What are the implications to the user? What are the implications to the environment?

7 TALK ABOUT DIOXIN (10 mins)

- 7.1 What are the most unfriendly chemicals used in packaging manufacture? What type of packaging are they used in? Why are they unfriendly?
- 7.2 What is known of as a chemical used in the manufacture of packaging materials?
- 7.3 What is known of as a chemical used in the manufacture of packaging materials?
- 7.4 What is known of dioxin as a chemical used in the manufacture of packaging materials?
- 7.5 Which types of companies use dioxin? How is it used? What does it do to the packaging? What does it do to the user? What does it do to the environment?
- 7.6 What are the alternatives to dioxin? How good or bad are these?

8 DIFFERENT SUBJECT NOW. TALK ABOUT MESSAGES ON PACKAGING (10 mins)

- 8.1 What messages should be shown on different types of packaging material. Which types of packaging are they likely to be on?

Nearly always the qualitative researcher would expect to formulate the specific questions themselves during the interview of group discussion and not worry too much about the precision that is the concern of the quantitative researcher. The qualitative researcher is allowed this freedom being the person who administers the question, hears the answer, develops the discussion with a rejoinder and interprets what it all means.

The qualitative researcher works in the informal atmosphere of conversation and spends much time listening, using silence to flush out further response. Whereas structured interviews last between 15 minutes and up to an hour, the conversational approach used in qualitative research allows the interview length to be pushed well beyond an hour without boredom or weariness on the part of the respondent. The interviews are usually face-to-face and are likely to be held in a home or office (sometimes a special venue is used for group discussions or depths). In certain circumstances, such as with business-to-business research, respondents can be held in discussion for long periods over the telephone as long as the subject is interesting and the interviewer is skilled in building a rapport.

The check list may appear to play a subservient role in the interview, perhaps being alluded to only now and then, but its importance should not be

underestimated. The very act of creating the check list will help the researcher structure thoughts and direct the interview.

Self-completion and postal questionnaires

As the name suggests, self-completion questionnaires are those which respondents complete on their own. In the main these are sent through the post and so they are often referred to as postal questionnaires. However, self-completion questionnaires can be used in face-to-face interviews in the right circumstances, perhaps for scalar questions where it is easier for respondents to read the questions and tick the boxes themselves rather than go through the much longer rigmarole of having the interviewer read everything out.

Postal questionnaires are the most difficult of all to design. A poor questionnaire can still be made to work by a skilled and trained interviewing force whereas a questionnaire which has arrived through the post is without anyone to provide advice, answer queries or ensure that the respondent understands the meaning of the question.

Self-completion questionnaires which are part of face-to-face interviews, are rather different as the interviewer is on hand to solve problems. Self-completion can be used in face-to-face interviews for scalar questions which would be long and tedious to read out.

In postal surveys the response rate is critical. The factors which affect response rates are:

The interest factor

The factor that influences the response rate of a postal questionnaire, more than anything else, is the interest that the respondent has in the subject of the survey. Thus, a postal survey of customers will achieve a higher response than one of non-customers because there is an *interest* in and a *relationship* between customers and the sponsor of the study. A postal survey aimed at people who have just bought a new truck will generate a high response (over 30% and possibly over 50%) because they are *interested* in the vehicle. If the same respondent received a questionnaire asking about the type of pen he uses, the response would be minimal (probably less than 5%) because the subject is not compelling.



This fundamental point means that researchers should avoid using postal surveys except when the respondent is likely to be highly motivated to answer.

Beyond the intrinsic interest which is held in a subject, the researcher can do a number of things to improve response rates to postal surveys. These are discussed below.

The incentive

A respondent does not want to feel that his efforts in completing the questionnaire are a waste of time. It is important, therefore, that the cover letter gives the purpose to the study and convinces the recipient that his reply really matters. If possible a benefit should be mentioned such as the promise of better products or service or a gift. Sometimes it is appropriate to offer a summary of the findings.

The layout

As in all other questionnaires the postal questionnaire must be orderly and logical, but more so. More than in telephone or face-to-face interviews, there is a need to begin with easy questions - questions that involve the simple ticking of boxes - and moving eventually to those requiring more thought. Getting the respondent started with the first tick is the hardest task of all and difficult questions at this stage would be off-putting. Ideally, the questionnaire should be desk top published and of a good print quality. A professionally produced questionnaire will lift the response. (As always there are exceptions and a questionnaire that looks as if it was designed specifically for the recipient by knocking it up on an old typewriter has been known to yield a high response).

Instructions must be clear. There is no chance of providing any further explanation as to what is really meant by a question. There must be adequate room to answer questions - especially any that attempt to elicit a free response.

The convenience factor

It has been emphasised that the successful postal questionnaire must be easy to complete. This means that questions with pre-coded answers should be used wherever possible. All the respondent should be asked to do is tick a box.

In some circumstances questionnaires with numbers to circle are acceptable but if there is any doubt, defer to simplicity and use boxes.

Everything should be done to make it easy for the respondent to reply. The enclosure of a stamped addressed envelope, or at least a business reply envelope, will raise the response by the odd percentage point.

Designing cover letters for postal questionnaires

The cover letter accompanying the questionnaire is as important as the questionnaire itself. Unless there is absolute certainty about the name and position of the respondent, it is better to address the letter to "The householder" or, in the case of business-to-business surveys, a functional title such as "The Production Manager" or "The Office Equipment Buyer". Mis-spelling a name or using the name of someone who has long since left the company or address is worse than having no name at all.

Rules for writing good cover letters are as follows:

- Explain the purpose of the survey and why the respondent has been selected.
- Give the respondent a reason for wanting to complete the questionnaire - offer a benefit of one kind or another.
- Give clear instructions as to what should be done - how to fill it in, *and* how to send it back.
- Give an assurance that completing the questionnaire is easy.
- If it is possible to do so, give an assurance that replies will be confidential.
- Thank the respondent.

Types of questions suited to postal questionnaires

Pre-coded questions are suited to postal questionnaires as they save the respondent time writing in the answers. Scalar questions are highly applicable to self completion questionnaires because they can be completed quickly by ticking boxes.

The researcher needs to have a good background on a subject to design a workable self completion questionnaire with sensible pre-coded answers. It would not be possible to construct the following question without some previous

knowledge of who makes pipe lagging products. (And this question is as complicated as is possible in a self completion questionnaire).

Which of the companies listed below would you say has the widest range of pipe lagging products? TICK ONE COMPANY ONLY IN COLUMN A.

And which company has the smallest range? TICK ONE COMPANY ONLY IN COLUMN B.

	Column A Widest Range	Column B Smallest Range
Jiffy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Climatube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Jetlag	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tublite	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Armaflex	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Insultube	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Don't know	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Types of questions not suited to postal questionnaires

Open-ended questions do not yield a good response in a self completion questionnaire. Questions which ask for free ranging explanations get inadequate (and often illegible) answers such as "because it is good", "we have always bought it", "it does its job" etc and there is no opportunity to find out why it is good, why they always buy it or in what way it does its job.

Nor is it possible to ask complicated questions in a self completion questionnaire. A question which asks a builders' merchant for a detailed breakdown of his purchases of pipe lagging products over the last year will not be answered because the respondent will not have the answer to mind. The researcher stands some chance if a pre-coded answer is given and the respondent only needs to give a response between ranges.

Finally, about how much did your branch spend on all types of pipe lagging in the last complete year?

Under £1,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£1,000 to £20,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
£20,001 to £50,000	<input type="checkbox"/>
Over £50,000	<input type="checkbox"/>

