

The Art of Asking
**SURVEY
QUESTIONS**

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CONTENTS.

- 4. Introduction: The Art of Asking the *Right* Questions.
- 7. Survey Yourself Before Others: 5 Questions to Ask Yourself Before You Start Writing.
- 27. The Do's of Writing a Sound Survey.
- 47. The Don'ts of Writing a Sound Survey.
- 69. Wrap Up: Getting Started With Your Own Survey.

Click the text above to jump to a section.

Keep an eye out for hyperlinks to other resources to learn more, too.

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The Art of Asking

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

When you need to gather information from an entire population, the best way to do so is to send a survey. Problem is, surveys are difficult to write. There are so many ways to ask questions, and *if you don't ask the right ones, you won't get the information you need.*

That's why HubSpot and SurveyMonkey collaborated to create this guide – to teach you the art of asking the *right questions* so that writing your next survey is both painless and productive.

Let's get started.

First things first: Before you survey others, you need to *take an honest survey yourself.*

If you're getting ready to send an online survey, you probably already have some questions in mind for your audience. No doubt about it — what you ask your respondents should be well thought out. Equally important, though, are the questions you ask yourself before you send a survey. Five basic questions — *why, who, what, how, and when* — don't get as much attention as the questions you include in your survey. But they should. Take time to answer them. Your results will thank you for it.

5 Questions to Ask

**BEFORE WRITING A
SURVEY**



1

Why DO YOU WANT TO ASK?

The most important step in a survey is *figuring out what you actually want to know*. It's important to make your objectives really clear up front or the next steps of survey formation won't go so well.

For example, stay away from vague goals like measuring “satisfaction.” What do you mean by satisfaction? Do you want to know if your public awareness campaign was engaging and fun? Or if it was informational? Or persuasive? *Focus on your end goal*: What decision do you need to make or behavior do you need to change based on the feedback you get from your survey?

Not only will having a clear sense of the feedback you want help you to analyze your data when you get it back; it will also *make writing your actual survey questions clearer and simpler* — something that the people answering your survey will definitely appreciate. Which brings us to our next question ...





2

Who DO YOU WANT TO ASK?

This may seem like a silly question, but it really is very important.

Survey respondents should be a “sample” of a “population.”

- A *population* is the entire set of people you want to ask – American citizens, non-profit workers in Texas, or teenage internet users in New York City.
- Your *sample* is the portion of that bigger population that actually ends up taking your survey.

You can think of a population as all the fish swimming around in the Pacific Ocean and a sample as all the fish you caught on Tuesday afternoon. Figuring out which fish you want to catch is directly related to why you're fishing. That is, figuring out *who you want to answer your questions is directly related to why you're asking* in the first place.



Let's say you're a non-profit looking to make sure you get lots of donations for your next year.

Do you want to make sure your current donors are happy with the way you are spending their contributions? Or are you trying to figure out how to attract new donors? If it's about your current donors, then your *population* would be all of your current donors, and to access that population, just send your survey out to your mailing list of donors. Your *sample* will be the people who actually respond to your survey.

If you're trying to get new donors, however, it gets a little trickier. First you have to spend a little more time defining who your population is exactly. That is, who could potentially donate to your organization? Adults probably. Maybe only English-speaking adults. If you're a local, grassroots organization, perhaps only American adults who live in San Francisco. *It's really up to you.* If you need help accessing a sample of your target population, SurveyMonkey has an [Audience](#) available.

Now that we've tackled the question of who to ask, let's move on to our next question ...



3

What DO YOU WANT TO ASK?



You've got your objectives and your sample population nailed down. But your survey is still blank. What do you ask?!

Well, that's a complicated problem, and there's not just one right answer. The short answer?

Ask questions that measure the things you care about. If you have a clear sense of the feedback you need to get in order to reach your end goal, determining what to ask will be a lot easier.

What makes writing surveys so difficult is that *you have to operationalize a fuzzy concept*, which essentially means you need to figure out how to ask questions in a way that they can measure an intangible, fuzzy concept like happiness, for example. Some questions you could ask to measure how happy someone is include:

- How many times did you laugh today?
- How optimistic are you about your future?
- How stressed were you this week?

Neither question is right nor wrong. The questions you choose to ask should ultimately provide you with the information you need to *measure your goal*. If you can't do something with the information, don't measure it!





4

How DO YOU WANT TO ASK?

There are *so many* different kinds of question designs and factors to consider when producing unbiased and relevant survey responses.

