

Chapter 10

Testing Survey Questions

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The aim of this chapter is to provide readers with (1) information about the different methods for testing survey questions and (2) guidelines on the implementation of each of the methods.

The initial section of the chapter explores why it is essential to test your survey questions. A section that explores the traditional field test follows this. For interview surveys, the traditional field test involves a small number of interviewers doing a few interviews each followed by an interviewer debriefing session with the researcher. For postal surveys this involves posting the questionnaires to respondents and reviewing the questionnaires that are returned. Various decisions that need to be made in this process are reviewed as well as limitations.

The third section looks at 6 new additional testing methods. "Expert Reviews/Panels" make use of expert advice about question problems and a "Systematic Review of Questionnaire" involves comparing each question to a pre-specified checklist of potential problems. "Respondent Debriefing Questions" are special follow-up questions used to determine respondents' understanding of the original survey question. "Behavior Coding" is the systematic coding of both interviewer and respondent behavior during the interview. "Cognitive Interviewing" is a type of in-depth interview that pays explicit attention to the mental processes respondents use to answer survey questions. The final method is the use of "Focus Groups" for question testing.

The last section focuses on a discussion of combining methods into a successful testing plan.

GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS

Traditional Field Test. For interview surveys this involves a small number of interviewers doing a few interviews each followed by an interviewer debriefing session with the researcher. For postal surveys this involves posting the questionnaires to respondents and reviewing the questionnaires that are returned.

Expert Reviews/Panels. A way of making use of the advice of an expert or panel of experts to identify potential problems in the questionnaire. No respondents are involved.

Systematic Review of Questionnaire. The review of a questionnaire by an expert using a specific checklist, often based on cognitive principles.

Respondent Debriefing Questions. Special follow-up questions used to determine respondents' understanding of the original survey question. Similar to probes used in cognitive interviewing.

Behavior Coding. The systematic coding of both interviewer and respondent behavior as a way of diagnosing problem questions.

Cognitive Interviewing. A type of *in-depth or intensive* interview that pays explicit attention to the mental processes respondents use to answer survey questions and uses specialized techniques, such as thinking aloud.

Focus Groups. Small group discussions under the guidance of a moderator. Focus Groups are used extensively in qualitative research, but they can also be used to test a survey questionnaire.