

PMR Challenges #2:

With this series of brief summaries, describing insights we gained through our work, we aim to raise awareness of inherent MR risks and point towards solutions that help you avoid falling prey to the most common mistakes made in PMR ... and to ensure that you can be confident in the results from future PMR studies.

Biased Questions – be aware of your influence on respondents

We have previously discussed how survey respondents' personalities and situations will affect their responses (and the need to gather information on these circumstances to better interpret the survey results). Closely related, but much more under our own control is the bias WE INTRODUCE by the way we ask questions. One of the most critical areas where we do not want to introduce any bias is during testing target product profiles (TPP) – as we have seen, this is an area where HCPs are often particularly optimistic and anything we do (unintentionally) to further bias MR feedback can lead to exaggerated forecasts and poor investment decisions.

Dissecting the Q&A Process

At the risk of sounding too academic, let's take a look at what happens when we ask a respondent to answer a simple question (or a complex question).

First, they must **understand the question** – and the context in which the question is asked. We cannot assume they are in the same frame of mind as we are, and we have to make sure the context is clear.

Second, they need to be able to **recall the information** we are asking – think about it: our interviewee is not a computer, so ask questions they can accurately answer from memory.

Third, they need to **select the best fitting answer** from multiple choices offered (for closed questions) – how clear are the options we offer? Might they not fit the respondent's answer? Or, they need to **express often complex ideas** to open-ended questions in a 2-line write-in box.

3 Steps in Q&A:

1. Understand the question
2. Recall relevant information
3. Translate into answers
 - a. Select best multiple choice
 - b. Express in a very brief statement

Pay attention to (and avoid) unintended question bias

Being sensitive to the tasks we put our survey respondents through is the first step to avoiding leading questions. Learning about the psychology of how people answer questions goes even further.



1. **Acquiescence bias** is the tendency to agree. Rather than asking, “*Do you believe that a 5% side-effect rate is acceptable?*”, keep the question neutral, for example, “*What side-effect rate would you consider acceptable?*”
2. Building on the above, we also have to avoid **Confirmation bias**, which occurs when researchers ask respondents to confirm their hypotheses. This happens more in interviews than in surveys as the interviewer often wants to be sure they heard the respondent correctly. There is a fine balance between confirming what you heard and nudging the respondent to agree to your hypothesis.
3. Just like people have a tendency to agree rather than disagree, they have a tendency to conform, sometimes referred to as **Social Desirability bias**. To avoid getting the answer that the respondent considers acceptable or believes the interviewer wants to hear, be sure to ask questions in a way that leave as few clues as possible to the right or desired answer – this can be achieved by ensuring all answer options are plausible, defensible, attractive and not embarrassing to select.
4. The next trap to be aware of is the fact that people tend to prefer a positive statement over a negative statement – even if the facts are the same. Maybe we’ll refer to this as **Positive Thinking**, but it has also been labeled as **Framing Gains vs. Losses**. Studies have documented that Statement A achieved a much higher product rating than Statement B:
 - a. *Product X has 92% fast response, allowing patients to be discharged after day 8*
 - b. *Product X has 8% delayed response rates extending the hospital stay beyond day 8.*
5. **Multiple Choice Order**: Intuitive once you’ve been made aware, the order in which we list multiple answer choices affects the rate at which they are picked. In paper or online surveys, respondents tend to pick the first decent answer – sometimes referred to as **satisficing**. On the other hand, in live interviews, the last option provided is often favored – mostly because it is still fresh in the respondent’s memory whereas the earlier options may have become a bit blurry. Experiments have shown that this effect is increasingly important with older respondents.

These are just a few examples of how our survey instrument or interview process can skew market research results. To be confident that we are capturing the true attitudes and/or behaviors, we must recognize these tendencies and design our research to account for them and minimize their impact.

In a world of easy and widely accessible survey programs, the temptation may be high to just do a quick study with a DIY (do-it-yourself) online tool ... and run the risk of merely rubber-stamping your own biases! Better to work with a professional who is well versed in the pitfalls of PMR and knows how to avoid them.

If you would like to discuss how to conduct PMR that you can be confident in, please contact us at info@cogent-hc.com.