To help you understand the range of questions you could ask, take a look at SurveyMonkey's overview of the [types of survey questions](#) you can add, and [view a demo](#) of how they'll appear in an actual survey.

These range from open-ended questions (comments or essays) to closed-ended (yes/no, multiple choice, rating scale, etc.), and also have a variety of formatting options.

The most important thing to consider when writing your survey questions is to keep your questions *simple, straightforward,* and *concise*. This will make it easy for your survey-takers to understand what you're asking, and will make it easy for you to analyze your data.

If you're not sure if your questions are easy enough to understand, test them out on a friend or someone who's not familiar with your particular industry to make sure the questions are comprehensive.



5

When DO YOU WANT TO ASK?

To understand when you should conduct your survey, let's revisit the fishing metaphor. When you go out fishing, how many fish you catch can depend on what time you go out to fish and how long you stay out there. Some kinds of fish tend to be easier to catch in the morning, others at night. Fishing for 2 hours will yield a different catch than fishing for 2 days.

In surveys, depending on who you want to “catch,” you're going to want to send out invitations at different points of the week, and leave surveys open for different amounts of time — especially if you want to

get more responses.

Closing a survey too quickly can frustrate people who tried to respond, and exclude people who are just a little slower at getting around to things. This could potentially bias the conclusions you draw in an unhelpful way.

For example, if you're trying to recruit new donors, you might be interested in what would motivate people who don't tend to be quick responders.

So, there you have it. Use these 5 questions to guide you, and your survey will be off to a good start before you've even started writing it! And that's what we're going to address next in this guide: what are the basic do's and don'ts for the actual writing stage of conducting an effective survey?

Let's dive in.



The Do's of Writing
A SOUND SURVEY

A good survey should *flow in an orderly fashion*, help to *stimulate recall* (if necessary); and *motivate the respondent to reply*. That's why it's good practice to follow these survey “do’s,” and avoid unintentional violation of the survey's objectivity by steering clear of the “don’ts” that follow.





1

BE *Clear* ABOUT YOUR INTENTIONS.

Remember your “why?” – the entire reason you were writing a survey in the first place? Communicate that to your audience so they can identify with your purpose.

If your survey doesn't seem to have a purpose, good luck trying to get anyone to take it! At the beginning of your survey, start with *a short introduction* like, “Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

We value your feedback so we can improve our service. Your responses will remain confidential.”



2

KEEP SURVEYS *Short.*

Crafting short surveys helps ensure that your respondents *start and finish* your survey. Respondents are much more receptive to partaking if they know your survey won't take them much time to complete.

Respondents take more time to respond to each question when taking shorter surveys as well, which means you're more likely to collect accurate feedback. Brevity also forces you to focus on your "why" – the reason you're writing and distributing the survey in the first place. It helps you think about the *most critical questions* you could possibly ask to retrieve the answers you need.



3

USE *Words* INSTEAD OF NUMBERS.



If you're going to give your survey-takers answer choices, try not to use too many choices for any given question. People get overwhelmed. For rating questions, make sure to *label the answer choices* and limit the number of options to no more than seven—the most number of choices people can typically consider at once.



So that means don't ask your survey-takers to rate how happy they are on a scale of 1 to 5. Ask them if they're extremely happy, very happy, moderately happy, slightly happy, or not at all happy. *Words are easier* for people to think about than numbers.

If you're trying to measure someone's attitudes or behaviors, consider using a [Likert scale](#) question. It's one of the most popular (and reliable) ways to measure opinion from one extreme to another (for example, not at all likely to extremely likely).

