

Chapter 2

Understanding Pitfalls in the Design of Surveys

There are a surprising number of potential pitfalls in survey design and, if ignored, survey results can become unusable for policy makers. This chapter provides an analysis of the most common pitfalls, as well as signposts to where information can be found to address them, both within this guide and from external sources.

There are a surprising number of potential pitfalls in survey design and, if ignored, survey results can become unusable for policy makers. Officials who design surveys, write tender proposals to commission surveys, judge the quality of consultant's work or are consumers of survey results are therefore well advised to be aware of the pitfalls.

Pitfalls in survey design

Survey design and methodological choices are often made unconsciously, without awareness of their impact on survey results. The following list points out the most common pitfalls and directs the reader to potential solutions:

- *Questions suggesting answers:* The phrasing of questions and the distribution of answer choices may suggest answers to respondents. For instance, survey respondents are more likely to agree to the question “Should the government increase social spending for *people with low income*?” than to the question “Should the government increase social spending for *people on welfare*?” (Rasinski, 1989).

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also Fowler 1995, pp. 73-75, and Iarossi 2006, pp. 32-37.

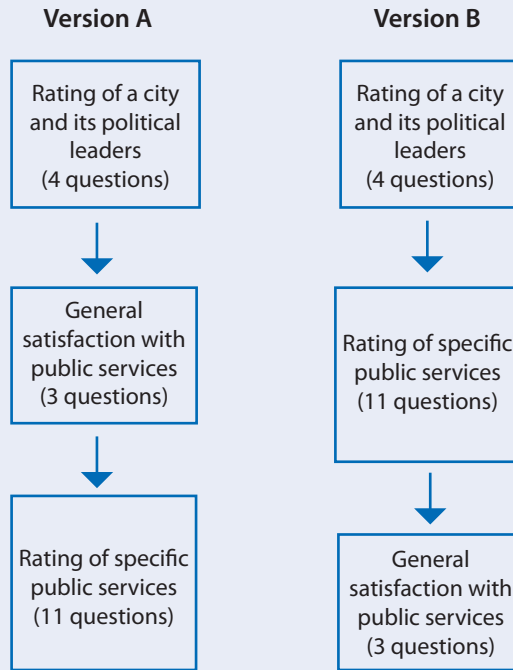
- *Question priming:* Previous questions may suggest answers; respondents answer questions differently based on the information provided by previous questions. The effects of “question priming” are detailed in Box 2.1. Many perception surveys focus on costs and burdens associated with regulations. If businesses first need to respond to a number of questions related to costs and burdens, they may be more inclined to answer negatively to questions about regulatory quality in general than if they were asked questions about the positive effects of regulations beforehand.

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also Iarossi 2006, pp. 74-78, and Van de Walle / Van Ryzin, 2011.

Box 2.1. Question priming and citizen satisfaction

Changing the order of the same questions in a survey can have a significant impact on the survey results and interpretations. In the citizen satisfaction survey modelled below, questioners switched the question order of specific public services versus general satisfaction with public services. The results of Version A and B were significantly different, even though the services clearly did not change.

Under Version B, overall satisfaction was significantly lower when people thought about their satisfaction after rating individual public services. Version A yielded higher overall satisfaction when asked about satisfaction before rating individual services.



This example was taken from Van de Walle, Steven and Gregg G. Van Ryzin (2011), “The order of questions in a survey on citizen satisfaction with public services: lessons from a split-ballot experiment”, in *Public Administration*.

- *Complexity*: Respondents easily get confused by technical jargon and complex answer options. Using many words to define a single concept within one question can also be difficult to understand. For example, the following question introduced in the UK Better Regulation Survey did *not* work, because the question introduced the parallel concepts of ‘regulation’ and ‘protection’ in the same question, confusing respondents (Russo, 2010):
 - How far do you agree with each of the following two statements?
 - There is too much *regulation*.
 - There is not enough *protection*.

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also Fowler 2009, pp. 93-95; p. 110, and Iarossi 2006, pp. 37-43.

- *Scale type*: Choice of scale influences survey results. For example, the results in one survey question using a scale from 1-7 were reported to be significantly different from the results using a scale from 1-5. This can happen because respondents may show arbitrary tendencies to answer at the median (3) more often in a 1-5 scale than in a 1-7 scale (Kwon and Kim, 2010). Furthermore, answers to the same scale may differ across country/cultural context. For example, on a scale from 0 to 10, a score of 5 does not necessarily mean a “pass” in all countries. In the Netherlands, students pass with a 5.5, in Brazil with a 6 and in Albania with a 4. In some other countries 0-10 scales are not commonly used. For instance, 2-6 is the standard scale in Bulgaria and -3-12 is the standard scale in Denmark (Van de Walle, 2010).

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also Fowler 2009, pp. 101-103; pp. 110-111, and Iarossi 2006, pp. 59-65.

- *Questions mean different things in different countries:* Simple concepts have different meanings in different countries, and ideas can be lost in translation. Even if two countries share the same language, concepts may differ (see Box 2.2).

