

CHAPTER 9

GETTING THE QUESTIONNAIRE RIGHT




Using software to design and edit questionnaires

The process of arriving at a questionnaire which works, and is as near perfect as possible, comes from constant refining, polishing and editing.

Editing questionnaires has been made easier by word processing which allows words and phrases to be removed or inserted. Questions can be moved around the document. Questions which have been tried and tested can be copied in from other files. Paragraph numbering can be used for question numbers so that they are automatically adjusted if the question order is changed. Spell checking helps remove embarrassing errors. Different font sizes and the use of columns can produce a questionnaire which is almost to desk top publishing standard. Word processing has now become such an important tool in the design of questionnaires that the researcher who cannot type or use the software is at a marked disadvantage.

Special software is also available to assist in questionnaire design. Often this questionnaire design facility is allied to data processing packages such as Snap, Marquis and Merlin¹. The packages have value in providing structure to

¹Snap is from Mercator, Bristol; Marquis from Systems Makers, Stockport; Merlin is from



questionnaire design as they remind the researcher to do routine things like give a title, make provision for the respondent's name and address and they provide automatic question numbering and routing. They are especially useful for taking control of the formatting of questions on the page producing well laid out grids, columns for office use and correctly spaced lines for open ended responses.

Most of the packages will convert the questionnaires for use in Computer Aided Telephone Interviewing (CATI). CATI is most suitable for large telephone studies where the interviewer reads questions from a computer screen and taps the answers into the keyboard as they are given. Such interviewing works best when the questions and answers are very simple and all the response categories have been pre-empted. The major advantages of CATI interviewing are savings in the time and cost of data processing and analyses of the findings can be obtained at any time during the interview programme.

Questionnaire design packages suffer limitations. Most do lack spell checkers. They bring to the screen one question at a time making it difficult to scroll backwards and forwards to look at what has already been asked. For the researcher who is already struggling with the complications of word processing software, the questionnaire design packages are something else to learn. At least the word processing software is in day-to-day use finding wider applications in report and letter writing. On balance, the word processing approach to questionnaire design appears to have more attractions.

It is normal, probably healthy, to produce three or four drafts of the questionnaire before the researcher feels that it is approaching the stage where it is ready for use in the field. Every time a draft is run off, the researcher should be viewing each question critically:

- How will the answer to this question help meet the objectives of the study; is it really necessary?
- Will the question be understood in the way that is intended?
- Is there a better way of asking the question?
- Is it clear what the interviewer should do and where she goes next?
- Have all the questions been included; has anything been missed out?



Piloting the questionnaire

Piloting is where a small number of interviews are carried out in the field to see if there are any aspects of the questionnaire which do not work. First, the researcher should at the very least read it out to him/herself or, better still, ask a colleague to play the role of respondent. Bringing the questionnaire into the *spoken* word could expose weaknesses in wording or phraseology and should show glaring inconsistencies. It is worth giving a final draft of the questionnaire to data processing to see if they can spot any coding or routing problems.

Finally, the questionnaire is ready for piloting. The following checks are vital at the pilot stage:


- question wording - does it make sense?
- pre-codes in closed questions - are they the right ones?
- interviewer instructions - is it clear to the interviewer what should be read out and what should not?
- routing - does the interviewer know where to go next?
- space - is there sufficient space for the answers?

The number of interviews which need to be carried out in the pilot varies according to the type of study. If the full study involves just 50 to 100 interviews with businesses, perhaps half a dozen pilot interviews will be sufficient to see if the questionnaire is working. In fact, in such a small survey, almost every interview will be watched like a hawk and variations and special comments can all be accommodated.

In a larger study, say one involving more than 200 people, the size of the pilot could be between 20 and 50 interviews - sufficient to cover a good cross section of the respondents.

The pilot should be carried out using the same medium that will be used in the interviews when they finally take place. That is, a telephone interview programme should be piloted over the telephone, street interviews should be piloted in the street.

It is important that the person who carries out the pilot is an experienced interviewer, someone who can look out for and pick up weaknesses in the questionnaire if they exist. Given the small number of interviews that will be carried out, the pilot could be undertaken by just one person.



The pilot could be used to build a list of pre-coded answers to an open question although normally these pre-codes would be determined during an earlier, qualitative stage.

The pilot interviews need not be wasted. Very often no changes are required to the questionnaire and so the pilot interviews are perfectly acceptable contributions to the total quota. Even minor changes to the questionnaire need not be a barrier to including the pilot interviews within the total number that are to be carried out, especially if respondents can be recontacted to ask a supplementary question or check if a change of wording would have altered the answer.

In some industrial samples it is not possible to abandon the pilot interviews as to do so would be to get rid of essential contributors to the survey. It sense for companies selected for the pilot interviews in an industrial study to be relatively minor players, thus minimising any damage to the whole survey if they need to be forsaken.