

## Quantitative Market Research

Imagine the mayor of Flanders gets an irate call from a citizen who believes the town's mosquito-spraying program is killing local birds. This particular mayor doesn't really care about birds, but he does care about reelection. The phone call lets him know that he might lose this one citizen's vote if he doesn't respond—but what he really needs to know is how many total votes he might lose. Given a choice, do citizens of Flanders care more about healthy birds or dead mosquitoes?

Use quantitative research when you want statistical information on what a group of people think (e.g., what percentage of people support the current mosquito spraying program?). While quantitative research is more scientific than qualitative research, it takes expertise to execute correctly. Any number of errors can lead to inaccurate results. As with qualitative research, hiring a professional, experienced market research team helps you get reliable results.

Before launching a poll, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What are your overall goals?
- What do you want to learn from the research? (Agreeing on survey objectives is paramount. Everyone should be very clear on what the survey will, and will not, tell you).
- Who will you survey, and how many?
- How will you conduct the survey—by phone, via the Internet, or a combination?
- What do you want to ask? (Pretest the questionnaire before finalizing!)

### Sample Selection

Once you've outlined your objectives, you need to know *who* you're going to survey. This is a more complex problem than it sounds.

**Selecting the target population.** The target population should match your survey objectives. Take our mayor of Flanders. He only cares about reelection, so he should only survey people eligible to vote. He might narrow the sample further to likely voters—those with a track record of voting. Your target audience can vary widely depending on your overall campaign goals. For example, if you want to use a survey to pretest campaign messages, keep your survey sample

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to those you intend to target in the campaign. On the other hand, if you want to understand which subsets of the population most support your issue, survey a broad segment of the population. You can narrow your target audience by factors such as geography, political affiliation, gender, age, ethnicity, etc. See "**Target Audience**" for an in-depth discussion on choosing a target audience for a campaign.

**Representation.** For a poll to accurately represent the views of the larger population, it must first and foremost draw randomly from that population. If our mayor of Flanders only surveyed those who recently bought bird feeders, he'd likely get a very different response than if he only surveyed those who recently bought electronic mosquito catchers.

Second, each member of the population should have an equal chance to respond to your survey. If your phone survey targets 25-to 40-year-old women, plan on calling at various times of the day to catch women working both in and out of the home.

Third, ensure a proper cross-section of the population by taking extra steps to include hard-to-reach people. Let's assume it's difficult to get young adults on the phone. However, if young adults make up 20% of your target population, they should make up 20% of your survey respondents. This may mean adjusting your methodology to specifically reach young adults (e.g., targeting additional phone calls to young adults to ensure adequate response rates).



Finally, avoid certain survey methodologies. Automated surveys, or “robo-polling,” don’t provide good data because they can’t deliver a good cross-section of your population. They’re limited to whoever answers the phone and takes time to respond. Also, never use survey methodologies that rely on volunteers to self-select. People who self-select to take surveys by calling 1-900 numbers, or clicking on website banner ads, are likely to be different from those who don’t.

**Adequate size.** A good research firm will tell you how big your sample size should be to ensure a reasonably accurate representation of the population you’re studying. Professional researchers often talk about this in terms of “margin of error” and “confidence intervals.” You may come across the following:

*“A recent poll showed that 56% of respondents prefer fried chicken, while 44% of respondents prefer fried steak. This poll has a confidence interval of 95% with a margin of error of plus or minus three percentage points.”*

What this means is that you have a 95% chance of getting the same results (plus or minus three percentage points) if you repeat the study. In other words, there’s a 95% chance that in a second survey, 53% to 59% of people (56% of people plus and minus three percentage points) would say they prefer fried chicken. However, at a 95% confidence interval, one in 20 surveys (or 5%) will produce results outside the predicted range. This means there’s a 5% chance that your survey is one of the 1 in 20 surveys that has results outside of the predicted range.

Published survey results often mention the margin of error but not the confidence interval. The default confidence interval used by most polling firms is 95%, which is normally achieved with a sample size of 400 people. A bigger sample size means a higher confidence interval and increased accuracy; the smaller the sample, the lower the confidence interval and accuracy. But higher survey accuracy can dramatically increase your costs. A good research firm will help you make reasonable trade-offs between accuracy and cost.

Note that margin of error isn’t the only source of error in surveys. Improper sampling methodology, poor interviewer technique, and unclear questions can all affect your results. Again, get a good research or polling firm to appropriately manage all these elements.

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**Oversampling.** Do you need information on a specific sub-population? Then you may need to “oversample” that sub-population. This means talking to enough people in that sub-group to make your data reasonably reliable.

