Guidelines for Questionnaire Design

July 2011

Table of Contents

Introduction

These Guidelines interpret the MRS Code of Conduct (revised 2010) and provide additional best practice guidance. Unless otherwise stated, Guidelines are not binding.

Research is founded upon the willing co-operation of the public and of business organisations. It relies on the confidence of those involved that it is conducted honestly, objectively, without unwelcome intrusion and without harm to respondents. Its purpose is to collect and analyse information and not to create sales or to influence the opinions of anyone participating.

The general public and other interested parties are be entitled to complete assurance that every research project is carried out in accordance with the MRS Code of Conduct and that their rights and privacy are respected.

Rules from the MRS Code of Conduct applicable in each section of this document are stated in the shaded boxes. These rules are binding on MRS members and MRS Company Partners and breaches may result in disciplinary action. The guidance that follows the rules provides interpretation and additional best practice. Members and Company Partners are reminded that this document is designed to complement the MRS Code of Conduct and should not be consulted in isolation.

As specified in the MRS Code, it is the responsibility of the researcher to keep abreast of any legislation which could affect research with employees and to ensure that all those involved in a project are aware of and agree to abide by the MRS Code of Conduct.

This material is provided for information only. It is not legal advice and should not be relied upon as such. Specific legal advice should be taken in relation to specific issues.

The principles of the MRS Code of Conduct:

1. Researchers shall ensure that participation in their activities is based on voluntary informed consent.

2. Researchers shall be straightforward and honest in all their professional and business relationships.

3. Researchers shall be transparent as to the subject and purpose of data collection.

4. Researchers shall respect the confidentiality of information collected in their professional activities.

5. Researchers shall respect the rights and well being of all individuals.

6. Researchers shall ensure that respondents are not harmed or adversely affected by their professional activities.

7. Researchers shall balance the needs of individuals, clients, and their professional activities.

8. Researchers shall exercise independent professional judgement in the design, conduct and reporting of their professional activities.

9. Researchers shall ensure that their professional activities are conducted by persons with appropriate training, qualifications and experience.

10. Researchers shall protect the reputation and integrity of the profession.

Definitions **from the MRS *Code of Conduct:***

Agency:

Agency includes any individual, organisation, department or division, including any belonging to the same organisation as the Client which is responsible for, or acts as, a supplier.

Client:

Client includes any individual, organisation, department or division, including any belonging to the same organisation as the Member, which is responsible for commissioning or applying the results from a research project.

Company Partner:

An organisation with MRS Members that has signed the MRS Company Partner Service Quality Commitment which applies throughout the organisation.

Data Collection Process:

A data collection process is any process used to obtain information from or about Respondents. It includes, but is not limited to, interviews, questionnaires, discussion guides, and stimulus materials.

Identity:

The identity of a Respondent includes, as well as his/her name and/or address, any other information which offers a reasonable chance that he/she can be identified by anyone who has access to the information.

Interview:

An interview is any form of contact intended to obtain information from or about a Respondent or group of Respondents. This can involve passive as well as direct contact.

Interviewer:

Person involved in the collection of data.

Member:

A Member is an individual who has been admitted to membership of the MRS in one of the four categories set out in Article 3 of the Articles of Association (i.e. Nominated Members, Full Members, Associate Members, and Affiliate Members).

The Profession:

The profession is the body of research practitioners and others engaged in (or interested in) marketing, social and opinion research or the application of its techniques.

Research:

Research is the collection and analysis of data from a sample or census of individuals or organisations relating to their characteristics, behaviour, attitudes, opinions or possessions. It includes all forms of market,opinion and social research such as consumer and industrial surveys, psychological investigations, qualitative interviews and group discussions, observational, ethnographic, and panel studies.

Respondent:

A Respondent is any individual or organisation from or about whom data are collected or who is approached for interview.

1: The Interviewer and the Respondent – gaining and maintaining co-operation

The Rules

B7 Where lists of named individuals are used, e.g. Client databases, the list source must be revealed at an appropriate point in the interview, if requested. This overrides the right to Client anonymity.

