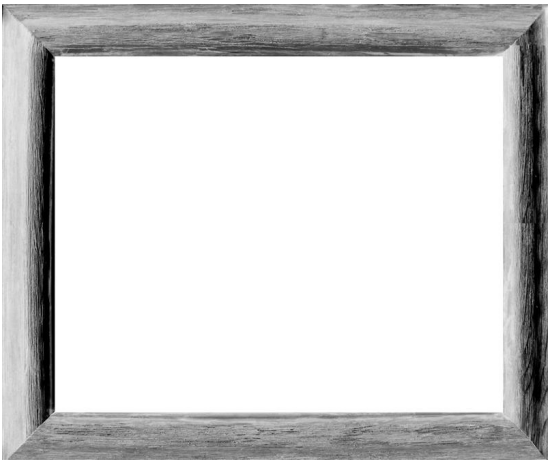
CHAPTER 6

FRAMING THE QUESTIONS



Getting the words right

Choosing one or other of the three styles of questions (open, closed or scales), the researcher can now frame the words that will be asked. It will be assumed that the key areas of information required from the study have been listed and some feel for the subject has been obtained from discussions with people who buy or use the product.

Here are four important questions the researcher should ask when drafting a question:

1. Will this question be understood in the way that I intend?
2. How many different ways could this question be interpreted?
3. Is this question likely to annoy or offend?
4. Is there a better way of asking the question?

Don't expect the draft of a question to be right first time. Think about the way questions are posed in ordinary conversation. Many is the time in conversation you need to obtain further clarification as to what was intended by the question.

Was the question clear? Was it necessary to add a rider to the first question having listened to the answer? Is there still a possibility that the question has not been fully understood?

In a market research study involving many interviews, there is no scope for debate about what was really meant by the question. Its meaning needs to be clear straight away.

Do's and don'ts in the wording of questions

During the drafting of the words of the questions the researcher is looking for clarity and this is achieved by following a number of simple rules:

- *Ensure that the question is without bias.* One of the most frequent and serious errors in the wording of questions is the introduction of bias. Very often the bias is unintentional but it creeps in nevertheless. An obvious use of bias is the presentation of a question in such a way as to lead the respondent into the answer. For example, "Would you agree that the Company has an excellent product range?". The question becomes more impartial if some counter weight is introduced. "Would you agree or disagree that the Company has an excellent product range?". However, there is still bias within the question because the idea has been implanted in the respondent's mind that the product range is excellent by the very use of that word. Reducing the bias still further the question could be asked:

  Q. Would you say the Company's product range is:

Very good	1
Quite good	2
Neither good nor bad	3
Quite poor	4
Very poor	5

  Researchers may still argue that the very act of presenting the scale from positive to negative has some bias and the order of the scale should be rotated. They may even say that it is better to use the word `good' throughout so that in the negative part of the scale the term `Not very good' and `Not at all good' is used instead of `Quite poor' and `Very poor'.

Erudite papers are written by researchers on the bias which can be introduced by these issues. Is there a bias in a blind taste test in favour of product labelled X or one labelled Y? Is there a bias in favour of scales which have the positive attributes at the top or the bottom? Is there a bias in favour of scales in which people have to choose one of two attributes where the positive attributes are to the left and the negative ones to the right?

All these factors have been shown to cause bias to varying degrees, but it is usually quite small and with nowhere near the effect of poor sampling or bad interviewing. The researcher is encouraged to think carefully about the wording of all questions to eliminate as much bias as possible but not to develop a neurosis which makes them too nervous to put pen to paper.

- *Jargon or shorthand may not be understood by the respondent.* It cannot be assumed that respondents will understand words which are in common usage to the researcher. Marketing and trade jargon, acronyms and initials which shorten everyday conversations may not be universally familiar. Even some words or phrases in every day use can give rise to confusion. For example, when speaking to buyers one has to be very clear as to what precisely is meant by the terms `margin' and `mark up'. In the same way terms such as `Gross Domestic Product', `purchasing criteria', and `marque' can create problems for respondents.