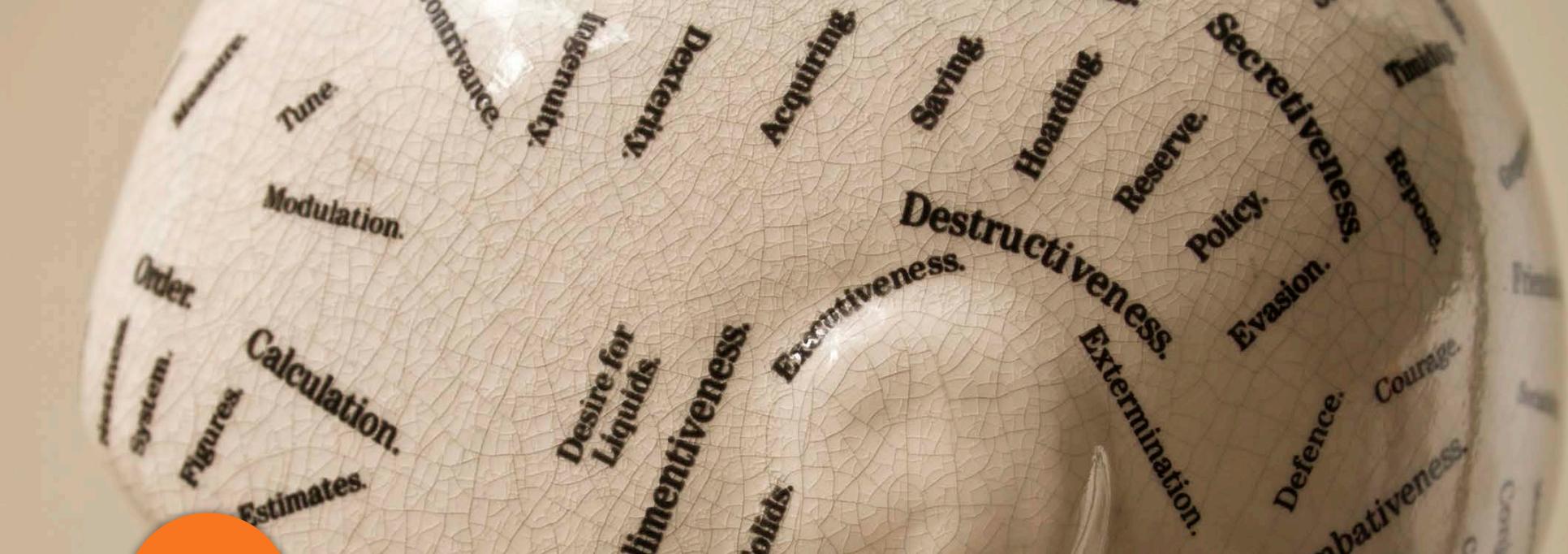
A man in a light blue shirt is shown from the back, looking thoughtful with his hand on his head. The background is a light blue wall with several large, white question marks scattered across it. A dark grey horizontal bar is positioned across the middle of the image, containing a white circle with the number 4 and the text 'USE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS Sparingly.'

4

USE OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Sparingly.

Asking open-ended questions, such as “What do you like about your boss?” can be great for qualitative research. The problem with questions like these, however, is that they’re *unfocused and therefore hard to analyze* since the responses you’ll get will be so varied. In addition to being difficult to analyze, the questions themselves are easy for respondents to skip since they take more time and thought to answer. Use open-ended questions sparingly (we recommend no more than one per survey) to save yourself time in the analysis stage.



5

ALLOW FOR *Shades of Gray.*

Sometimes it can be tempting to craft questions that provide respondents with a simple “yes” or “no” answer because they’re really easy for respondents to answer, and it would seem as if the 50/50 responses would make for easier analysis later on.

Even though “yes” or “no” questions are appealing, try to *use them sparingly* for two major reasons: People’s views and behaviors can be fuzzy, so their opinions about what you’re measuring don’t always fall into one of two buckets.



Secondly, writing questions that allow your respondents' opinions to be seen in various shades of gray from “yes” and “no,” to “agree” and “disagree” (e.g. Likert scale questions) actually ensures there's enough variance for statistical analysis, and gives you more information because it not only tells you what they feel, but *how strongly they feel* about something.



6

ONLY ASK QUESTIONS THAT GIVE
YOU ANSWERS YOU CAN *Act On.*

The whole point of conducting a survey is to find out a key piece of information in order to actually change or influence some sort of action or behavior. When you conduct a survey to retrieve answers that you have no immediate plans to do anything with, you waste yours and your respondents' time and energy.

Ask questions that give you actionable data so you can do something with the results, and be prepared to make some radical shifts based on the data you receive – not just the data you hope to get.



7

Start Broad, **THEN GET NARROW.**



A general, logical, overall *flow is important*, because the order that specific questions appear in your survey can directly impact the responses you gather. This is why it is best to start broad and get narrow with your questions.

Start with the most general question to get a clean reading on your survey topic. For example, in an event feedback survey, the respondents' overall impression of the event should come first. That way you know their reaction is based on their general opinion of the event and not biased by the specifics like the event catering or venue.

