VansonBourne

A brief guide to...

Questionnaire design

Sarah Thorp
Research Director

What came first, the chicken or the egg? One of life's big questions. An alternative question could be: what came first, the survey question, or the headline?

It all comes down to what you're looking to achieve. Maybe you want numbers to tell stories, to get headlines and to ultimately sell a product or a service. Or maybe you're looking for reliable data to guide your decision making and shape your strategy. But how do you get to a number that will tell a story and captivate your target audience? Or get to a data point that you can trust?

The answer sounds simple; by creating a great survey that will glean the insightful and accurate responses you need, which will ultimately become truly relevant content to the people that you want to read it.

It might sound easy, but there's a lot to consider when creating that survey. Only once the target respondent audience has been agreed can you think about building a survey tool; you need to know who's going to be on the receiving end of your questionnaire before design can begin.

Having an expert research partner helps of course (although we would say that). The Vanson Bourne approach to questionnaire design is iterative. We work with you right from the off – we often even include sample questions in our research proposal, along with respondent recommendations – all with your objectives front and centre, guiding our suggestions. The thing to remember is that we are research experts and we specialise in the tech sector, so you know you'll get something credible. But every client, company, and campaign is unique.

That's why we always start with understanding you.

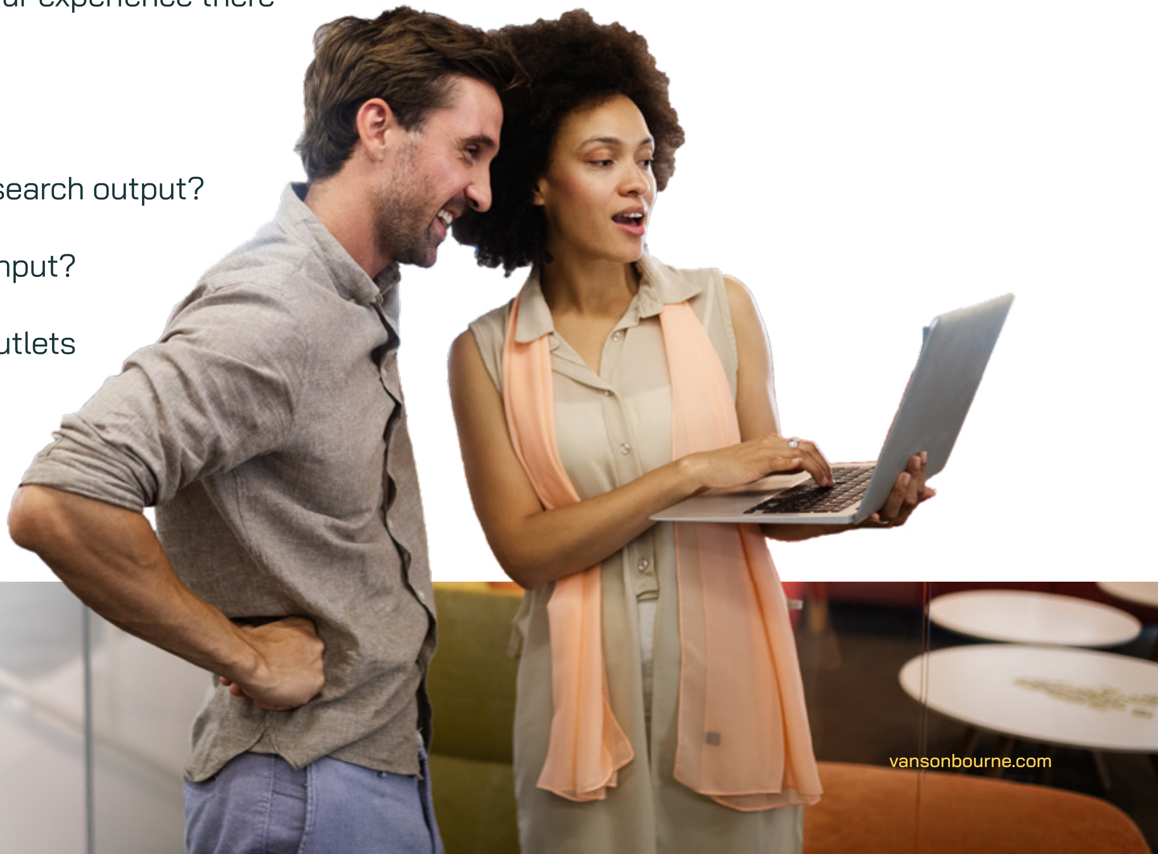
Understanding your objectives

Before putting fingers to the keyboard, it's crucial to map out and understand your objectives for the research and to communicate those to your research partner. Depending on your desired outcome, it might be something you're trying to prove, an idea you're looking to test – or what headlines you would like to be able to use. So, to answer the question from earlier on; what should come first – we would always recommend it's the headline. Know your desired outcome and use that as the foundation for success.

How do you get there?

Firstly, keep your objectives top of mind. At Vanson Bourne, the first few slides of any research proposal we create always contain the objectives of your research project With those objectives in mind, in our experience there are some key questions to consider:

- Who are you interviewing, and why them?
- Is that the same demographic you're hoping to read the report/research output?
- Are there internal stakeholders you need to engage to offer their input?
- If it's research for a campaign or thought leadership, what press outlets are you trying to get the findings into?
- What does your campaign look like; is it global? Will there be regional narratives?
- Are you looking to prove anything specific?
- Is there a dream headline you'd love to be able to use?
- Is there a hypothesis you're looking to test?