- *Steer clear of sophisticated or uncommon words* (eg `salient', `rancour', `synergy'). A questionnaire is not a place to score literary points so, if in doubt, keep it simple. Be prepared to use colloquialisms if they are more meaningful. In some areas of the North of England it may be necessary to refer to bread rolls as `baps', this being the normal terminology. However it is important to use words which all respondents can understand and so if the bread survey was carried out nationally, there would have to be alternative definitions for other regions.

- *Avoid ambiguous words.* You may know what you mean by `usually' but will the respondent? The word `frequently' would be acceptable in a question which asked: "How frequently do you buy instant coffee?" but

it would lack precision if it was used as follows: "Do you frequently buy instant coffee?".

- *Make the question as short as possible.* A very long question can lose the respondent part way through. Sometimes the researcher has a burning need to put a question into a context to give it meaning. This can be necessary in certain circumstances. Respondents may need reminding of an event or require some explanation before an answer can be given. The following example reminds or informs people about something which is critical to answering the question.

  "The Chancellor in his Autumn statement said that the economy was showing signs of improvement and could be expected to grow at 3% over the next year. Would you agree or disagree with this view?"

  However, sometimes questions get out of hand. "In the light of the most recent inflation figures and bearing in mind the Chancellor's Autumn statement, what do you think are the prospects for your business over the next year?" may be better asked as "How is business right now?".

- *Make the question as simple as possible.* Following on from the above point, questions should not only be short, they should also be simple. Questions which include multiple ideas or two questions in one will be confusing to the respondent and the answer could be unintelligible. Here is an example of a question which got into a questionnaire and is bogged down with multiple ideas:

  "When you buy both aluminium and steel strip, do you use a different supplier?".

  Similarly, it is easy to fall into the trap of building two questions into one. eg "Did you drive or did your partner?". If a question looks as if it is becoming too complicated, it may be because it justifies being split into two separate questions.

- *Make the questions very specific.* Again the rule is for brevity and simplicity. However, there are occasions when it is advisable to lengthen the question by adding memory cues - such as "Have you, yourself, bought any xxx in the last three months; I mean in September,

October or November?" There are two memory cues in this question. Firstly a reminder that the question relates to the respondent personally and secondly that the last three months comprised September, October and November.

It is always good practice to be specific with time periods. For example don't be vague about "last year" - spell out whether this means the last twelve months or the last full year from January to December. Remember that there is a temptation for people to extend periods rather than contract them. Pinning down the dates reduces the chances of "over claiming" in the responses.

- *Make sure that the question and answer do not conflict.* There is a danger that in trying to make a question clearer the result could become confusing eg "Do you care what brand you buy or would you buy any brand?".

- *Keep the number of meaningful words to a minimum.* Questions which include a number of profound words could bamboozle and the researcher would be unsure which word swayed the response. The following question is rather heavy in its use of meaningful words, "What motivates and inspires you in the selection or specification of a new supplier?". Once more, simplicity rules and a better question may be, "What, above all else, influences your choice of a new supplier?".

- *Avoid questions with a negative in them.* Questions are more difficult to understand if they are asked in a negative sense. It is better to say "Are you likely to buy XXX in the next three months?" than to say "Are you not likely to buy ...?"; "Do you ever ...?", as opposed to "Do you never ...?

- *Avoid hypothetical questions.* It has been reported that when Xerox commissioned research on the potential for its new copying process, the consultants forecast 8,000 units over six years while, in the event, Xerox installed 80,000 units in three years. The consultants were seeking answers to questions people could not really give as there is a conditioning process which affects people's actions in the longer run.

Nevertheless, researchers frequently are under pressure to ask hypothetical questions knowing that the results cannot be trusted.