Let’s say you want to do a broad state survey on a land preservation bill and you’re particularly interested in what Native Americans think. If Native Americans represent 3% of the state population, and you have a sample size of 500, you’ll only talk to about 15 Native Americans. This is too small a sample to draw reliable conclusions about the opinions of Native Americans. You’ll need to deliberately supplement your random population sample with additional Native American respondents—hence the term oversample.

### Survey Design

As if getting the sample right isn’t hard enough, consider the impact that survey design and wording have on results. For example, social pressure, confusion over questions, and inadequacy of provided answers can all compromise your survey. A good survey design pays careful attention to wording, word order, questionnaire length and format, and unintended sources of bias or error. A trusted research firm should take care of this for you. However, if you understand what makes a good survey, you’ll also be able to interpret third-party surveys.

**Speak the language of your audience.** Write the survey to match the language of the target population. This includes colloquialisms as well as using native-language interviewers for non-English speaking ethnic populations.

**Ask clear, non-leading questions.** How questions are asked can greatly affect survey results. “Would you rate the president’s performance as good, average, or poor?” is different than asking, “Do you agree with the 68% of Americans who rate the president’s performance as poor, which, by the way, is the lowest approval rating since Nixon?” Clearly define concepts, phrase questions unambiguously, and carefully

examine your survey for bias. Include “Don’t Know” or “Not Applicable” type responses to all questions, except those where all respondents are certain to have a clear answer. Pretest the survey to make sure that respondents will understand all the questions, and that vague wording won’t interfere with their responses.

**Be careful with survey context.** Many things can influence someone’s response—even a single-minded focus on a specific topic. Let’s say you want to understand support for affirmative action. A survey that clearly focuses on racism and race policy may lead the respondent to answer in a “politically correct” way, skewing the results. You’ll get a more accurate read by throwing an affirmative action question into a mix of other, non-related policy questions on taxation, education, and foreign policy.

**Short is sweet.** Keep the survey as short as possible. More people will complete a shorter questionnaire, regardless of the interviewing method. *If a question isn’t necessary, don’t include it.* Getting people to spend 10 minutes answering questions free of charge is difficult enough. Getting them to do it for 45 minutes is almost impossible.

**End with demographics.** Leave demographic questions (e.g., age, gender, income, education) till the end of the questionnaire. By then, the interviewer should have a rapport with the interviewee, allowing honest responses to personal questions. Exceptions to this rule are any demographic questions needed to qualify someone for survey inclusion. For example, many researchers limit their surveys to people in certain age groups.

## Question Sequencing

Statistical analysis is subject to some hard and fast rules. However, the people providing the data are subject to some pretty weird human behavior. Fortunately, we know this and can adjust for it using survey design techniques such as question sequencing. Question order can affect the results in three ways.

**I can’t get this out of my head (priming).** Don’t bias your survey questions by mentioning an idea or issue that people will still have in the back of their minds while they answer a later question. Consider the following: “Did you hear about the heat wave in New York that killed several senior citizens? Do you support government subsidies for air conditioners in New York?” This will elicit very different responses than “Did you know that air conditioning units are

one of the biggest domestic contributors to greenhouse gases? Do you support government subsidies for air conditioners in New York?”

While this example creates an obvious response bias, some priming effects are less obvious. Asking about the biggest problems facing the nation may affect how respondents later rate the president’s performance. You can try to lessen priming effects by randomizing the order of related questions, or by separating them with unrelated questions. Unfortunately, neither technique completely eliminates the problem.

**Top of the heap (order bias).** The order in which answers are presented can also affect the results. People tend to pick the choices nearest the start of a list when they read the list on paper or a computer screen. People tend to pick the most recent answer when they hear a list of choices read to them. If you’re using phone, computer, or Internet survey methods, good software can help reduce this problem by randomizing the pick list for each interview.

**Mental laziness (habituation).** The other way question order can affect results is by habituation. This applies to a series of questions that all have the same answer choices (e.g., poor, neutral, good, very good). People tend to give the same rote answer to all questions after being asked a series of similar questions. They may only truly think about the first few questions in the list. Again, you can use software to randomize the questions. It won’t eliminate habituation, but it will ensure that habituation applies equally to all questions in a series, not just those at the end of a series.

Another way to reduce this problem is to ask a short series of similar questions, then ask one or more different kinds of questions, and then another short series if needed. You can also change the “positive” answer to reduce habituation. For example, word statements so that agreement sometimes means satisfaction, and sometimes means dissatisfaction (e.g., “I think this country is headed in the right direction,” and “I believe that I am worse off now than I was five years ago”).

