

A Note on Formatting a Questionnaire

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Introduction

Research is a scientific, rational, systematic and objective investigation with a purpose to solve an existing problem or to expand frontiers of knowledge by providing answers to fundamental questions. Whatever the purpose research, it is imperative that it must be always based on relevant and pertinent information procured from suitable sources – respondents, objects, organisations, etc. The focus of this article is on some aspects of formatting a questionnaire in an efficient and compatible manner. A questionnaire is defined as ‘a set of questions designed to generate data necessary for accomplishing the objectives of the research project’ (source: www.momentumresearchgroup.com).

Topics relating to the art and skill of questionnaire designing have been discussed in several books. Research journals contain articles and papers, which deal with specific aspects of designing questions without ambiguity, scaling techniques, intricacies of reliability and validity and designing object-oriented professional questionnaires. These are the ‘software’ of questionnaire designing. But, one can hardly find any book or article or paper that address the subject of formatting a questionnaire. In this note the author has discussed various aspects of the ‘hardware’ of a questionnaire.

Foreword from the author

My exposure to designing questionnaires, administering them to respondents, entering the data from the filled-up questionnaires into data-sheets and preparing extensive data-files for use in Statistical software (mainly SPSS and MS Excel) started when I took up Market Research Assignments about eight years back. While working on a particular project on ‘Consumer Non-Durable Items’, I was confronted with a number of difficulties in the data-entry process. As far as the questions and the various forms of scaling were concerned, the questionnaire was designed perfectly; but there was no formatting in the structure. At nearly every stage of data entry I encountered difficulties which made the task extremely tedious and unscientific. I had to spend a considerable amount of time strategising the data entry process, which made my task tiring and time-consuming. While working on another project titled “Employee Loyalty in Private Sector Organisations”, I had developed and introduced a formal formatting of the questionnaire – this eventually made the data entry and preparation process a much simpler and swift work. The formatting technique however simple and trivial, may be implemented in questionnaires designed for several types of research. The examples used in this article have been borrowed from the Working Paper “Customer Perception of Banking Services” I am currently engaged in writing.

1. Every questionnaire should have a serial number in the front page

Entering data from a large number of questionnaires is a very monotonous task and needs a lot of concentration. A person dedicated to such a task would tire easily. To revitalise himself from this fatigue, he would need to take occasional breaks in his work. In addition to these, attending phone calls, answering doors and such chores would also result in a break in the continuity of data entry. An organised person may leave a mark (a post-it note / pen mark / paper tag) at the point in the questionnaire at the point where he had stopped. But more often than not this is not the case – people generally give a break, thinking that he will continue from where he had trailed off. After his break on his return to his task of data entry, he may tend to forget as to which questionnaire he had entered the data from before he took his break. This may be avoided by a simply

numbering the questionnaires on the front page and entering this number in front of the data corresponding to that questionnaire. For example,

Questionnaire for “Customer Perception of Banking Services”

Questionnaire No. 027

2. A questionnaire should contain very few pages (preferably one single sheet of paper, written back to back)

The researcher holds the best knowledge of the aims and objectives of his research and would definitely not want to compromise on the number of questions. But, he must remember that the respondent is a person who is most likely oblivious of these aims and objectives. What a respondent abhors most is being confronted with a large sheaf of paper filled with a long list of questions. To accommodate as many questions as possible on a page, the page layout may be adjusted, the font size of letters may be made suitably small. The questionnaire itself should be printed back to back. Fewer numbers of pages may give an illusion of a ‘brief’ questionnaire!

3. Questions should be in order in which you want to enter the data

Entering data from a questionnaire involves a strenuous task of ‘soft-copying’ down numbers (or words). Shifting to and fro along the data sheet, while entering data, may result in errors. Questions should be arranged in order in which the data are to be entered to ensure a continuous flow in data entry work.

For example question no. 1 may correspond to the entries of the 1st column of an MS Excel sheet, question no. 2 to that of the 2nd column, and so on.

4. Each option stated in a ‘categorical variable’ question should be numbered

A ‘categorical variable’ or nominal variable as it is more commonly known are those which relate to the class or group or category to which the respondent belongs to. The possible answers (i.e. categories) in a particular question may be large in number and some of their names may be rather long. It is easier to insert a number instead of a word or phrase in a data sheet. A codebook containing the various options and their corresponding numbers may be prepared for the purpose of analyses. An example is shown below:

Q1. Where would you look for information about the various services available in a bank?

- Parents / Spouse / Children (1) Friends / Relatives (2) Agents / Brokers (3)
 Bank personnel (4) Advertisement in the bank premises (5) Newspaper (6)
 Television (7) Magazines (8) Hoardings (9) Internet (10)
 Cellular Phone (11) Others (please specify) (12) _____

5. Questions relating to a particular type of variable should be together

Researches, especially empirical researches need data on different kinds of variables, depending on their objectives. The most commonly used variables are categorical, interval scaled, demographical, socio-economic and psychographical. Whether analysing data directly from the data sheet or entering the data into software programmes for future analysis, it would always be convenient and thus preferable to have data relating to a particular type of variable should be to-

gether, rather than dispersed all over the data sheet. Thus while sequencing questions in a questionnaire, care should be taken to insert questions a particular 'variable' together one following the other. An example,

Please grade the following questions on the given 1 to 7 scale:

Account Facilities	(1-extremely poor, 7-excellent)						
1. Ease of opening new savings account	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2. Ease of operating savings account	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3. Minimum balance required in savings account	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4. Ease of opening a new recurring deposit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5. Ease of operating recurring deposit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6. Amount required in recurring deposit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
7. Ease of opening a new fixed deposit	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Psychographics	(1-extremely poor, 7-excellent)						
8. Easiness of understanding paper-work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9. Reputation of bank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10. Security of money at bank	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
11. Feeling of warmth and friendliness	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
12. Attitude of bank manager	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
13. Attitude of bank staff	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
14. Effectiveness of customer care cell	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
15. Listening to complaints	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
16. Solving problems	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
17. Listening to suggestions	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Personal Information

B1. Gender	Male (1)	Female (2)			
B2. Marital status	Married (1)	Unmarried (2)	Widow / Widower (3)	Separated (4)	Divorced (5)

B3. Monthly Family income (Rs.)	B4. Age	B5. Education	B6. Occupation
Less than 10,000 (1)	Less than 25 (1)	Secondary (class 10) pass (1)	Home maker (1)
10,000 – 20,000 (2)	25 to 35 (2)	Higher Secondary (class 12) pass (2)	Service (2)
20,000 – 30,000 (3)	35 to 45 (3)	Undergraduate (3)	Self-employed (3)
30,000 – 40,000 (4)	45 to 55 (4)	Graduate (4)	Retired (4)
More than 40,000 (5)	More than 55 (5)	Postgraduate (5)	Student (5)

6. Make name of the respondent optional

In many researches it is irrelevant to note down the name of a respondent for its analyses. It is thus immaterial and pointless to ask the respondent his name. Respondent often shows disliking in giving his name, as he feels apprehensive about the confidentiality maintained regarding the information he has contributed to the research.

7. Give the respondent a choice as to whether he would like to be informed about the final outcome of the research

A respondent would be happy if he is made to feel that he had been an important and integral part of the research. A questionnaire should always conclude with a thank you note as a sign of gratitude towards the respondent. Respondents often enquire about the research and show interest in its findings. Thus, a sentence such as the following may be added to the thank you note:

We would like to share our findings of this research with you in near future. In case you are interested, please give your name, address, e-mail address, and fax no. and contact number(s) below.

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