

Chapter 13

Self-Administered Questionnaires; Mail Surveys and Other Applications

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Self-administered questionnaires have been proven an efficient tool for data collection in mail surveys, educational research, health studies and psychological testing. A new application is the Internet, where self-administered web surveys are becoming more and more popular. Common to all self-administration is the absence of interviewers. As a result, not only the questions and answer categories, but all relevant information such as general information about the survey, instructions, and questionnaire routing are an integral part of the survey system. In addition all communication is transferred through the visual channel, making lay-out and graphical design of essential value. For the self-administered survey to be successful, all these elements must be tailored to the research problem, the population surveyed, and the chosen survey method. The general data collection strategy is to make the demands on the respondent low by making the questionnaire simple and attractive, and easy to fill in, and providing the respondents with appropriate rewards. All these elements of the survey system need to be pretested for the specific survey situation.

In this chapter we discuss the effects of interviewer absence and of visual presentation of a questionnaire on the data. We present five main types of self-administered questionnaires: (a) mail surveys, (b) internet surveys and panels, (c) interactive voice response, (d) interviewer introduced self-administered questionnaire, and (e) group administration.

GLOSSARY OF KEY POINTS

Access Panel. An access panel is basically a rich data base of willing respondents, that is used as a sampling frame for Internet studies, but may be used for other data collection procedures too. Panel members are invited and selected in various ways, through self-selection via websites, through acquisition by other panel members, at the end of successful face-to-face or telephone interviews, etc.

Aural Communication. The method of providing information to another person that depends upon speaking and listening, through which questions are communicated by entirely in telephone interviews and to a large extent in face-to-face interviews.

Computer Assisted Self Interviewing (CASI). Also known as Computer Assisted Self Administered Questionnaires (CSAQ). Defining characteristic is that the respondent operates the computer: questions are read from the computer screen and responses are entered directly in the computer. One of the most well-known forms of CASI is the web survey.

IVR. The acronym for Interactive Voice Response, which is a data collection technology in which the computer plays a recording of the question to the respondent over the telephone, and the respondent indicates the response by pressing the appropriate keys on his or her touchtone telephone keypad.

Self-Administered Questionnaire (SAQ). Questions are administered and answered without the assistance of an interviewer. There are several forms of SAQ, for instance paper questionnaires in mail surveys, group administered questionnaire in schools (tests), individual questionnaires that are filled in during an interview to ensure privacy, and drop off questionnaires, where surveyors personally deliver questionnaires, but the respondents fills in the questionnaire on their own and either mail it back or keep them for the surveyor to collect.

Meta information in surveys: Information about the survey and the questions. This includes explanations on the goal and content of the study, and instructions on how to respond to specific questions. In interview surveys this is mostly conveyed by the interviewer. In self-administered questionnaires this has to be done explicitly in written form. In Web surveys and other forms of computer-assisted self interviewing this information may also be (partly) available in the help system.

Para information: Information that goes alongside the textual information and adds meaning to the textual information. For example, to emphasize a word in order to give it more importance para-information is necessary. In interviews this is achieved through para-linguistic information (for example, tone of voice); in self-administered questionnaires through graphical language (for example, fonts, lay-out).

Sensitive questions. Questions are considered sensitive when they are about private, stressful or sacred issues, and when answering them tends to generate emotional responses, or potential fear of stigmatization on the part of the person or his/her social group.

Social Exchange Theory. A social psychological theory that states that actions of individuals are motivated by the returns these actions are expected to bring.

Visual Communication. The method of providing information to another person that depends upon what one sees, which is the means by which questions are mostly communicated to respondents in mail and web surveys.

Visual design: Using graphical language and lay-out in a planned and consistent way to facilitate (visual) communication and convey the information needed. Visual design incorporates graphical language tools, such as, figure-ground composition, location and spacing, size changes, brightness variations, and changes in similarity and regularity.

Web (Internet) Survey. Web surveys are a form of self-administered questionnaires, in which a computer administers a questionnaire on a web site. Survey questions are viewed and answered using a standard web browser on a PC. The responses are transferred through the Internet to the server.