Consider context of questionnaires as survey results can be affected

**MARKETING RESEARCH**

By Thomas T. Semon

Your ad agency suggests a campaign nurturing your company’s concern about the environment. You like the idea, but you wonder how many of your potential customers are concerned, and how seriously they will answer. In an article published in 2000 in Public Opinion Quarterly, Alexandr Todorov of New York University pointed out that a question that is literally unambiguous may not be unambiguous pragmatically. The reason is usually the question context. For example, to determine levels of concern about the environment, you can ask the question directly, without a filter. The incidence of mild concern is likely to be understated with the filter question, and overstated without it.

There are other context effects in questionnaires. If the question of environmental concern is the first time the environment has been mentioned in the interview, it comes, so to speak, out of the blue; as a result, the response may reflect superficial associations derived from media inputs. Asking the question following other mentions of the subject tends to focus and concretize the concept in the respondent’s mind, a process likely to yield a different, more considered response.

That, however, is not necessarily an advantage. Whether it is depends on whether the planned campaign will refer to the environment in broad, general terms, or whether it will go into specifics. If broad and general, the superficial response may be preferable, being more relevant to the planned communication.

Questionnaire design, a fundamental determinant of survey quality, is an art rather than a science; but for optimum effectiveness, the art has to take advantage of all available scientific findings. Todorov’s article lists more than two dozen references, published studies and articles on the subject of question context and its effects. I suspect that many, perhaps most questionnaires, are designed on their own wits. It’s a form of conceit that makes a mockery of researchers’ scientific pretensions.

For users of survey research data, there is an important caution: Make sure you know exactly how questions were asked, in what context, before comparing results of different surveys. Apparent trends and differences may largely reflect differences in questionnaire design that send different messages to the respondents.

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Diverse team ups creativity

Dive rse team ups creativity on as part of my talent review and what we’re evaluating all of our marketers on,” she says.

Comstock has even assembled a SWAT team. “We were looking to hire senior marketers who’ve had track records in different industries to go into an in-house consulting group,” she explains. Her team includes academics, packaged goods and healthcare veterans, a biochemical and an aerospace engineer and a classically trained marketer.

“It’s been fun to see what happens when you bring people with different backgrounds together. Really great ideas come out,” Comstock says.

Comstock advocates marketing as a career choice for today’s grads. “Marketing is a great destination because you’re involved in different projects, industries and emerging trends. If you love to learn, marketing is a great place to put your energy,” she says. “The great marketers in our company are integrators. It’s a great training ground to become a CEO.”

Could a marketer run GE? According to Comstock, one already does. She says Immelt began his career in the group she now heads.

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