Get better info from all your questionnaires

13 important tips to help you pretest your surveys

by Pamela Narins
Manager, Market Research

Now that we have discussed how to develop questions and present them in a questionnaire, you must ask yourself one final question before going into the field: “Will this questionnaire work in the way I’ve intended?”

This important question is the basis of survey pretesting. Consider the pretest phase a dry run where you uncover any defects in your questions. Give the questionnaire to a small sample of respondents. Find out how well your questionnaire works, whether there are areas of confusion, and if the questionnaire could be made to read more smoothly.

After pretesting, you should expect to make some changes to the format or content of the document. For this reason, it is important to remember the first rule of pretesting: Do not pretest with a final, printed version of your questionnaire.

Your pretest can vary in its degree of formality, but you should always conduct one. Following are some guidelines that should help you perform successful pretests.

1. The first stage of the pretest process is that participants are aware they are taking a pretest. The interviewer should either administer the questionnaire face-to-face, or over the telephone, and discuss the questions with respondents. This process requires interviewers to sense confusion, ambiguity or hesitation in the respondents.

This stage can be informal. You might try gathering an objective group of recruits and have them respond and critique the questionnaire. Participants should be encouraged to be open. If you are planning to do more than one pretest, respondents do not have to resemble your target population.

This stage of pretest has a qualitative aspect to it: the interviewer can serve as a focus group leader, gathering as much insight from participants as possible. Ask about the flow of the questions, whether the instrument was difficult to complete or whether it was boring. Directly ask respondents about their interpretation of specific questions. You may find that people read what you wrote quite differently than you intended.

2. At some point, a pretest should be conducted in the same way as the final questionnaire. Time constraints may make it impossible to perform a mailed pretest. If that is the case, you should be particularly rigorous in alternative-method pretests.

3. It is difficult to say how many pretests to perform. With a new survey, conduct two at the very least; remember that you will have to pretest changes from the first round.

It is possible to perform only one pretest, but this is advisable only for questions that have been administered to similar audiences before.

4. It is difficult to say how many participants to have per pretest. A rule of thumb is a sample of 25 to 75 for a large-scale study. Again, this can vary depending upon time constraints and resources as well as whether or not a similar study has been conducted with a similar population.

5. It is advisable to have at least one pretest sample resemble your actual sample as closely as possible. If you are planning to survey a finite population you may not want to use up potential respondents in the pretest.

If you cannot find another source of similar pretesters, then you might use people from your final sample in both the pretest and the actual survey. This tactic, though imperfect, can be used to your advantage. Often people have a better feeling about something that they helped to construct.

6. Remember that your participants are the experts when it comes to understanding your questions. But, you are the ultimate authority. There are times when suggestions made by participants are either impractical or run contrary to the rules of sound methodology. Keep the balance in mind.

7. Count on some changes resulting from the first pretest. If no weaknesses were uncovered, you should presume that there was a problem with your pretest, rather than perfection in your questionnaire.

8. Look at the responses to open-ended questions you have included. If there are very few comments, the wording, positioning or spacing of the item may not have been sufficient.

9. Examine the frequencies of the items. If there is little or no variance among responses, the question may not be measuring what you want as clearly as you would like.

10. Are there a lot of “Don’t Know” responses? Too many may indicate a poorly constructed scale, unclear or inappropriate wording.

11. See if there are scaled items that received more than one response, no response or write-in answers. If this is the case, re-examine and refine your response scales.

12. Ensure that respondents had no trouble following the instructions included and that skip patterns were followed.

13. Time how long it takes to complete the survey. Remember, questionnaires that are too long will alienate your respondents.

The pretest is an element of the survey process that should not be omitted. Without a pretest even experienced researchers can administer a faulty survey, putting into question any results.

Next time: what to do when data starts coming back. If you have any comments, opinions or suggestions about this column, please send them to SPSS or send e-mail to keywords@spss.com.