- *Do not use words which could be misheard.* This is especially important over the telephone. For example the numbers 15 and 50 can be misheard and so if these must be used it would be wise to also spell them out – i.e. 15, I mean one five; 50 I mean five oh.

- *Do not offer fixed alternatives which could both be valid.* Attitudinal questions can sometimes be irritating to respondents if they feel that their answer is being forced into a box which does not reflect reality. In the following example there is no provision for the fact that the drink could taste both sour and bitter.

  Q Would you say that the drink tasted: sour 1 bitter? 2

- *Keep questions within the respondents' capabilities.* A question which asked distributors of clutches how many they sold per year obtained a poor response because the distributors held figures in their heads on monthly not annual sales. When the question was changed the question was answered with very little trouble.

- *Desensitise questions by using response bands.* Questions which ask ladies about their age or companies about their turnover are best asked in bands. The respondent is less inclined to think that confidences are being divulged if the response categories are fairly broad. Since the data will almost certainly be grouped into bands at the analysis stage, it may as well be collected as such. Thus:

  I will read out a number of turnover bands and would you tell me which your company fits into:

Less than £1 million	1
£1 million to £10 million	2
Over £10 million to £50 million	3
Over £50 million	4
Please specify _____	

In a situation such as that above the respondent may well be asked to be more specific if his turnover is more than £50 million as the data may be required to work out averages and gross up. Without some specific figures on the `over £50 million' respondents, the average of this band would be impossible to calculate.

- *Make it easy for respondents to answer questions.* Developing the above point further, it is easier for a respondent to answer a numeric question within bands than to answer specifically. If you do not need the answer to be specific, make the respondent's task easier by banding the responses. For example, the question "How much did you spend in XXX's supermarket last week?", would have people racking their memories for the exact figure when you may be quite satisfied to know the figure within £10 bands. If this is the case the respondent should be prompted with those bands. That is:

Was it ...	Nothing	1
	Less than £10	2
	£10 to £20	3
	£21 to £30	4
	Etc	

It should be noted in a question such as this, the people who do not shop in XXX's supermarket would normally be rerouted so that they are not asked how much they spent. It is still prudent to make provision for someone who passed the routing, perhaps because they normally shop at XXX, but for one reason or another they did not spend anything last week. This requires the response category `nothing' which is a very different answer to `less than £10'.

Some work may have to be done prior to designing the questionnaire to find suitable intervals for the bands. For example if a researcher had to design a questionnaire aimed at collecting data on distributors' sales of commercial brake linings, first it would be necessary to speak to a few distributors to find out sensible turnover bands.

- *Allow for `others' in fixed response questions.* Pre-coded lists, which are not read out and which are for the convenience of the interviewers and the coders, should always have provision for responses other than those which are listed. If the list of responses is read out, once again

there should be provision for answers which have not been included but it should be realised that these `other' responses will always be under-recorded.

- *Ensure that fixed responses do not overlap.* The categories which are used in a fixed response question should be sequential but not overlap otherwise there will always be someone who is caught on the cusp.

- *Consider `softening' knowledge based questions.* If a respondent is asked if they know the date a magazine was launched, or the name of products they last bought, or the price they paid, it may soften the question to insert a phrase such as "Can you recall off hand....?" or "Do you happen to know....?".

- *Consider using projective questions where the subject is sensitive or difficult.* There are circumstances when people may not like to admit that they act in a certain way. Sometimes they may not even recognise why they act or think as they do. These may be occasions for moving the question beyond the respondent and into a wider frame. For example, prior to asking a company about the prices it is paying for a product, it could be better to lead with a question about the market as a whole. It will help make way for the sensitive questions.

  QXa Thinking about companies like yours, what would you say are typical of the prices they pay for ground bar?"

  £_____/tonne

  QXb And would you say that the price your company pays is higher or lower than this?"

  Higher 1 → How much higher? _____%

  The same 2

  Lower 3 → How much lower? _____%