USING AND DESIGNING QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaires
For research, it is usually best to use a standardised questionnaire i.e. a questionnaire that has already been tested for reliability and validated. This is to ensure that the questionnaire is measuring what you are trying to measure and that your findings can be easily replicated.

Standardised questionnaires can be identified through published research, the internet or through suppliers of assessment tools. Questionnaires can measure general concepts such as general coping strategies or specific measures that focus on a specific concept such as coping in response to pain, or for a specific population e.g. children aged 5-11 years. Some generic questionnaires can be adapted for a specific purpose, for example the Illness Perception Questionnaire (IPQ has been adapted for different medical conditions e.g. a version is available for HIV, asthma and chronic pain, although this should be completed following the instructions of the questionnaire to prevent any changes effecting the results.

There are advantages and disadvantages of using either a generic or specific questionnaire and the choice of questionnaire should be based on what you are trying to find out. For example, if you are looking at people’s experiences of living with asthma, a specific measure may be useful to identify the specific issues in living with this condition whereas if you are looking at patient satisfaction a questionnaire focusing on more generic issues may be more useful.

However, there are many times when you are unable to find a measure that is looking specifically at what you would like to measure or if you may only want to ask a small number of specific question to evaluate a service. In these situations it may be best to develop your own questionnaire. Although bear in mind that in research any questionnaire you develop will need to be pilot, and publishers do not look favourably on questionnaires that is not or is not in the process of being standardised.

Designing a Questionnaire
Most problems with questionnaires can be traced back to the design phase. A study that has well-defined documented goals, expressed in a few clear and concise sentences from the outset will have fewer problems when designing the questionnaire that those that do not. The tool becomes considerably easier to develop if the questionnaire is developed to directly address the goals of the study.

One of the best ways to clarify the study goals is to decide how you intend to use the information and to what purpose. Do this before you begin designing the project. This sounds obvious, but many people neglect this task. Be sure to commit the study goals to writing – write a study proposal that sets out the how when and why’s of the project. Everyone will then be very clear what is trying to be achieved and what is expected of him or her. Whenever you are unsure of a question, refer to the study goals and a solution will become clear. Ask only questions that directly address the goals. Avoid the temptation to ask questions because it would be "interesting to know".

The design of the questionnaire can be split in to three elements:

1. Determine the questions to be asked
2. Select the question type for each question and specify the wording
3. Design the question sequence and overall layout.
There are two important factors to remember. The importance of the layout and the quality of the questions

**Design and Layout**

We all know how important first impressions are. The same holds true for questionnaires. The layout of the questionnaire including the ease on the eye and the ease at which it can be filled out probably are the most important factors in obtaining a good response rate. Do not clutter the form up with unnecessary headings, and numbers. A brief introductory statement is useful, especially if the introductory letter could go adrift. Contact and return information should be included on the questionnaire.

Lay out the questions and answer choices attractively and neatly. Try to be consistent in aspects such as wording and layout of the questions e.g. asking them to rate on a scale or to number items in order of priority, use as few questions as possible. Avoid switching between landscape and portrait for the text layout. Be careful not to overfill the page. Avoid using lots of lines, borders and boxes since these can make the page look cluttered. Using a small font can cut down the number of pages and hence make the questionnaire look shorter; but remember that small fonts can put people off.

As a general rule long questionnaires get less response than short ones. One of the most effective methods of maximizing response is to shorten the questionnaire. If your survey is over a few pages, try to eliminate questions. Read each question and ask, "How am I going to use this information?" If the information will be used in a decision-making process, then keep the question... If not, throw it out. A low response rate can cause your findings to be questioned. Style any layout is important - Make your questionnaire stand out by using different coloured paper or inks.

Begin with a few non-threatening and interesting items. People generally look at the first few questions before deciding whether or not to complete the questionnaire. Grouping questions that are similar will make the questionnaire easier to complete, and the respondent will feel more comfortable. Leave adequate space for respondents to make comments. One criticism of questionnaires is their inability to retain the "flavour" of a response. Leaving space for comments will provide valuable information not captured by the response categories. Leaving white space also makes the questionnaire look easier to complete. Hold the respondent's interest by using different fonts, italics and bold.

Organize the pattern of the questions:

- Place demographic questions at the end of the questionnaire.
- Have your opening questions arouse interest.
- Ask easier questions first.
- To minimize conditioning, have general questions precede specific ones.
- Group similar questions together.
- If you must use personal or emotional questions, place them at the end of the questionnaire.

Anonymous questionnaires that contain no identifying information are more likely to produce honest responses than those identifying the respondent.

**Qualities of a Good Question**

- A good question asks for only one "bit" of information.
- Good questions do not confuse and frustrate the respondent
- Good questions use simple and direct language. The question should leave no ambiguity in the mind of the respondent. There should be only one correct or appropriate choice for the respondent to make.
• Good questions should follow on comfortably from the previous question. Transitions between questions should be smooth. Always give the option of a "don't know" response category if there is any possibility that the respondent may not know the answer.
• Good questions are not emotionally loaded nor use vaguely defined words as this can lead to misinterpretation.
• Good questions do not use unfamiliar words or abbreviations. Remember who your audience is and write your questionnaire for them.
• Good questions use short sentences.
• Good questions do not ask the respondent to order or rank a series of more than five items.
• The questionnaire / data collection form states the policy on confidentiality.
• Good questions are non-threatening.

Always pilot your questionnaire - The final test of a questionnaire is to try it on representatives of the target audience. Select between 5-10 candidates. If there are problems with the questionnaire, they almost always show up here. If possible, be present while a respondent is completing the questionnaire and tell her that it is okay to ask you for clarification of any item. The questions she asks are indicative of problems in the questionnaire. It is too late to decide there are flaws in your questionnaire once you have collected the data.

Covering Letters
Always provide a well-written cover letter that includes reasons for the study what you are trying to achieve and what is expected of the respondent. This will include clear and concise instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. These must be very easy to understand, so use short sentences and basic vocabulary. Be sure to print the return address on the questionnaire itself and offer the respondent a reply envelope. The importance of the cover letter should not be underestimated. It provides your best chance to persuade the respondent to participate in the study. Give your questionnaire a title that is short and meaningful. A questionnaire with a title is generally perceived to be more credible than one without. Always include other experts and relevant people in the questionnaire design process. Their suggestions will improve the questionnaire and give it credibility with your respondents.

The cover letter is an essential part of the questionnaire. It will affect whether or not the respondent completes the questionnaire. It is important to maintain a friendly tone and keep it as short as possible. The importance of the cover letter should not be underestimated. It provides an opportunity to persuade the respondent to complete the questionnaire. If the questionnaire can be completed in less than five minutes, mentioning this in the cover letter can increase the response rate.

The letter should:
1. Describe why the study is being done (briefly)
2. Say how you want the questionnaire returned giving an address - mention the inclusion of a stamped, self-addressed return envelope.
3. Encourage prompt response — give a response deadline of no more than 2 weeks
4. Describe your "confidentiality/anonymity" policy.
5. Give the name and phone number of someone they can call with questions.

If you would like help in designing your questionnaire
Please Contact the R&D Office on X3021