Standards and Best Practices

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- Dedicated to the memory of Shirley A. Stern

Best Practices for Survey and Public Opinion Research

As noted in the most recent publication in the "What is a Survey?" series by the Section on Survey Research Methods of the American Statistical Association (1996), "the quality of a survey is best judged not by its size, scope, or prominence, but by how much attention is given to [preventing, measuring, and] dealing with the many important problems that can arise" (p.11) at any point in the survey process conceptualization, organization, sampling, questionnaire design, data collection, data processing, and analysis.

1. **Have specific goals for the survey.**
2. **Consider alternatives to using a survey to collect information.**
3. **Select samples that will represent the population to be studied.**
4. **Use designs that balance costs with errors.**
5. **Take great care in matching question wording to the concepts being measured and the population**
Key survey elements:

1. organization & resources
2. conceptualization
3. sampling
4. questionnaire design
5. data collection
6. data processing
7. analysis, reporting, dissemination
Organization

Survey research project requires the successful execution of many steps in sequence and relies on the same processes and characteristics as other tasks -- good internal communication, clear delineation of responsibility, careful project management, effective scheduling and tracking, etc.

organization – conceptualization – sampling - questionnaire design - data collection - data processing - analysis, reporting, dissemination

Resources?
Conceptualization

Have specific goals for the survey
Consider alternatives to using a survey to collect information

organization – conceptualization – sampling - questionnaire design - data collection - data processing - analysis, reporting, dissemination
Sampling

Select samples that well represent the population being studied
(random selection)

organization – conceptualization – sampling - questionnaire design - data collection - data processing - analysis, reporting, dissemination
Questionnaire Design

Use designs that balance cost with errors
Take great care in matching question wording to the concepts being measured and the population studied
Pretest questionnaires and procedures to identify problems prior to the survey
Carefully develop and fulfill pledges of confidentiality given to respondents

organization – conceptualization – sampling - questionnaire design – data collection - data processing - analysis, reporting, dissemination
Data Collection

Train interviewers carefully on interviewing techniques and the subject matter of the survey
Maximize cooperation or response rates within the limits of ethical treatment of human subjects

organization – conceptualization – sampling - questionnaire design - data collection - data processing - analysis, reporting, dissemination
Data Processing

Construct quality checks for each stage of the survey

conceptualization – organization – sampling - questionnaire design - data collection - data processing - analysis, reporting, dissemination
Analysis, Reporting, Dissemination

Use statistical analytic and reporting techniques appropriate to the data collected
Disclose all methods of the survey to permit evaluation and replication

conceptualization – organization – sampling - questionnaire design - data collection - data processing – analysis, reporting, dissemination
Review Best Practices

1. Have specific goals for the survey
2. Consider an alternative to using a survey to collect information
3. Select samples that well represent the population being studied
4. Use designs that balance cost with errors
5. Take great care in matching question wording to the concepts being measured and the population studied
6. Pretest questionnaires and procedures to identify problems prior to the survey
7. Train interviewers carefully on interviewing techniques and the subject matter of the survey
8. Construct quality checks for each stage of the survey
9. Maximize cooperation or response rates within the limits of ethical treatment of human subjects
10. Use statistical analytic and reporting techniques appropriate to the data collected
11. Carefully develop and fulfill pledges of confidentiality given to respondents
12. Disclose all methods of the survey to permit evaluation and replication
Practices Condemned by American Association for Public Opinion Research

1. Requiring a monetary payment or soliciting monetary contributions from members of the public as part of a research process.
2. Offering products or services for sale, or using participant contacts as a means of generating sales leads.
3. Revealing the identity of individual respondents to a survey or participants in a research process without their permission.
4. Representing the results of a 900-number or other type of self-selected "poll" as if they were the outcome of legitimate research.
5. Conducting a so-called "push poll," a telemarketing technique in which telephone calls are used to canvass potential voters, feeding them false or misleading "information" about a candidate under the pretense of taking a poll to see how this "information" affects voter preferences.
Five types of closed-ended questions

