

# 7 reasons why your health survey might fail

## Introduction

Collecting information using a questionnaire to measure patient satisfaction, experience and health outcomes is now common practice. There is a variety of health questionnaire types that can be used. Whichever way questionnaires are used and for whatever purpose, the objective is to obtain reliable and valid information on the patient's experience and reported outcomes.



### 1. Understanding the big picture

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It is essential that the overall objectives of the survey are defined. This will include, establishing the purpose of the survey e.g. measuring patient satisfaction, experience or outcomes, clarifying the target population the questionnaire will be administered to e.g. patient group, disease type, how the information will be collected e.g. paper/pencil, interview, web and how that information will be used e.g. improve patient experience.

### 2. Using incorrect data collection methodology

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Telephone online and mobile surveys are inappropriate for the hard of hearing and elderly. If you are using a postal survey, how reliable is your data source and what is the literacy level of your target population?

### 3. Using the wrong type of question

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Choosing the correct type of question for your survey will involve making decisions such as to use an open or closed question, a 'don't know' response option, rating or ranking scales or grids etc. Respondents generally do like open-ended questions and should be used sparingly.. Grids should be avoided for online surveys. Ranking vs rating. Ranking questions are cognitively more demanding so in most cases rating scales will be the best choice. Remember complexity leads to none-response.

## 4. Questions difficult to understand

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Respondents need to understand what the question is asking to give you the correct information. A well-crafted question needs to be no longer than 20 words, should be written using plain and simple language. The question should ask one question only e.g. How would you rate the receptionist's helpfulness? NOT How would you rate the receptionist's and doctor's helpfulness?

## 5. Not adding a 'Prefer not to answer' option

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Respondents will sometimes prefer not to answer a question or questions. While this is considered by some researchers as a loss of data, forcing respondents to answer a question before moving on to the next question can result in respondents discontinuing the survey. Furthermore, there is research evidence from the USA that shows cultural groups may respond differently in that some groups will skip a question whereas others will discontinue the survey entirely.



## 6. Failing to provide all answer options

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You need to make sure you provide all the answer options for respondents to answer the question appropriately. If you are unsure, carry out a pre-test using an 'Other (please specify)' option. Alternatively, a small focus group or face-to-face interviews will provide evidence whether all the answer options are provided.

## 7. Not using a balanced scale

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Unbalanced scales (where the majority of the response options are either positive or negative) are suitable in some cases where, for example, respondents are more likely to have a particular view. However, balanced scales (where equal and negative responses are provided) should be used in general.

## Summary

These 7 survey question design tips are not totally exclusive, they however, are some of the common reasons affecting the quality of the data collected. Questionnaire designers should keep in mind two goals. First, make it as easy as possible for respondents to complete the answering process. Secondly, focus on creating clear questions with understandable, appropriate and complete answer options.



# About Health Outcomes Insights

Health Outcomes Insights is an independent research consultancy serving academia, life science researchers, healthcare agencies and the pharmaceutical industry, get targeted answers to patient behaviour, experience and health outcomes across a range of conditions and diseases – with particular expertise in diabetes.

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