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Respondent Centred Surveys: putting respondents at the heart of survey design

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Abstract

Too often, surveys are designed for the analyst, rather than the respondent, resulting in cumbersome surveys with low response rates. Increasing demand for self-completion surveys means we can no longer rely on skilled interviewers to improve the experience and secure responses.

It's time to achieve your survey goals by empowering your respondents. The speakers share an innovative approach to survey design, called 'Respondent Centred Design' (RCD). It challenges the status quo by putting respondents' needs at the heart of survey development. It encourages you to stop designing based on assumptions and instead to listen to respondents needs. Only then can you design a survey that provides a great experience, alongside collecting more accurate data and without compromising the analyst's needs.

Overall, this approach aims to refocus our investment to the beginning of the data lifecycle, to the design phase, by prioritising the respondent and enhancing their end-to-end experience. This method is being used at the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS) to transform the Labour Force Survey. Drawing on their experience, the speakers:

- Share why moving to RCD is necessary

- How to design respondent centred surveys (including the RCD Framework)

- Demonstration of practical application of RCD through ONS case studies

Introduction:

What is 'Respondent Centred Design'? It simply means putting the respondent in the driving seat when it comes to the design of your survey experience. We must not underestimate the importance of doing this and the importance of the 'experience' aspect of the interaction when it comes to nonresponse in longitudinal surveys.

Self-completion surveys no longer mean that we can rely on highly trained and dedicated interviewers to provide a good experience for the respondent and to achieve that response. Interviewers play a vital role in maintaining response rates (especially around hard to reach groups) and gathering the correct information for complicated concepts which are cognitively demanding. They quickly come to learn which questions are troublesome however changes to question wording are kept to a minimum to manage time series data concerns. Instead, the interviewers will use their skills and experience to work around the challenges; this is no longer acceptable.

The data-user-centred approach has left us with questionnaires that are long, confusing, and sometimes repetitive. However, worst of all is that they often feel irrelevant to the respondent, leaving them feeling like they've not really represented themselves well enough or in the way they wanted to. This poor experience is a contributing factor to declining response rates; however, it can no longer be overlooked when the tables are turned and the respondent becomes the interviewer and the interviewee.

The term Respondent Centred Design is derived from the term User Centred Design (UCD). UCD is not new, the term was coined in 1986 and for a long time it has driven the development of products (e.g., websites and apps) in the tech world with the aim of creating something which has high 'usability'. It promotes the creation of 'models' and 'goals' to assist the development, including end-to-end 'user journeys' and 'happy/unhappy paths' to achieve a great experience for the user. In turn, this hopefully means the user perhaps buys something, comes back again and spreads the word about how great their experience was – each contributing to the success of your product. Almost all those desired outcomes are relevant to the goals of an online government survey. It also means not striving for perfection before sharing or testing something – the aim is to 'fail fast'. It is important to learn quickly what is and isn't working so that you can change it and get back out there with the public to test it again. This development approach means that you don't put the roof on the house before the walls are built. It reduces the risk of sticking with something because you've started it now and it's too far gone or will take too much time and effort to change it.

In short, Respondent Centred Design is defined as learning about the needs of those who will use your service and designing it to meet them. It keeps the respondent as the informant of the design. In terms of surveys the user is the respondent, and their needs can relate to the following:

- Who they are
- What their circumstances are
- What information they require before, during and after taking part
- How and where they take part
- What they are trying to do and what they want to be able to do
- What their expectations are at each stage of the journey
- Issues that cause them friction and pain points

If we build the 'right thing' (i.e., the right sort of survey) then the following outcomes will be observed:

- Reduction in respondent burden
- Increased data quality
- Reduction in costs

The Government Digital Service principles support this approach.

How can Respondent Centred Design reduce respondent burden?

Respondent burden can occur at any point in the respondent journey, for example from the point of receiving communications through to completing the survey itself.

It is possible to reduce burden at every touchpoint by developing the survey experience to be user centred. Wilson and Dickinson (2021) have distilled their user-centred design knowledge and approaches into a 'Respondent Centred Design Framework' (RCDF) (L. Wilson and E. Dickinson, 2021), found below. The RCDF aims to combat the 'errors of measurement' and 'errors of representation'.

This framework can be used alongside: the Total Survey Error Framework (Groves and others, 2004) and the four-step cognitive process developed by (Tourangeau and others, 2000).

Respondent Centred Design Framework (RCDF):

1. Establish the data user need

Before designing in a respondent centred way, we must understand the data user need. Gather information from the data users and analysts to learn about how they intend to use the data. Once this is clear, this information can then be used to inform the design of the communications, questions, and next steps.

2. Mental model research

Explore through qualitative research how respondents conceptualise topics in the questionnaire. This means to learn about what they draw upon to reach that understanding, the thought processes that take place and whether the response options meet their expectations.