B14 Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following:

- that the data collection process is fit for purpose and Clients have been advised accordingly
- that the design and content of the data collection process or instrument is appropriate for the audience being researched;
- that Respondents are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know prefer not to say where appropriate;
- that Respondents are not led towards a particular point of view;
- that responses are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way;
- that personal data collected are relevant and not excessive.

B15 If there is to be any recording, monitoring or observation during an interview, Respondents must be informed about this both at recruitment and at the beginning of the interview.

Comment: This does not include monitoring (listening to but not recording) telephone interviews for the purpose of quality control where interviewers have been informed that such monitoring takes place.

B17 Respondents must not be misled when being asked for cooperation to participate..

B18 A Respondent's right to withdraw from a project at any stage must be respected.

B21	Members must ensure that all of the following are clearly communicated to the Respondent: • the name of the interviewer (an Interviewer's Identity Card must be shown if face-to-face); • an assurance that the interview will be carried out according to the MRS Code of Conduct; • the general subject of the interview; • the purpose of the interview; • if asked, the likely length of the interview; • any costs likely to be incurred by the Respondent.

Guidance

1. A good questionnaire should engage the respondent from the start. Technically, the quality of data depends entirely on respondent engagement and interest in the subject matter. Boredom, irrelevance, and questioning that are outside their frame of reference are likely to lead to poor data.

2. In addition, justice should be done to the knowledge and agenda of the respondent. Researchers should consider how the respondent would feel not only at the start of the interview, but during it, and when they have finished. How will they react – and will they be willing to help - the next time they are asked to take part in a research project; will they feel it had been an enjoyable experience; will they feel they had the opportunity to have their say about the topic; would they recommend taking part in research to others as a result of their experience?

3. There are occasions on which the research design requires the precise purpose of the research to be disguised. In such cases, the introduction need not explain the precise objectives of the research, but must honestly explain the broad subject matter. So, for example, in dealing with a subject such as cinema going, it may be legitimate to

communicate the subject matter as being about "leisure activities". It is important however to ensure that the description of the subject matter doesn't mislead respondents, in breach of B17.

4. The subject of the interview should be described as precisely as possible and be compatible with the objectives of the study. If any sensitive data is to be collected this must be made clear to the respondent at the time when co-operation is sought. Researchers should apply their professional judgment in determining what could be sensitive in any given project. This includes, but is not limited to, subjects defined as "sensitive personal data" in the Data Protection Act 1998:

    a. racial or ethnic origin
    b. political opinions,
    c. religious beliefs or other beliefs of a similar nature,
    d. trade union membership
    e. physical or mental health or condition,
    f. sexual life,
    g. the commission or alleged commission of any offence, or
    h. any proceedings for any offence committed or alleged to have been committed, the disposal of such proceedings or the sentence of any court in such proceedings.

5. The objectives of a research project do not give the researcher a right to intrude on privacy or abandon normal respect for an individual's values. This means that sensitive questioning/subjects must be particularly carefully handled.

6. In terms of sensitivity, topic areas can be divided into:

    - those topics that are judged sensitive to everyone, because of the nature of that subject;
    - those topics that may be sensitive to a group for cultural, religious or political reasons; and

- those topics that may be sensitive to a particular individual, because of that individual's past history, behaviour and attitudes.

7. In the case of the latter, researchers cannot necessarily take precautions in advance of the interviews, but can treat each case sensitively and individually, giving respondents a genuine opportunity to withdraw. Any topic can potentially be sensitive to an individual. Respondents who feel their privacy and personal sensitivities are not being recognised or respected may be less forthcoming. Equally, respondents who feel they have not been treated with honesty and openness may feel patronised. In both cases, the nature of their responses may be affected. In addition, these respondents may feel less willing to participate in further research.

8. In accordance with B18, All respondents must be allowed to exercise their right to withdraw from the interview at any point. Further B14 provides that questionnaires must allow respondents to express the views including "don't know", or "prefer not to say" where appropriate. In face-to-face, telephone or online interviews this means that the interview should generally be able to proceed without a pre-coded answer having to be selected..

9. Four major issues were identified by research undertaken by the Research Development Fund to impact negatively on both quality of data collected and respondents' attitude towards research. These are

   - Excessively lengthy questionnaires, or a lack of honesty/transparency about the potential length of the interview
   - Repetitive questioning
   - Insufficient opportunity for respondents to have their say
   - Excessive classification section

10. Lengthy interviews can impact on response rates and hence representivity of the sample. Repetitive questions can negatively affect the respondent's willingness to be interviewed in the future and hence adversely affect future response rates.

11. Researchers should avoid long or repetitive interviews. This may involve a trade off against the "ideal world" objectives. Consider whether or not a question is required in order to meet the objectives, or whether it is "nice to know".

12. Respondents should feel that justice has been done to their knowledge and/or opinions within the confines of the questionnaire or subject matter. This may involve compromise on the part of the researcher.

13. It can be useful to think of the questionnaire as one element in a conversation. It should also be acknowledged that for the majority of respondents some subjects (holidays or cars for example) are likely to be of more interest than others (household appliances or financial services for example). Researchers should take account of this and make particular efforts when dealing with more problematic topics.

14. A questionnaire designed for one interview methodology may need to be amended to be effective in another channel. However, researchers should be aware that may also lead to different answers across channels if adequate care is not taken.

2: Meeting the Objectives

The Rules

B2	All written or oral assurances made by any Member involved in commissioning or conducting projects must be factually correct and honoured by the Member.
B3	Members must take reasonable steps to design research to the specification agreed with the Client.
B4	Members must take reasonable steps to design research which meets the quality standards agreed with the Client.
B14	Members must take reasonable steps to ensure all of the following: • that the data collection process is fit for purpose and Clients have been advised accordingly • that the design and content of the data collection process or instrument is appropriate for the audience being researched; • that Respondents are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know prefer not to say where appropriate; • that Respondents are not led towards a particular point of view; • that responses are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way; • that personal data collected are relevant and not excessive.

Guidance

1. Researchers should ensure that the objectives of a research project are fully translated into a series of questions, which will, as far as possible, obtain the required data.

2. It is the responsibility of all researchers involved in designing a questionnaire to ensure that the questions included are adequate to enable the study to meet its objectives. However where a researcher's advice and recommendation is not accepted, the researcher cannot then be held responsible for any consequent failure to meet the objectives.

3. It is the responsibility of both researchers and clients to ensure that the questions asked meet the objectives of the study:

   - The researcher because they have a professional responsibility; and
   - The client because their commercial and professional interests are at stake.

4. The interests of research at large are thus served through the encouragement of:

   - The credibility of research in the commercial environment
   - Respondent goodwill through a transparent and effective questionnaire.

5. Good practice dictates that questionnaires should be formally agreed to confirm that all parties are satisfied that the research objectives will be sufficiently met within the practicalities of getting the project done, paying particular attention to:

   - Errors of commission (objectives that are badly addressed)
   - Errors of omission (objectives that are not addressed either at all or in part).

6. Clients should obtain the guidance of researchers as to the feasibility of meeting defined research objectives:

   - Within an interview of a given length
   - Within respondents' ability to give the information required
   - Within ethical and technical best practice.

3: Structuring the questionnaire - its impact on interviewers and respondents

The Rules

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- that the design and content of the data collection process or instrument is appropriate for the audience being researched;
- that Respondents are able to provide information in a way that reflects the view they want to express, including don't know prefer not to say where appropriate;
- that Respondents are not led towards a particular point of view;
- that responses are capable of being interpreted in an unambiguous way;
- that personal data collected are relevant and not excessive.

Guidance

1. Whenever possible, a questionnaire should follow some form of natural flow, reflecting a train of thought, a logical conversation, or an implied chronology of events, depending on the subject matter.

2. Good practice is to give high priority to user friendliness in administration, and a structure that is easy to follow for interviewers and respondents.

3. Researchers should plan a questionnaire to make it logical from the respondent's point of view. This should involve outlining a structure and routing plan before beginning to write questions. The structure need not follow that of the objectives.