1) Likert-scale
2) Multiple-choice
3) Ordinal
4) Categorical
5) Numerical
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of question...</th>
<th>Best Used for...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open-ended</td>
<td>Breaking the ice in an interview; when respondents' own words are important; when the surveyor doesn't know all the possible answers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed-ended</td>
<td>Collecting rank ordered data; when all response choices are known; when quantitative statistical results are desired.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likert-scale</td>
<td>To assess a person's feelings about something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple-choice</td>
<td>When there are a finite number of options (remember to instruct respondents as to the number of answers to select).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinal</td>
<td>To rate things in relation to other things.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorical</td>
<td>When the answers are categories, and each respondent must fall into exactly one of them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerical</td>
<td>For real numbers, like age, number of months, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Suggestions for writing closed-ended items

1) Avoid double-barreled (Do you approve or disapprove of abortion in cases of incest or threats to the mother’s health?)

2) Provide all response options to a closed question and make them mutually exclusive (Marital status? Single [never married], single [married previously], heterosexual marriage, homosexual marriage, divorced, separated, committed uncertified partnership, widowed/widower)

3) Avoid numeric intervals except when detail might discourage response (Annual parental income, number of beers consumed on last drinking occasion)

4) Use response structure effectively (clustered and mixed)

5) Don’t use hypothetical statements but be careful asking about personal behavior without IRB approval

6) Use specific time frames (during this quarter)

7) Avoid acronyms, jargon, slang and technical terms

8) Use complete sentences (Sex? v Are you [male] or [female])

9) Avoid emotional, value-laden terms (fair, right, poor, unjust, liberal, conservative)

10) Recognize that some responses are socially more desirable (Are you a registered voter?)
Suggestions for writing open-ended items

1) Encourage expansive responses, within reason (If you could make one change to residence hall facilities, what would you change? [parking] Or What do you consider to be the top three issues for students voting on Arnold’s March bond proposal? )

2) Use open-ended items to solicit anecdotes for your report

3) Realize how difficult open-ended items are to analyze and transcribe

4) Use sparingly on scanned forms and only within clearly defined physical boundaries

And always respect the respondent
TABLE 5
Expected Sampling Error (Plus or Minus)
At the 95% Confidence Level
(Simple Random Sample)

Percentage of the Sample or Subsample Giving
A Certain Response or Displaying a Certain
Characteristic for Percentages Near:

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<th>Size of sample or subsample</th>
<th>10 or 90</th>
<th>20 or 80</th>
<th>30 or 70</th>
<th>40 or 60</th>
<th>50</th>
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<td>13.7</td>
<td>14</td>
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</table>

NOTE: Entries are expressed as percentage points (+ or -)

From NHTSA, Department of Transportation
\[ S_m = \frac{S}{\sqrt{N}} \]

- \( S_m \) - standard error of the mean
- \( S \) - standard deviation of the mean
- \( N \) - number of scores on the test
Quick Poll

If you are attending UC Davis WITHOUT using financial aid, what proportion of your total expenses (school and living expenses) is being paid by your parents?

- 90%+
- 75%-89%
- 50%-74%
- 25%-49%
- 10%-24%
- 9% or less

Follow-Up Question:
Imaging that you are talking with a community college student who will be transferring to Davis and will be sharing expenses with his/her parents. How would you recommend they decide how they will share expenses?
OVERALL PERFORMANCE

A. All things considered, how well do you rate President Bush and his ability to serve the interest and well-being of all American? Excellent Good Fair Poor

B. How do you feel about America’s future if we cannot restore a Democratic Senate majority to provide balance against the Bush Administration right-wing legislation? It is very Alarming. I know the future of this country could be undermined if the current Republican agendas continue to prevail. Please accept my $200 contribution to the DSCC. (important was $150, Serious was $100, Urgent was $50 or less)
SECTION I – The Economy

A. Do you consider your family’s economic future better, worse, or unchanged since the start of the Bush Administration?  
Better  Worse  Unchanged

B. Do you think President Bush understands what it takes for your family (and others like yours) to make ends meet?  
Yes  No  No opinion

C. Do you agree with the Bush Administration’s plan to “stimulate” the economy through tax cuts that jeopardize our country’s future by running the federal deficit up to a record $475 billion?  
Yes  No  No opinion
SECTION IV – Judicial Nominees

A. Do you believe that President Bush has a mandate to fill federal court vacancies with far-right, ultra-conservative judges who are out of sync with the majority of Americans?
Yes  No  No opinion

etc.