Mental models can be learned, based on experience, exposure and environment. It is equally important to design for them in interviewer administered and self-completion modes. Interviewers can also provide insights into the mental models of respondents. This information will then inform the wording and flow of the questionnaire, grouping questions that are conceptually linked.

3. Understand user experience and needs

User stories and journeys are key tools when designing a survey. They document needs and the path that a user will take, respectively. Often assumptions are made about these which can result in the wrong thing being built.

A user story is a three-part statement which documents the user needs. They are commonly written in the following way, "As a [insert]…I need [insert]…so that [insert]". For example, a respondent may say, "As a respondent to the survey, I need to know how long it will take, so that I can complete it at a time that is convenient".

The insights that inform the statements are gathered through qualitative research with the public. A user journey documents every step taken and task completed by the user when using your product or to complete a goal. Documenting each step in the journey will help to identify the barriers and friction points. Once these are identified and understood then they will inform the research plan.

4. Use data to design

Data can be used to inform the questionnaire order and flow and to improve quality. It is possible to assess whether the questionnaire is moving respondents through it in the most efficient way by analysing the pathways of different groups. Using this information, it is possible to design the question flow to minimise burden.

High item missingness (i.e., a high amount of missing data related to people not answering a question), or long question timings for certain questions may indicate a question is burdensome for respondents. Running these analyses and learning from them can improve data quality and direct future qualitative research to explore the problems.

5. Create using appropriate tone, readability and language

Creating content with appropriate tone, reading age and language is key to reducing burden. All content, from letters to the questionnaire, should be tested for reading age compliance (there is free online software to do this, such as the [Hemingway App](#)).

In the UK the average reading age is nine years old therefore content should be developed to meet this level. There will be some instances where this is not possible to apply to all content, so pragmatism is recommended. Learning about the language used by the public to describe topics or their circumstances allows us to recycle this content in materials and questions to reduce burden by aiding cognition.

6. Design without relying on help

Questionnaires should not rely on respondents reading additional help in order to provide a response. Questions should be designed in a respondent centred way to reduce burden.

Issues with questions should be addressed through iterating and testing alternative designs rather than by adding help. It is not always possible to remove all help from a questionnaire – however, it should be used sparingly.

7. Take an 'optimode' approach to design

'Optimode' means to design the respondent communications and the questionnaire optimally for each mode. For respondent materials this means tailoring content of letters depending on the mode of interview. For questionnaires this means optimising the design for each mode.

Having a design that works optimally in the mode that it is being administered will reduce respondent burden as it will be tailored to their needs

8. Use adaptive design

Questionnaires should be built using adaptive design. This is where the interface adapts to the screen size and displays the content accordingly. This approach will reduce respondent burden as the screen will render suitably to the device they are using to complete the survey.

When designing questions, it is helpful to think 'smartphone first' as this will constrain the amount of space available in turn challenging you to produce a leaner question, or set of questions, to address the data user need and reduce burden

9. Conduct 'cogability' testing

Before going live with respondent materials and the questionnaire, it is important that pre-testing takes place with respondents. The content must be tested to ensure that it is understood, it is usable and meets the respondent need, in turn reducing burden.

We recommend combining cognitive and usability testing to create 'cogability' testing in the same session to maximise learning

10. Design inclusively

All content developed should be designed to be inclusive. Inclusive designs reduce burden for all users not just those with disabilities. Find out more about making your service more inclusive.

Summary:

It is time to go back to the basics of good survey design and start to re-introduce the respondent in the design process. To do this, it is necessary to stop designing surveys at desk or by committee, with stakeholders and data users. As Oppenheim (1966) said, "The world is full of well-meaning people who believe that anyone who can write plain English and has a modicum of common sense can produce a good questionnaire." However, anyone who has spent time cognitively testing survey products knows that it takes a lot more than the ability to 'write in plain English' and use 'common sense' to design a good survey. Therefore, we need to see greater investment in the survey design phase to ensure that we create surveys that are comprehensible, relevant, and useable for our respondents. In other words, we need to start designing surveys in a respondent centred way.

Further reading:

- 'Respondent Centred Surveys; Stop, Listen and then Design' (2021, SAGE Publishing).
- ONS Survey Methodology Bulletin, No. 78 - January 2018, "Using respondent centric design to transform Social Surveys at ONS" https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/methodologicalpublications/generalmethodology/surveymethodologybulletin
- Social Research Association, Research Matters Magazine article, "Putting the respondent at the heart of survey transformation", September 2018, https://thesra.org.uk/Common/Uploaded%20files/Research%20Matters%20Magazine/sra-researchmatters-september-2018-edition.pdf
- Global Network and ISWGHS joint webinar: Respondent Centred Surveys: Stop, Listen and then Design, April 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GDq_6N-ReSA
- DC-AAPOR Book Club 2.0: Laura Wilson and Emma Dickinson – Respondent Centred Design, December 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUdIrIpFJY8