WHITE PAPER

The Hidden Costs of Long Surveys: Why Survey Length Impacts Data Quality

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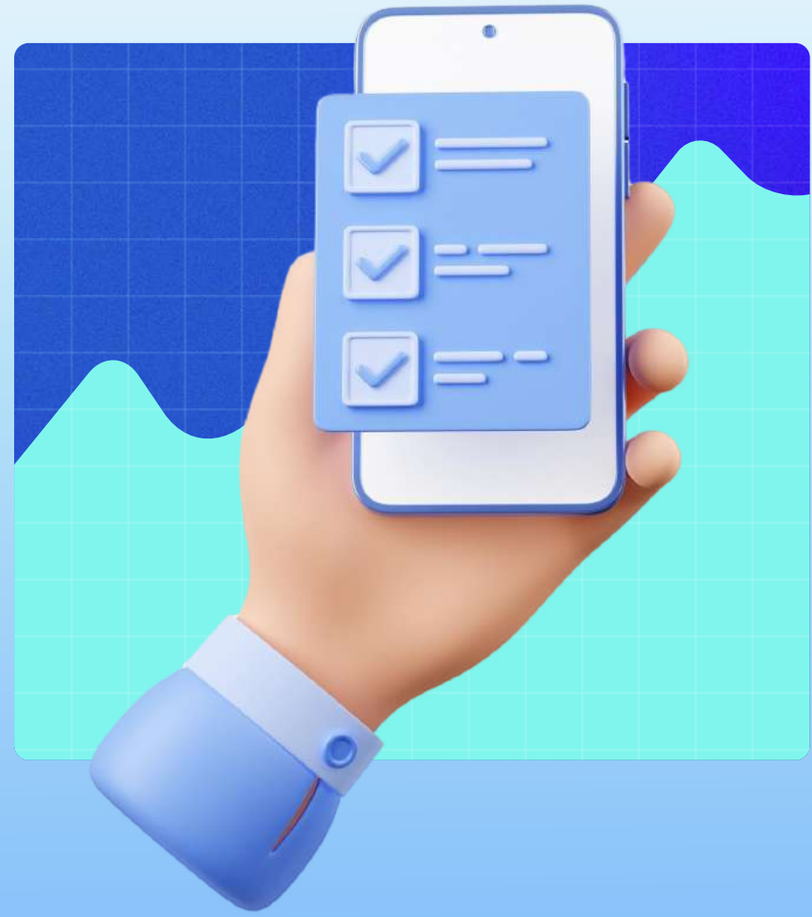

> “We need all these questions. Just give them a bigger incentive.”

> “We can’t cut any of those questions! We’ve been tracking them for years.”

> “The brand manager is insisting we keep those new questions.”

Have you ever heard comments like these when finalizing a survey? They suggest that survey length doesn’t really matter and that it’s fine to make the survey “just a little bit longer.” But is it really okay?

When a survey is too long, data quality suffers, drop-out rates increase, and response rates decline. These factors significantly impact the value and validity of the data we collect.

Yes, we might get answers to our “extra” questions, but if respondents are overwhelmed by the survey length, their answers may be inaccurate. And bad data leads to poor decisions.

Long surveys lead to bad data

Research clearly shows that lengthy surveys cause respondents to tune out and answer hastily to finish quickly, leading to inaccurate data.

Mirta Galesic and Michael Bosnjak published a study in Public Opinion Quarterly entitled “Effects of Questionnaire Length on Participation and Indicators of Response Quality in a Web Survey.” They tested surveys of three lengths: 10, 20, and 30 minutes. They concluded that “the longer the stated length, the fewer respondents started and completed the questionnaire. In addition, answers to questions positioned later in the questionnaire were faster, shorter, and more uniform than answers to questions positioned near the beginning.” Likewise, Herzog and Bachman’s research confirmed that “...people respond in somewhat more stereotypical ways in the later parts of a long questionnaire, as reflected in straight-line or almost straight-line responding.”

An award-winning study entitled “Questionnaire Length and Fatigue Effects: does size really matter?” by Andrea Rathod and Sandra LaBruna tested blocks of questions, rotating their order. The survey was up to 35 minutes long. They compared how people answered when questions were at the beginning versus the end of the survey. They found that, like Galesic and Bosnjak, people answered much more quickly at the end of the survey. They suggested this was because “respondents get tired and probably sloppy at the end of long surveys and do not pay as much attention to those questions towards the end of [long] surveys.”

In 2009, Peter Cape replicated Rathod and LaBruna’s study and added additional analysis. He concluded, “the long survey proved itself too long. It fatigued the respondent and led to satisficing behavior.” He found “The answers to open questions were less full, and less time and effort generally was put into the end of the survey compared to the start. Perhaps the most unsettling finding was that the instances of cheating, deliberately telling a Falsehood in order to skip an entire section, also increased as the survey progressed.”

In 2015, Cape replicated the study, expanding it to include new countries and cultures. He again discovered that questions at the end of the survey were answered more quickly, responses to open-ended questions became shorter, participants were less likely to change the default position on a slider, and they were less likely to admit to having taken a holiday, as they wanted to skip answering questions about it. He concluded, “Three studies across multiple countries and cultures and across more than a decade have demonstrated that there are fatigue effects when taking surveys and that data quality suffers as a result.”

In another study, Andrew Grenville found that in brand tracking, the “percent of people selecting ‘don’t know’ at the end of a long [18 minute] survey was almost 50% higher than when it was placed at the beginning of the survey....” He concluded, “Length can clearly have a profound effect on respondent engagement and, therefore data quality.” These findings are also consistent with work done by Jon Krosnick and colleagues, who found “Attraction to no-opinion options was found to be greatest...for questions asked later in a survey....”

All these findings align with Rathod and LaBruna's conclusion that

> "respondents get tired and probably sloppy at the end of long surveys and do not pay as much attention...."

But is the problem the respondents or the length of the survey? It is easy to take respondents for granted, to treat them like a sample rather than people. But they are people. They participate because they want to make their voices heard, but they hate long surveys. We must respect that or suffer the consequences.

The bland academic language of these papers, unfortunately, tends to blunt the impact of the findings. When we talk about "response quality," is that really something we need to be concerned about? In a word, yes.

Perhaps we can accept that some of the data we collect is less than 100% accurate, but the problem is that error doesn't go away. It accumulates, like a slow poison. The more inaccurate information we have, the further it takes us away from the truth. This ever increases the likelihood of misunderstanding the market and making wrong decisions.

How long is too long?

There is no definitive answer to how long a survey can be before respondents get bored and tune out. It depends on the subject matter, the ease of answering the questions, the demographics of the respondents, and many other factors. However, based on our experience and various studies, we know that **surveys longer than 10-12 minutes** often suffer from quality issues.

A study in the International Journal of Market Research concluded that "the ideal survey length is a median of 10 minutes." A GRIT survey of respondents found that a majority felt surveys should be 10 minutes or less. Dan Coates and colleagues analyzed millennials' responses to 75 studies and found "participation has been dropping off closer to the 13-minute mark."

Additional research determined that longer interviews were "most likely to give us the least amount of insights, combined with the maximum number of empty verbatims." It is ironic but instructive that asking more questions results in "the least amount of insight."

So, what can we conclude? Short surveys—no more than 10-12 minutes—will produce reliable data. Longer surveys can yield inaccurate data. Our job as researchers is to provide findings that inform and illuminate, not mislead.

But I need that question

Writing a short survey is hard. But cutting to the point is not a new or unique problem. Mark Twain is said to have quipped "I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead." It takes more effort to be succinct. It is even more difficult when there are multiple stakeholders, all of whom “need” their questions.

So how can we proceed?
Here are four strategies for keeping surveys to a reasonable length.

1

Get a Fresh Perspective

It is helpful to draft a survey and then set it aside for a day or two to gain some perspective. When you revisit it, assess how each question aligns with the study’s objectives. Reflect on how many questions target the same objective and determine the truly unique information each one provides. A thorough second review can help identify questions that can be eliminated.

It's also valuable to have a colleague who isn’t directly involved in the project review the survey. Ask them to note which objectives each question addresses and identify any that seem repetitive or unnecessary. A fresh set of eyes can uncover blind spots and redundancies.

2

Pretest and cut

Conducting a pretest with 30-50 respondents is sufficient to assess the survey length and identify questions that are highly correlated. Even with a small sample, examining correlations and performing exploratory factor analysis will often show that many questions are redundant. The brand manager may believe there’s an important distinction between “tastes great” and “delicious,” but if respondents provide the same answers to both, it’s clear they don’t see the difference.

Similarly, many studies include items that have been asked before. A factor analysis of previous datasets can identify highly correlated and redundant items. When reanalyzing past waves of trackers, we often find that half or more of the survey is duplicative.

3

Ask: Does everyone need to answer every question?

Consider a design where, for instance, half the sample answers Section D and the other half answers Section E. Although this approach results in a smaller sample size for those questions, it provides more accurate information.

4

Let people know that a long survey is a problem survey

Stakeholders are often not aware how profoundly the length of a survey can influence the quality of the data. Share this research. If stakeholders learn that asking more questions paradoxically leads to “the least amount of insight” they will think twice about what their real priorities are.

Length matters

Survey length matters much more than we would care to admit. Our industry’s tendency to write long surveys is counterproductive. You can’t generate good insights out of poor data. Sometimes the more we ask, the less we learn.

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