Here at Vanson Bourne, we're researchers, so we're curious – any effective research partner should be.

You've probably grasped that we will ask you a lot of questions around what you're looking to achieve – especially anything you want the research to back up or support. In or before the project kick off, think about any supporting documents, such as product information, collateral you already have, or data you've seen elsewhere that you think is relevant.

Once all that is addressed, we always recommend working back from there in terms of questions. Focusing on the end goal will ensure every tool in the arsenal is used to ask the best questions and get the most from the respondents in a finite amount of time.

And that brings us to the next consideration when designing your survey...

Engaging the respondent to ensure reliable data

It might not be that surprising to know that annually, the proportion of surveys that are completed on mobile devices increases; after all, data shows that globally, 68% of all web visits came from mobile devices in 2020 —an increase from 63% in 2019. Most of the decision makers we talk to are busy people and so it's vital to have a survey that not only looks good, fits on the screen and actually functions on a mobile – it also needs to keep their attention.

Microsoft published a study that found that the average attention span of adults in 2018 was just eight seconds, down from 12 in the year 2000. (So if you're still with us, then thank you!) That means there's a need to grasp the respondent's interest with each new question. Anything over 160 characters and you risk them skim reading which puts data quality in peril, or worse, they'll give up and log into a different app from the average of 60-90 that they have on their device.

Here are just some of the ways that effective survey design can keep respondents' attention with even the most niche topics:

- Using section headers and info pop-ups to tell respondents what they're moving to next, or if there's a change of topic
- Using a variety question types (hypothetical, drag'n'drop, sliders, ratings etc.)
- Gamification techniques (such as card sorting)
- Using images in the survey

Overall, remaining mindful of the number of questions and overall length of the survey is crucial in managing respondent fatigue (we'll come to that in a bit). There's also respondent psychology to consider...hands up if you'd consider giving up if the first question you were asked was a bit too hard? Yep, us too.

But the answer to that question might be really important to your campaign, so there's something else to think about...

Balancing your needs and the data quality provided by respondents

You have questions. Respondents have answers. We have eight seconds to keep their attention. An impossible task? It doesn't have to be.

Based on over 20 years' experience in survey design, here are our key things to keep in mind when developing questionnaires:

1. Scrutinise each question

Do you need it? Does it add to the story? Can a respondent answer it truthfully and accurately? Are you being specific enough?

2. Assess every answer list

Does it cover every aspect that you might want to talk about in later analysis? Do any answers contradict answers elsewhere in the survey? Does it need a "don't know" for respondents who might be too senior to know such detail? Does it need a "none of these" option? Does it need an option for them to say something else? There's a reason not including these sorts of answers breaches the regulation we go on to mention in point 4 – spoiler alert! Think about it this way: if, during a conversation someone wasn't allowing you to express yourself in the way you wanted to, would you continue that conversation? Exactly. Questionnaires are the same. If you don't allow respondents to say "don't know" or you try to pigeonhole them – then they won't complete that survey and too many dropouts puts the survey timelines at risk.

3. Read back through the questions once drafted

Once the first draft is complete, take a look back at the whole survey. Is the order of questions sensible? Are there headers, or sections to signpost the respondent (but not lead them) through the questionnaire? Are the most important questions in the first half of the survey when the respondents are the freshest and most engaged? But equally, does it ease them in with some broader questions to set the scene? Do the questions link together into a narrative that will result in great content and reliable data points?

4. Check the Code of Conduct

Ensure to abide by the Market Research Society's Code of Conduct. Is there anything leading? Is there any accidental bias? Are respondents always being respected? (e.g. there are "prefer not to say" options for sensitive questions such as age, gender, income etc.). This is less common in B2B tech surveys, but is still something to keep in mind.

5. Look at the language

Are there any terms that might cause confusion? Are there any that might not translate well? Do you need to define anything to ensure consistent understanding from respondents? Does every question make it clear what respondents need to do? (e.g. select one, more than one, rank the options etc.) Can anything be made more concise, so it looks better on a small screen?

6. Estimate the survey duration

Lastly, estimate the time it would take a respondent to answer. We usually say around 20 questions is about right, but if there are questions some respondents won't see, or if there are some really hard questions, then that might have an impact as to whether that number can go up or down.

This all takes time, but questionnaire design is the most important part of a research project, and it shouldn't be rushed if possible. You don't want to get to the end and wish you'd asked something you haven't.

Planning ahead is the key to success, and being client-centric, at Vanson Bourne we'll do everything we can to ensure you succeed.

So, what should you expect working with Vanson Bourne on a questionnaire?

We're experts with over 20 years' experience as B2B research specialists, so we'll think outside the box and develop something that will work for you. Every project is bespoke and we work to your specific goals every time.

We care. About you, and about our respondents. Client success and satisfaction is what we get out of bed for, but we also know that respondents are a finite resource. That means it's in everyone's best interest that we put out the very best questionnaire we can for every project we run.

If you'd like to understand more about what a well written questionnaire can do for you, then just get in touch:

enquiries@vansonbourne.com

vansonbourne.com