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## Question Scales

*On a scale of 1 to 73, how satisfied are you with the performance of today's teachers?*

If that took you aback (Does your satisfaction rate 63 or a 64? What's the difference anyway?), you'll know why most surveys use standardized scales. Researchers are divided on how large a scale a survey can safely use, but considerable evidence suggests that anything over five loses relevance. This depends partially on the education level of the respondents. University graduates deal with a 10-point scale just fine, but we recommend limiting your scale to five if you're surveying respondents with less than a high school education.

Scales also have a typical sequence. They normally present agree/disagree choices in that order. When using numerical rating scales, higher numbers should mean a more positive answer.

Lastly, the desire to please translates into a tendency to agree. Statistically, the percentage that strongly *agrees* that "X is good" should exactly equal the percentage that strongly *disagrees* that "X is bad." In the real world, however, it doesn't work that way. Experiments show that more people will agree than disagree.

Try eliminating this problem by asking half your respondents if they agree that "X is good," and the other half if they agree that "X is bad." Then, reverse the answers given by the second group. This is extra work, but it may be worth it if you're after the most accurate reading of those who really agree.

### Clear, Unbiased Questions

Each question needs to be clear and precise. You want all respondents to interpret each question in exactly the same way. Keep questions short to avoid confusion and to take some stress out of the process. Stressed and confused respondents result in bad data. Also, avoid introducing bias into your survey by looking out for the following:

**Double-barreled questions.** Double-barreled questions combine two or more issues into a single question. For example, the LGBT surveys we reviewed commonly included questions such as:

*I may not personally agree with homosexuality, but that doesn't mean I think gay service members should be banned from the military.*



This example requires agreement on two separate things. First, that I'm *uncomfortable* with homosexuality, and second, that I'm comfortable with gay service members serving in the military. What if both don't apply? What if I'm comfortable with both homosexuality and with openly gay service members? Conversely, what if I don't personally agree with homosexuality, and I also think the military should ban gay service members? It would be better to rephrase the question so that all respondents can clearly agree or disagree:

*Regardless of how I personally feel about homosexuality, I don't believe gay service members should be banned from the military.*

Here's a simpler example of a double-barreled question:

*Gays and lesbians should be prevented from marrying and adopting.*

The example above uses one sentence to ask about two different issues (i.e., marriage for gay couples and adoption rights). Each issue may elicit different levels of support, so putting them both in one question will skew results.

**"What part am I answering?" questions.** Especially in message testing, there is temptation to test lengthy ideas or language such as the following:

*Not everyone agrees on marriage for gay couples, but that doesn't mean it should be illegal. The government shouldn't be in the business of regulating what people can and can't*

**Tip:** If the word “and” or “but” appears in a question, check to verify that it’s NOT a double-barreled question.

*do in their private lives. Liberty is a fundamental American value, and not extending that value to gay couples is discrimination, pure and simple.*

This type of message testing is generally problematic. It combines at least four different concepts: 1) despite disagreement, marriage for gay couples shouldn’t be illegal, 2) the government shouldn’t regulate our private lives, 3) liberty is fundamental American value, and 4) this situation is discrimination. If the question tests well (or poorly), it’s not clear which concept, or combination of concepts, is driving the response. You can, however, use this type of question when you’ve already independently tested each concept, but you want to find out how well they work when presented together.

#### **Partisan cues and emotionally charged language.**

Avoid emotionally charged words or leading questions that encourage a certain answer. Sometimes charged language can be subtle. “What do you think of the XYZ proposal?” will elicit a different response than “What do you think of the *Republican* XYZ proposal?” Using “Republican” may cause some to favor the proposal and others to oppose it, depending on their feelings about Republicans, not the proposal itself. Certain words create strong reactions in people, regardless of the content of the question.

That said, our concern about emotionally charged language should NOT be applied to message testing. The whole point of message testing is to see if respondents are persuaded by your language or logic. To determine how you should word your message, ask yourself, “What do I want to learn from this question?” If you want to learn what the respondent already thinks, use neutral language. If you want to see how your target audience will react to an emotional augment, testing non-neutral language may be the whole point.

**Leading questions.** A leading question is phrased in a way that suggests that the researcher expects respondents to give a certain answer (e.g., “Don’t you agree that gays and lesbians deserve equal protection under the law?”)

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**Double negatives.** When you ask respondents whether they agree with a statement, double negatives can occur. For example:

*Gay service members should be required not to reveal their sexual orientation in the military.*

Do you agree or disagree? If you disagree, you’re saying you don’t think gay service members should be required *not* to reveal their sexual orientation. In other words, you believe that gays and lesbians *should* be required to reveal their sexual orientation. If you’re confused, so is the person answering the survey.