4. Consideration should be given to using blocks of sub-group questions and the construction of decision trees or flow charts to assist in structuring (and later routing) a questionnaire.

5. In general, order of questions will have an effect on the answers that are provided. This is generally controllable in an interview setting, or electronically, but when the questionnaire is self administered, it ,may not be possible to control the order in which the questions are read and answered.

6. Avoidance of non-sequiturs (i.e. statements having little or no relevance to what preceded them) is recommended. Where they are unavoidable (e.g. in omnibus style questionnaires) appropriate introductory phrases should be used.

7. To prevent a questionnaire being boring use a variety of different forms of questioning to break the routine within the questionnaire.

8. A theoretically optimal research design can result in a repetitive or boring interview. Researchers should, wherever possible, seek ways of engaging and maintaining the respondent's interest.

9. Question rotations between interviews, although good practice in themselves, are not a solution to this issue and sometimes have the effect of merely spreading unreliability across several questions, rather than concentrating it amongst a few.

10. The main principle is the rigour, integrity and quality of data. Neither respondents nor interviewers should be confused or bored by any questionnaire.

11. Wherever possible, a questionnaire should be piloted before the survey to ensure it can be answered by potential respondents as well as meeting the needs of the researcher/client (see Section 6)

12. The guiding rule can be expressed as "doing justice to how people would normally talk about things in everyday language".

4: Writing the Questionnaire

The Rules	
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Guidance

1. In summary, will the respondents:

   - Understand the questions and /or the answer options?
   - Be willing to answer the questions?
   - Be able to answer the questions?

2. In practice every researcher knows that there is no right and wrong question or answer, and that, legitimately, different questions get different answers. The prescription for writing questions is therefore intrinsically linked to the interpretation of the results and data that will be obtained.

3. It is possible to frame questions or question sequences to support or dismiss any point of view, with varying degrees of subjectivity built in. This is particularly relevant to published research, and question wording is particularly crucial in opinion and advocacy research. The general public expects 'objectivity' in market research exercises even when this is not always the purpose.

4. Researchers should take particular care to ensure that respondents are not lead to a particular answer. For example, any underlying facts to be communicated to the respondent should be set out in a neutral manner. Positive phrases such as "the proposal is a good idea" in a question without a balancing negative phrase may lead the respondent to a positive view of the proposal under consideration.

5. Sensitive subject areas should be explored through appropriately sensitive or even indirect questions. Sensitive subjects are most often placed towards the end of a questionnaire.

6. Respondents should always be given the opportunity to decline to answer any question.

7. Any question that a respondent is required to answer should be:

   - Within their frame of reference (in business-to-business research for example, can a single informant answer all the different questions?)

   - Relevant to them.

   If this is not achieved, respondents will be forced to guess. In interpreting the responses, the researcher may not be aware of this.

8. Question concepts should be clear and understandable with as little ambiguity as possible. In general terms, a question should be interpretable in only one way.

9. Questions should be clear and phrased in language appropriate to the respondent's way of thinking/talking.

10. Only one question should be asked at a time - questions containing multiple concepts (*e.g. What do you think about the colour and taste of the product?*) rarely give sensible data.

11. The status of answers should be understood by researchers. Are we asking questions that can be answered:

    - Accurately *(e.g. What was your age last birthday?)*
    - Through memory *(e.g. How many times in the last month have you done X . . .?)*
    - Through a best choice of options, none of which may correspond precisely to the respondent's view / behaviour *(e.g. Which of these three statements comes closest to describing your view . . .?)*
    - Through estimation, guesswork or even speculation.

12. Appropriate answer code options should be available that reflect the reality of the range of responses. Response codes should be:

    - Clear and understandable, with as little ambiguity as possible;
    - Phrased in language appropriate to the respondent's way of thinking/talking.

13. The questionnaire should be designed to indicate that a question was asked, even if it has not been answered. It should always be possible to record a "don't know" response as this is often a perfectly valid answer, and a "not answered" response. The responses are distinct and should not normally be combined at the data collection stage. Classification questions can be seen as intrusive, and should be kept to a minimum.

