Symmetry shouldn’t be goal for scales

MARKETING RESEARCH

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The awkwardness of symmetry in this rat-

ing scale is evident in its supposed center point. Just what does “neither important nor unimportant” mean? If something is not important, it is unimportant, and vice versa. If we want to use a verbal scale, it should be something like, “essential, very important, moderately important, not really important or not important at all.”

Poor research practice is often compounded by assigning arbitrary numerical values to these scale positions and using them as multipliers of quality assessments (expressed as equally arbitrary numbers) to derive composite indices of product or service quality or value perceptions. Clients are likely to accept anything as long as it is expressed in numbers.

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By Thomas T. Semon

Now, I would like you to consider (attribute x). Would you say that it is very important to you, somewhat important, neither important nor unimportant, somewhat unimportant, or very unimportant?” I suppose most of us have seen questionnaires with this type of question, and sometimes more than a dozen such questions. Wherever design such a questionnaire either does not realize what a tire some bore it is for both respondent and interviewer, or does not care, or perhaps both. It is a prime example of poor survey design, likely to yield poor-quality responses. It is also unnecessarily verbose, which means time-consuming and therefore costly.

At least 40 years have passed since Harry Heller argued convincingly that the importance of attributes should not be ascertained by explicit questions, but determined by analysis of other responses, at least in part because asking it directly could elicit self-protective, posturing responses. Additionally, the question format quoted is inappropriate for ascertaining importance.

Importance is not a bipolar concept. The scale of importance ranges from “essential” down to zero—not down to a negative. There is no such thing as negative importance. If I do not want something, and it is important to me nor to have it (such as, say, music in the office), that is not equivalent to saying that it is “very unimportant.” Using a symmetrical, bipolar rating scale for assessing importance level is the kind of error induced by ritual thinking.

In this case, the ritual is symmetry. We have a natural preference for symmetry: In the animal kingdom, symmetry of build and features is generally perceived as indicating health; studies have consistently shown that it is a strong factor in mate selection. At least externally, most creatures are symmetrical around the axis of their alimentary tract. The preference for symmetry is evident in language: descriptors such as “skewed” and “lopsided” or “asymmetry” are negative. It is not surprising that we should try to impose symmetry even when it is not naturally there.

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DECISION ANALYST

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The Associated Press

NATION ● Attract ‘em

Philly colleges, tourism team up to get students

Universities spend millions on new buildings, glossy brochures and ad campaigns to sell themselves to top student prospects who sometimes make a decision based, in part, on just a few hours on campus.

So Philadelphia’s scores of area colleges and universities have teamed up with city tourism officials to try to sell visiting students on Philadelphia as an attraction.

“The vitality of Philadelphia has been enhanced so much recently that it’s a real selling point,” says Lee Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania.

Selling the city will be a focal point of the Campus Visit Philadelphia program, a 17-school effort led by the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Corp. to create a user-friendly atmosphere for visiting students and their parents.

The program’s Web site, featuring a photo of the Philadelphia Art Museum overlooking the Schuylkill River at sunset, attempts to give students an array of resources for planning their trips.

The site lets students make hotel and plane reservations, provides discounts from US Airways and Amtrak, lists events, tours city attractions, and provides links to the colleges’ Web sites.

The effort was prompted, in part, by a recent Pennsylvania Economy League study that found that Philadelphia’s “knowledge industry” is inferior—despite drawing more than 200,000 students a year to the city—to that of New York, Boston, San Francisco and Raleigh-Durham, N.C.

The study recommended that the schools increase their capacity to attract 20,000 more students. But to use Philadelphia’s attractions as a selling point, the colleges need to overcome the problem of visiting students’ budgeting enough time to tour campus but not the city.

“This is not classic tourism,” Hoffman says, noting that students bring in more money and stay for longer than tourists do. “It’s economic development.”

—The Associated Press

NATION ● Turned off

Channel One drops marketing plan

Denver-based broadcasting company that gives schools free video gear for airing a broadcast with commercials is backing away from a plan to give teachers $500 to sign up new schools.

Channel One says it is dropping the plan because as structured, it could present a conflict for some educators.

Teachers can still earn $500 by persuading their principals to sign up—but now, they have to give the money to the school.

—The Associated Press