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also Iarossi 2006, pp. 85-86, and Harkness *et al.*, 2010.

Box 2.2. Conceptual differences across nations

When asking questions about confidence in the civil service, the World Value Survey incorporated different translations to represent the same concept in different nations (here, the concept was “the civil service”). The translation in Mexico, *la burocracia pública*, has much stronger negative connotations than the Argentinean translation, *los funcionarios*. This difference in phrasing may create a negativity bias with respect to the results in Mexico when compared with those in Argentina.

Example: World Value Survey ‘Confidence in the civil service’

Argentina (Los Funcionarios)

Chile (La Administración Pública)

Mexico (La Burocracia Pública)

Venezuela (La Administración Pública)

Peru (Los Funcionarios Públicos)

Puerto Rico (Los Funcionarios De Gobierno)

Spain (La Administración Pública: Los Funcionarios)

Venezuela (La Administración Pública)

Source: Van de Walle, Steven (2010), “Measuring citizens’ perception of the public sector”, presented at the OECD Workshop on Measuring Progress in Regulatory Reform: Perception Surveys, 21-22 June, Slide 14.

- *Definitions:* The way regulation is defined in a survey, if at all, has several implications for survey results and interpretation:
 - First, the word “regulation” has multiple meanings for many respondents. If regulation is only defined broadly (or not at all), survey results are difficult to analyse and compare. The reason is that survey participants may be responding with different ideas of “regulation” in mind or may not understand at all what regulation means. The UK Better Regulation

Study documented that participants' ideas of regulations differed between primary laws, agency rulemaking, self-regulation by businesses or obligations on citizens like speed limits.

- Second, when regulation is not defined, answers to general questions about regulation may be formed more by the negative connotations of the word 'regulation' than by perceptions of actual regulation (negativity bias). The reason is that the word 'regulation' has an inherent negative association in several cultural contexts. For example, Goddard (2003) identifies a strong negative connotation of the word 'regulation' in the US across sectors. And Cosh and Wood (1998) find that although businesses in the United Kingdom did not have serious concerns with the measures that make up regulation – legislation, legal rulemaking, norms, and taxation – they had significant concerns about the word “regulation” in general.

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also Fowler 1995, pp. 13-20, and Iarossi 2006, pp. 37-38.

- *Focus of survey and balance of questions:* Most perception surveys focus on costs and burdens, and few ask about the benefits of regulations. This may bias results towards negative perceptions.

Suggestion: follow Steps 2 and 3 in Chapter 3; see also questions suggesting answers and question priming.

- *Strategic responses and social desirability:* People often lie in surveys, either in order to promote their interests or to look socially desirable. For example, businesses may report higher regulatory burdens than they actually perceive, in order to motivate additional action by governments. Survey respondents may also answer based on what they think is socially desirable, especially in face-to-face situations.

Suggestion: follow Steps 2, 3 and 4 in Chapter 3; see also Fowler 2009, pp. 108-110, Marsden/Wright 2010, pp. 285-287, and Fowler 1995, pp. 28-45.

- *Uninformed respondents:* Policy makers can choose to survey business and citizens in general, or target those with direct experience with particular regulations and agencies. Studies find that responses vary according to the level of knowledge and personal experience with regulations. A study conducted in the United Kingdom for instance identified that people having significant experience with regulations exhibited a more balanced view of regulation, acknowledging costs and benefits. Meanwhile those with less experience had less understanding and more polarised opinions. This might be explained by the fact that low awareness of regulation is linked to “an emotional rather than rational response to regulation” (FreshMinds, 2009, p. 27). The study further finds that “more informed citizens are usually more positive about regulation, though this seems less strongly the case for business” (UK Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2009, p. 69).

Suggestion: follow Steps 1, 2 and 3 in chapter 3; see Fowler 2009, pp. 106-108, and Iarossi 2006, pp. 27-28.

- *Non-respondents:* Many people who receive a survey do not answer it. If those who ignored the survey would have answered differently than respondents, survey results are biased. For example, many questionnaires ask businesses whether they feel an improvement with respect to regulatory burdens. If businesses that feel the improvement do not bother to answer, and only those who still feel high burdens answer, the results will be more negative than the views of all businesses. Or, if burdens differ for big companies and for small companies, and only big companies fill in the survey, the answers will not be representative of all businesses.

Suggestion: follow Steps 4, 5 and 6; see Fowler 2009, Chapter 4, and Lohr 2010, Chapter 8; pp. 533-535.

Conclusion

Common pitfalls in survey design include overly complex questions, missing definitions and question priming, i.e. respondents are inclined to answer based on the information provided by previous questions. Furthermore, many perception surveys focus on costs and burdens, and few ask about benefits of regulations. This may bias results towards negative perceptions. If these pitfalls are ignored, the results become unusable for policy makers. It is therefore important to keep pitfalls in mind when designing surveys or judging the quality of consultant's work. The next chapter will offer step-by-step guidance to design methodologically sound surveys that avoid pitfalls or mitigate their effects.



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