

A Guide to Using a Market Research Questionnaire

Business Information Factsheet
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Introduction

A market research questionnaire is a useful tool for collecting and understanding the opinions, preferences and buying behaviour of your customers or potential customers. It is also a means of adding structure to a customer interview or focus group. The questions you ask may help you to estimate levels of demand and opinions on pricing in relation to your product or service. In designing the questionnaire, you need to construct questions carefully in order to obtain unambiguous answers from respondents about their needs and wants.

This factsheet outlines the most common methods of using questionnaires to find the information you need about your market, what types of questions you can ask and the style of questionnaire you could use. It also includes hints and tips and sources of further information.

Uses of market research questionnaires

A well-thought-out questionnaire, which asks the right questions and is properly completed, can be a useful means of understanding factors relating to your product or service, such as:

- Consumers' awareness of your product or business.
- Consumers' attitudes towards your product or service.
- Consumers' attitudes towards your competitors' products and services.
- Consumers' perceptions of product performance.
- Consumers' buying behaviour.

Questionnaire techniques

There are three main questionnaire techniques:

- Personal survey (that is, face-to-face).
- Telephone questionnaire.
- Postal/e-mail/online questionnaire.

Your choice of technique will depend on the type of customer group being targeted and the type of information you are seeking. Each has its own benefits and drawbacks. The techniques, and their advantages and disadvantages, can be usefully compared in the following table.

Questionnaire techniques	Advantages	Disadvantages
Personal survey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater flexibility and control - opportunity to clarify misunderstandings. • Can ask supplementary questions. • High response rate. • Can watch body language as well as verbal response. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time consuming. • Expensive. • Respondents have little time to think.
Telephone questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More flexibility and often a higher response rate than post. • Reach people who won't give personal interview. • Fast. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews must be fairly short. • Respondents have little time to think. • May give inaccurate responses.
Postal/e-mail/online questionnaire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheap. • Respondents have time to think. • Objective - there is no bias from the interviewer. • Useful when respondent is difficult to contact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible low response rate. • No flexibility to clarify answers. • Limited information obtained.

Questionnaire structure

A questionnaire can fall into one of three categories - structured, semi-structured or unstructured.

- A structured questionnaire is a series of 'closed' questions asked in the order in which they are laid out. These questionnaires are best suited to large interview situations such as a postal survey.
- Semi-structured questionnaires (a mixture of 'closed' and 'open' questions) enable you to retain control while also allowing for a wider range of responses.
- An unstructured questionnaire is a series of 'open-ended' questions, the order of which can be changed by the interviewer. This type of questionnaire is often used with narrow or specialist target audiences, either face-to-face or over the telephone. While the unstructured approach can provide valuable insights, it can be difficult to analyse and draw meaningful conclusions from the findings.

There are a number of issues to consider when deciding what structure of questionnaire you should use, including the aims and objectives of the survey. The method of data collection you use must suit the nature of the audience sample and the questions you want to ask. With telephone and face-to-face questionnaires, for instance, you will be able to answer any queries about the questions, whereas a postal or e-mail questionnaire will be expected to be easy to follow and self-explanatory.

You also need to decide on how you will analyse the data and incorporate this into the design of the questionnaire (for instance, including boxes to tick or pre-coded questions).

Types of market research questions

There are five main types of market research questions:

- Closed questions - where the only answers are yes/no/don't know. For example: 'are you planning a holiday this year?' It is possible to anticipate the answer and results can be easily summarised.
- Open questions - where the respondent is given the chance to answer freely. For example: 'what is your opinion about this new brand of soap powder?' This produces more realistic information, but is harder to interpret.
- Multiple-choice - where a series of set answers is given and the respondent chooses one. These are easy to summarise, but it is hard to design these questions without missing out other alternatives. For example, 'if you had a choice of restaurants, which would be your first choice?' (Indian, Chinese, Mexican or Italian?) One way around this is to have an option for the respondent to select 'other', supplemented by the question: 'if other, please state.'
- Direct questions - relating to the respondent's own behaviour. For example: 'which TV channel do you watch most?'
- Indirect questions - by asking questions about other people, the respondent's own attitudes are revealed. For example: 'where do you think the average parent would prefer to buy disposable nappies?' (At a chemist, a supermarket or via a delivery service?) Indirect questions should be used in cases where people might mislead the researcher about their own behaviour; for example, they may say that 'The Sun' is the most popular newspaper, but might not admit to reading it themselves.

Setting market research questions

- Ask your questions in a logical order. The first question you ask should tell you whether it is appropriate to continue with the respondent. For example, if the target group is coffee drinkers, 'do you drink coffee?' could be asked first.
- Put the easy and interesting questions at the beginning of your questionnaire.
- Confidential, personal and complex questions should be listed at the end and only asked if necessary.
- Make the wording of questions as simple as possible and clearly define all regional and technical terms.
- Questions should be precise, related to time, place, type and so on.
- Ensure that questions are relevant to the information you are seeking.
- Filter questions allow the respondent to move quickly through the questionnaire, ignoring questions that are irrelevant to them. For example, if your respondent answers that they don't drink coffee, your questionnaire should direct them past the next questions that deal only with coffee drinking.
- Avoid double-barrelled questions such as 'What do you think about the colouring and design of this product?' These can be confusing to answer and difficult to analyse.