14. Wherever appropriate space should be provided to allow the recording of comments of respondents on the topic(s) not covered by the questionnaire. This achieves two objectives:

    - It encourages respondents to feel researchers are interested in and value their views;
    - It might prove beneficial to the study in illustrating aspects of the topic(s) not adequately covered in the questionnaire.

15. Consider the appropriateness of question wording to the audience, particularly where it might be difficult to be answered by, or cause offence to, minority groups or people with special needs.

16. Where appropriate standard questions or questions used on previous research should be considered. Use of such questions gives comparability across studies and can enhance the value of the data to the client.

5: Questionnaire Instructions

Guidance

1. The instructions within a questionnaire are crucial to the reliability of the data returned and should be clear and unambiguous. Such instructions help both the interviewer (if used to gather the data) and the respondent.

2. Each question in a questionnaire has four key routing instructions (whether overt or implied) associated with it:

   - Who should answer the question?
     For example: "Ask all" versus "Ask only those using product X at QY".

   - How is the question to be asked?
     For example: "Read out" versus "Do not read out".

   - How is the answer to be recorded?
     For example: "One code only" versus "code all answers mentioned".

   - Where will they go next?
     For example: "Users ask QX" or "Non users skip to QY".

3. The same design principles apply whether the questionnaire is administered on paper, by a computer-assisted method, or online.

   - In CAPI, CATI, online questionnaires or related computer assisted modes much of the routing will be embedded in the computer script and therefore need not be overt to the interviewer or respondent.

   - Instructions for self-completion questionnaires should be clear and user friendly.

4. Neither interviewers nor respondents should be held responsible for data collection errors arising from poor, or inadequately signposted, routing and/or instructions. Excessive complexity of routing is to be particularly discouraged. Consider including a question twice on the questionnaire in order to avoid complex routing.

6: Piloting

Guidance

1. On quantitative surveys, a small number of pilot (test) interviews should ideally be conducted to test the feasibility and appropriateness of the questionnaire. The main principle at stake is the responsibility of the researcher to collect high quality data in an objective manner, but there are also respondent issues. It may be necessary to test whether the questionnaire is compatible with the rights of respondents, particularly where sensitive issues or subjects are involved.

2. Where a client researcher is present at the pilot, the same rules apply as in other observed research.

3. Researchers should pilot questionnaires, not least to test the questionnaire for length, comprehensibility, and general good sense.

4. Researchers should satisfy themselves as to the workability of a questionnaire through an internal pilot, that is, pilot interviews with colleagues or others not involved in the research.

5. Researchers should conduct pilot interviews with a small selection of the target audience for any given research project.

6. Certain circumstances demand particularly rigorous piloting. For example:

    - When dealing with unfamiliar concepts – observation (watching pilot interviews), or qualitative pilots, can help in framing questions in the right way;

    - If there are areas in the questionnaire where there are no ready-made code lists, pilots can help generate initial codes for open ended questions;

    - Where it is obvious that the interview is potentially very complex or lengthy;

    - Where questions are potentially contentious;

    - When it is necessary to review and test alternative question strategies;

- Where a questionnaire will be delivered on a variety of platforms, eg multiple web browsers, multiple operating systems or on mobile devices.

7: Dealing with the results

The Rules	
B49	Members must ensure that conclusions disseminated by them are clearly and adequately supported by the data.
B53	Members must provide Clients with sufficient technical details to enable Clients to assess the validity of results of projects carried out on their behalf.
B54	Members must ensure that data tables include sufficient technical information to enable reasonable interpretation of the validity of the results.
B55	Members must ensure that reports include sufficient information to enable reasonable interpretation of the validity of the results.
B56	Members must ensure that reports and presentations clearly distinguish between facts and interpretation.
B57	Members must ensure that when interpreting data they make clear which data they are using to support their interpretation

Guidance

1. Researchers have a responsibility to deal with results in a way that reflects the questions that were asked, rather than (mis)interpreting data in the abstract. This includes paying close retrospective attention to question phrasing, to whether the answers were prompted or unprompted, and so on.