**Answer choices should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive.** Mutually exclusive means there’s no overlap. For example, asking for respondent age with categories 20 to 30 and 30 to 40 puts the respondent in a dilemma if they’re 30 years old. Exhaustive means there’s a category available for all potential responses. When your last age category is 65 to 80, you don’t leave a response for a 90-year-old respondent.

#### **Split Samples**

Some researchers split their samples to understand how word choice affects their survey outcomes. Split samples occur when half of the respondents receive one version of a question, and the other half receives a different version. Researchers often use split samples to test language subtleties. For example, you might ask the same question but substitute the phrase “civil unions” for “domestic partnerships” for half the respondents. If the respondents asked about domestic partnerships respond more favorably than those asked about civil unions, you’ll know which term has more public support. Note however that since you have less people answering each split sample question, you’ll have a higher margin of error for those questions.

#### **Interpreting Results**

Unlike a good detective show, survey results are rarely limited to “just the facts.” “Favorable” answers can be driven by the desire to please or to look like a nice, responsible, compassionate citizen. The desire to “look good” consistently skews pre-election poll results. More people say they’ll vote than actually do. More people say they’ll go to museums or libraries or church than actually do. And more people say they’ll support minority rights than actually vote to protect them. This desire to “look good” can be particularly acute if the survey focuses single-mindedly on one issue. Results from a survey focusing only on the

environment will indicate more support for an environmental protection bill than results from a survey that puts the same bill in the context of a list of other, non-environmental issues. Many polls on LGBT issues suffer from just these types of problems. In fact, on Election Day 2004, voting on anti-gay ballot initiatives was consistently less favorable than predicted by preelection polls. Because there can be a big drop-off between stated support and actual support, many political operatives won't pursue issues that poll at less than 60% support.

### Survey Types

Surveys come in many different flavors. We cover a few of the basic surveys used in communications campaigns.

**Longitudinal survey.** Surveys should be designed to be replicable over time. A longitudinal study measures changes in attitudes and beliefs by asking the same questions at different points in time. Longitudinal studies are particularly useful in determining trends in public opinions or in measuring whether a communications campaign has succeeded in shifting public attitudes.

**Benchmark survey.** A benchmark survey reveals where an audience stands on a particular topic. They're often used in up-front campaign planning and may be helpful for developing messages or defining the target audience. A benchmark survey may include questions on attitudes, values, and reactions to messages. It may also contain demographic and lifestyle questions, and questions on policies and behavior. Benchmark surveys can also serve as the pre-campaign survey (see below), though if possible, it's better to conduct a separate pre-campaign survey immediately before starting your communications.

**Pre- and post-campaign surveys.** Pre- and post-campaign surveys are done directly before a communications campaign rolls out and immediately after it finishes. They ask identical questions about public opinions and attitudes to help determine if the campaign succeeded in shifting public opinion. The post-campaign survey also often asks questions that measure awareness and recall of the campaign. Ideally, the pre- and post-campaign surveys will be compared to the same survey done in a control market that isn't running the campaign. Performing an identical set of surveys in a control market helps you figure out whether public opinion shifted due to your campaign, or whether it shifted due to external factors.

### WHEN IS INTERNET POLLING RELIABLE?

Many market research firms are intrigued by the low cost of Internet polling. It can be effective, but it only results in reliable statistical data when both of the following conditions are met:

- Your target audience excludes those who don't use the Internet. One-third of Americans don't have Internet access, and lower-income and older Americans are less likely to have Internet access, so focusing only on Internet respondents creates sampling errors if you're trying to understand the views of the general public.
- You recruit respondents by phone using random sampling methodology as opposed to asking respondents to self-select (e.g., click on a banner ad to complete a survey).

### Integrating Qualitative and Quantitative Research

Whether you're a "hard numbers" type who prefers to sleep with your calculator or a "soft and fuzzy" type who prefers to sleep with someone who hogs the covers, you'll need to get comfortable with both qualitative and quantitative research to get the complete picture. Historically, social advocates haven't put enough focus on qualitative research. Only 10% of political research dollars go into qualitative research, compared to 70% of consumer research dollars. In other words, social advocates need to prepare to get in touch with their soft and fuzzy side.

A research approach that integrates qualitative and quantitative research works best. However, make sure you hire a research team with expertise in both methods, as the two research types require very different skills. Sometimes, qualitative research is used as a prelude to quantitative research, such as the use of focus groups to help guide the development of polling questions. Alternatively, qualitative research can shed light on quantitative findings (e.g., "That's odd. Why do 53% of people in this town believe in extraterrestrials?") Or, you can use quantitative research to determine the prevalence of qualitative findings (e.g., "People in this focus group kept talking about UFOs. I wonder how many people in this town believe they've seen one?") The best campaigns use qualitative and quantitative research to cross-validate and build on each other's results.

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