- Avoid leading questions that imply an answer (for example, 'most people choose Brand X for its quality, why do you buy it?') or biased questions (for example, 'would you buy this product if a percentage of the price went to charity?').
- Be careful how you phrase questions relating to age, income or status. For example, instead of 'can you afford a holiday?' ask your respondent 'will you be going on holiday this year?'
- Avoid asking questions beyond the respondent's span of memory (for example, 'what TV programmes were you watching this time last year?'). Rather, ask the respondent a question that they can answer with confidence.
- Do not ask questions such as date of birth, school attended, mother's maiden name or town of birth as the answers to these questions are routinely used for accessing bank and personal information. Inclusion of them in a questionnaire might arouse distrust and result in a poor response rate.

Testing a questionnaire

Test the effectiveness of your questionnaire before using it as a tool for market research. To do this, the questionnaire should be tried out on a small sample of people. Ensure that the questions are easily understood so they will lead to the desired kind of response. This testing should expose any ambiguous or unnecessary questions, and help you to decide whether questions are suitable for the purpose of the survey.

Using the questionnaire

Individuals value their time and their willingness to devote any effort to answering your questionnaire will largely depend on who you are, what you want to know, why you want to know and what's in it for them. So, no matter how you go about your survey (postal, face-to-face, telephone, etc) you should provide the following:

- Brief details of your business (name of business and what it does).
- Why you are conducting the survey (testing a new product idea, product enhancement, etc).
- Overview of what the questions cover (time expected to complete questionnaire).
- Details of any incentive to participate (entry into a free prize draw, etc).

The above information can be provided verbally or in a letter or e-mail accompanying the questionnaire.

Analysing questionnaire results

Although individual responses can give some interesting insights, it is the collective questionnaire result that is of most use to your research and marketing plans. Analysis involves turning raw data into a representative list of similar responses.

To do this, information can be entered onto a spreadsheet to enable easy comparison of responses. With large numbers of replies it is easier to code and analyse the data using a database. There is also the option of handing over your replies to a specialist market research agency that will have data analysis software; however, this can be expensive. You can display

your results in charts or tables, and you should aim to produce a report of the findings followed by your recommendations.

Privacy issues

The Data Protection Act 1998 will apply to any personal information you gather when carrying out your questionnaire. Make sure you inform respondents that any data collected that identifies them personally will not be sold or given away to a third party. Go to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) website for more information on data protection (www.ico.org.uk).

Hints and tips

- If you can, limit the number of questions you ask - too many questions may affect the response rate, particularly of postal questionnaires.
- Test that the meaning of the questions is easily understood and unambiguous.
- If you use an independent market research agency, ensure that they are members of a reputable trade association that has a defined Code of Practice. The Market Research Society provides information on research agencies and consultants in its 'Research Buyer's Guide' (www.rbg.org.uk).
- If you use a postal questionnaire, it is a good idea to give the respondent an incentive to return it - for example, a prize draw or a discount on a purchase. A return rate of 10% of the questionnaires mailed is considered to be a good response.
- It is vital to include a Freepost or stamped return envelope in order to achieve reasonable response rates to postal questionnaires.
- You might find it beneficial to conduct a follow-up survey using the same group of respondents, so remember to ask if they are willing to be contacted again and what their preferred mode of contact is.
- Provide direct contact details of the person responsible for the survey as this may help to overcome any issues of trust that respondents might have.
- Be honest. If the results show up something you do not like or had not anticipated, look at this from a positive viewpoint as a foundation for changing your product or market focus.
- There are several online survey tools that are quick and easy to use, such as SurveyMonkey.com (www.surveymonkey.com) and SurveyGizmo.com (www.surveygizmo.com).

Further information

For practical start up and small business tips, ideas and news, go to:

Website: www.enterprisequest.com

To access hundreds of practical factsheets, market reports and small business guides, go to:

Website: www.scavenger.net

BIF 3 A Guide to the Data Protection Act 1998
BIF 44 A Guide to Developing a Marketing Plan

BIF 47 A Guide to Sources of Market Information and Statistics
BIF 107 A Guide to Profiling Your Target Market
BIF 185 A Checklist for Start Up Market Research

Books

'Developing a Questionnaire'

Bill Gillham

2008

Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd

Useful contacts

The Market Research Society (MRS) provides a wide range of information about market research and publishes the Research Buyer's Guide.

Tel: (020) 7490 4911

Website: www.mrs.org.uk

The MRS has guidelines on carrying out market research.

Website: www.mrs.org.uk/standards/guidelines

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Cobweb Information Ltd, Unit 9 Bankside, The Watermark, Gateshead, NE11 9SY.

Tel: 0191 461 8000 Website: www.cobwebinfo.com