2. Researchers also have a broader responsibility to deal with answers in a way that respects respondents' views. This will help retain the confidence of the general public and business community, ensuring future respondent co-operation and the health and good image of the research profession.

It is impossible to divorce good practice in questionnaire design – in terms of ethical and technical responsibilities – from the interpretation of the resulting data. As part of the questionnaire design process, researchers should consider how they expect to analyse and report the results.   This will aid in avoiding errors of both commission and omission.

8: Some references for help in questionnaire writing.

Questionnaire Design - How to Plan, Structure and Write Survey Material for Effective Market Research, Second Edition, Ian Brace. Kogan Page, 2008.

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Marketing Research – An Applied Approach, Malhotra and Birks, Third Edition. Chapter 13, Questionnaire Design Financial Times/ Prentice Hall, 2007.

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Standardised Questions – A Review for Market Research Executives, MRS Research and Development Committee, 1984.

The Practice of Market Research, Chapter 9: Designing Questionnaires, Yvonne McGivern, FT Prentice Hall/MRS, 2009

Research into questionnaire design: a summary of the literature, Petra Lietz, International Journal of Market Research, Vol. 52, Issue 2, 2010

ANNEX : Ten Tips for DIY Surveys

What?

Start with the end in mind. For each question you should be able to answer 'what will I do when I have the answer'. How will it add insight and understanding? Be really strict on this, many questionnaires are too long because they fail to distinguish interesting from relevant.

Who?

Who do you want to collect the data from? Many DIY surveys canvas opinions from those in their own network, contact book or organisation. Their views may be representative of a wider population on some topics, but not all. Take care before assuming the results can be said to represent a wider group of people, particularly if you are taking decisions that will impact a broader group.

Set them up.

Today, it is common to be asked to complete a survey and many organisations ask customers for feedback from the last contact. The result is that such requests are all too easy to ignore. It helps to explain who you are, why you want their input and what you will do when you have the results. Also, tell people how long the survey will take. These things help achieve a higher response rate.

Who took part?

With online research it is now much easier to collect lots of responses. As well as the total number, take a good look at the profile of people who completed the survey. Do you have a good spread of respondents, from different demographic groups and people who have roles with diverse experiences? Customers verses non customers or engaged verses disengaged respondents can be expected to have different opinions.

When?

The timing of the DIY survey is important. People's opinions change over time and on some topics can change rapidly. For example, when the subject concerns celebrity or music the shelf life of the data collected can be extremely limited. If possible allow a survey to run for some days to maximise response, but feel free to set an end-date.

How?

Be balanced and non-judgemental in how you phrase the question. You want to know what your audience truly think and not 'lead the witness'. If you direct the question to favour one answer over another, the results are worthless and your audience may be frustrated at the bias.

Cover all the bases

People taking a DIY survey need to be able to answer your question with an answer choice that represents their view or position. Consider ALL the possible answers, not just the most common responses. It is good practice to offer 'don't know/don't want to answer' and, where it is difficult to predict the full range of answers, you might provide a category 'other, please specify' with a box to enter free text

Use simple, straightforward language

Plain, unambiguous words and phrases are the safest route. The group from which you are seeking opinions will vary in their level of expertise, interest and commitment to the survey. If the question is complicated in its construction, the risk of misunderstanding is high. Before launching try the questions with a friend or colleague.

Ask open-ended questions

If your intention is to explore a subject, open questions like 'why do you say that?' help to reveal a range of opinions on a topic. While this is harder to translate into percentages, this approach will help to ensure you have the breadth of views people covered. Closed questions with multiple answers provide an alternative, but often require your audience to do some force-fitting of their perspective to your survey.

Share the results with care

The presentation of results as statistical totals implies rigour and accuracy. With any Research, care is needed to avoid over-interpretation of results. Note the sample definition, method and timing as well as the number of people completing the question. It is fine to be selective in highlighting results, but be careful not to distort the results. Good research is often described as a blend of art and science.