

From the Field

Pollsters Inside the Box

Learning to ask what you want to know

By **Richard Clark**

In the spring of 2000, students in the Masters of Survey Research Program at the University of Connecticut received their semester-long practicum project assignments. One group took on a particularly challenging initiative: survey those who conduct surveys for a living.¹ In fact, they were assigned to poll members of the survey industry's leading professional organization, the American Association for Public Opinion Research.

Adding to the adventure, these students would collect their data online using a web-based survey instrument. The use of this controversial method to poll some of the most noted members of the survey community would be rather like preparing a *nouveau cuisine* banquet for a convention of classically trained chefs—a risky venture, to say the least.

As part of the survey design, the students appended a text box to their questionnaire allowing respondents to submit additional comments. From this comment box came perhaps the most valuable lessons of the study.

The most heartening insight afforded by the contents of the comment box is that many survey researchers are quite generous in giving their time and sharing expertise. About one-third of the 560 respondents took the time to write something. Some respondents wrote a few paragraphs, others more, with the longest comment nearly 300 words.

The comments can be sorted into four basic categories, which may be described as critical constructive, critical non-constructive, non-critical constructive, and non-critical non-constructive.

Of all the comments given, 39% were critical of the survey but offered some constructive remarks. Respondents in this category found something specifically wrong with the survey. Most frequently noted was a set of questions that began, "How much of an issue is..." and then named a potential polling problem, such as low response rates. The phrasing was criticized for being overly vague. One respondent wrote:

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I couldn't understand the 'issues' questions—'How much of an issue is withholding the name of the sponsor of the survey from the respondent, if at all?' Does the 'issue' refer to how often it happens or if it happens, how much of a problem is it? I think I interpreted the term differently across the questions.

Another respondent concisely advised, "Ask what you want to know." It became clear from these comments that the validity of this battery was questionable. (For the record, the students had a more direct question wording prior to asking other program staff and me to review the instrument. The initial wording of one of the items was, "How serious of a problem are low response rates in survey research, if at all?" followed by an ordinal scale.)

One respondent who was very critical of the survey instrument generally did not fill out the questionnaire, but instead gave a detailed explanation of what he believed was wrong with the tool and why he refused to respond:

I started to fill this survey out but became frustrated by the fact that you have made it impossible in most cases to nuance the response to your questions. The subject is much more complicated than your questionnaire and you could be misled by your results. So I have not filled your instrument out.

The respondent then went on to flesh out some of the detail and suggested ways the students might approach measurement. Additionally, this respondent courteously invited the students to call or email to discuss the comments given.

There were very few comments in the critical, non-constructive category. An example of this sort of negative feedback was the following, reprinted in its entirety: “Not a particularly good questionnaire.” While others expressed this same opinion and then suggested how to improve the questionnaire—or at least said what was wrong with it—only 3% offered no explanation for their criticism.

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An additional 36% of the comments were not critical of the survey yet offered advice or, more commonly, elaboration on respondents’ attitudes about the industry and the major issues it faces. These “non-critical, constructive” comments provided both additional insight into the industry and fodder for future research. For example, on the subject of online surveys, one comment read:

The validity of internet surveys for general populations will increase greatly over the next few years for two reasons: (1) the proportion of persons with email addresses will become high enough to give a good approximation of the population (just as telephones did 50 years ago); (2) researchers will be able to weight data from internet surveys by calibrating them against traditional methods.

Another topic often commented upon was response rates. Some respondents wrote to emphasize the problem of low response rates:

...I think we need to spend more energy working to solve the response rate problem than worrying ourselves about online

surveying. Its time has not yet fully come—and low response rates are here now!


Other comments on response rates claimed that the industry is overly focused on this issue to the detriment of more pressing matters:

The profession needs to acknowledge that response rates are not the ONLY measure of quality in survey research. A survey with an ‘acceptable’ response rate may nonetheless be fundamentally flawed. An otherwise well-conducted survey with [a] lower response rate might be virtually indistinguishable in terms of quality from a survey with a higher response rate.

In many ways, the comments that fell under the “non-critical, constructive” category provided some qualitative context for analysis of the survey. They delved deeper into the issues the respondents thought were most important. The student researchers had made a number of assumptions about the important and controversial issues in the survey research field when designing their instrument; had they been privy to the input the comment box eventually provided, they might have examined some topics differently. The lesson all practitioners can take out of this is the value of pre-testing.

The last class of comments was neither critical nor constructive. This is not to say that they had no value. Under this classification, which made up 21% of the comments received, were compliments to the students on work well done and/or requests for copies of the findings.

This group of comments helped offset the non-constructive criticisms, which were not limited to the comment-box data. At one point while in the field, the survey was criticized on the AAPORnet listserv, and several AAPOR members responded to the critique. Nevertheless, this exchange was followed by an increase in the number of hits on the web survey which helped raise the response rate considerably.

Beyond the wealth of substantive input that was offered in the text box, what I came away with from reading these comments was a sense of how supportive some members of the profession are of new researchers. The students who conducted this survey are now a part of this profession, and hopefully, they have learned to encourage and mentor new researchers in a manner similar to the way they were treated. 

Endnote

¹I would like to thank the researchers—Colleen McColloch, Jaime Nieves, Zsolt Nyiel, and Valerie Tenore—for their hard work and good humor in collecting these data. The results are posted at www.csr.uconn.edu/reports.html.