

CASE STUDY

An Alternative Approach to Testing Survey Questions

The Challenge: One of the many ways AmeriSpeak® seeks to promote data quality is by testing new or revised survey questions. Traditionally, questions are tested via pilot testing or cognitive interviewing to assess respondents' understanding of a question and their approach to answering it.

But pilot testing and cognitive interviewing can be time-consuming and costly, depending on the approach used and project needs, and are often conducted with a small sample. When project budgets or timelines are limited, these traditional testing methods may not be feasible.

NORC has demonstrated an alternative approach for testing survey questions: using the AmeriSpeak® Omnibus alone or to supplement other testing methods. The Omnibus is a twice-monthly survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,000 U.S. adults that provides generalizable insights about the views of the U.S. adult population.

Methodology: To evaluate the use of Omnibus for question testing, NORC fielded several split-ballot experiments that explored how variations in question wording, response category wording, and response category order impacted responses.

In a split-ballot experiment, the sample is divided into two random samples. Half the sample sees one version of the survey item and the other half sees another. Such experimental designs let us compare response distributions and proportions across the experimental variations. For example, in one

experiment, response category order effects were tested on sexual orientation. Respondents were randomly assigned to receive a sexual orientation item beginning with either “Lesbian or gay” or “Straight, that is, not lesbian or gay.”

Another experiment compared responses across different response category wordings, specifically low- and high-frequency scales. Respondents were asked about their social media usage using two different time scales. One group had a lower-usage scale ranging from “½ hour or less” to “more than 2 ½ hours.” The other group had a higher-usage scale ranging from “2 ½ hours or less” to “More than 4½ hours.”

FINDINGS

Our Testing Results

NORC’s approach to testing survey questions—including response category order, question and response category wording, frequency scales, and question format—provides valuable insights. For example, response ordering affects sexual orientation measurement. When “Straight, that is, not gay or lesbian” was the first option, participants were less likely to select “I don’t know the answer” than when “Gay or lesbian” was the first option.

Social media usage was lower for respondents who received the low-frequency scale. Prior research has shown that people use the categories provided to anchor and estimate their own responses. Consistent with prior findings, in our research, individuals reported lower social media usage with the low-frequency scale than with the high-frequency scale. Using open-ended numeric responses or scales that place average behavioral ranges in the middle may give more accurate results when the pressure to provide a socially acceptable response may skew survey results.

Traditional Interviewing Remains Best Evaluation Practice

Traditional approaches, such as cognitive interviewing or pilot testing, remain best practices for evaluating survey questions or response options. Interviewers can detect respondent hesitation, confusion, or discomfort with a question and better understand the underlying mechanisms of why questions may not be working well. Respondents can also share their approach to a question with interviewers.

Omnibus Provides Ease and Efficiency

NORC recommends traditional approaches to survey testing when time and resources permit. But when budgets are limited and timelines are short, the Omnibus can test new or revised survey questions in 7-10 business days. The Omnibus also provides a larger sample size than what is often used for cognitive interviewing or pilot tests, providing a larger sample for testing specific question differences and more power to detect significance. Because of AmeriSpeak’s high-quality probability sample, data are also generalizable to the U.S. adult population.

Get Your Research Right

To learn more about how you can use AmeriSpeak Omnibus for your next study, please contact AmeriSpeak-Omnibus@norc.org.