COMPOSE

Inbox (1)

8

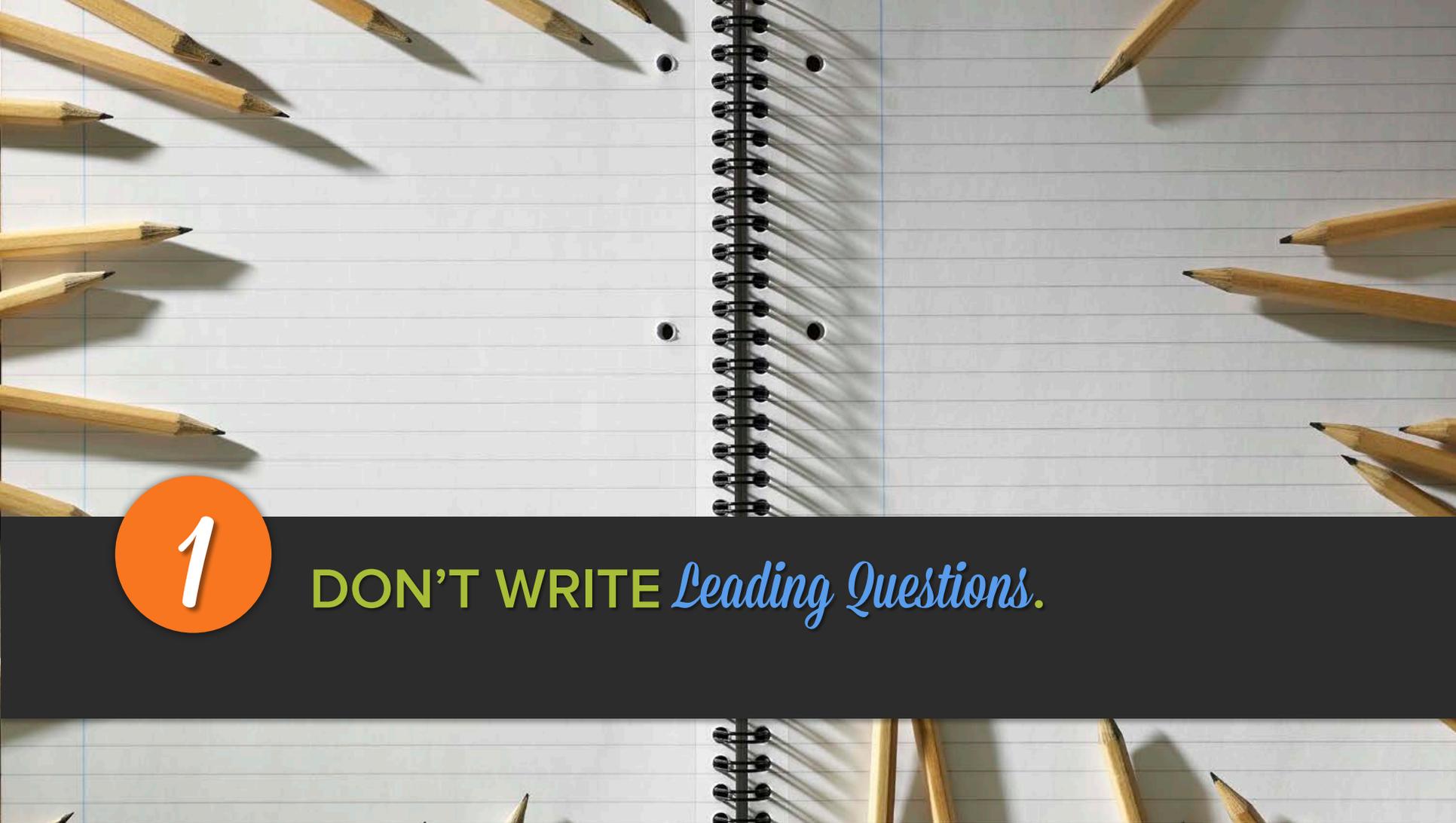
Follow Up WITH YOUR RESPONDENTS.

A great survey is like a great conversation in that it's written in a personable, logical fashion; it is written in a tone the audience can relate to; and it allows the respondent to feel listened to. Oftentimes, this is the sole reason why respondents choose to participate in surveys in the first place: *They want to be heard*. If someone took the time to answer your questions, it's a good idea to follow up on your "conversation" – even if it's a more general summary – indicating what action was taken.

Now that you know what to do, let's move on to what *not* to do.

The Don'ts of Writing

A SOUND SURVEY



1

DON'T WRITE *Leading Questions.*

You don't want to lead your respondents into answering a certain way based on the wording of the questions.

For example: We have recently upgraded SurveyMonkey to become a first class tool. What are your thoughts on the first class site?

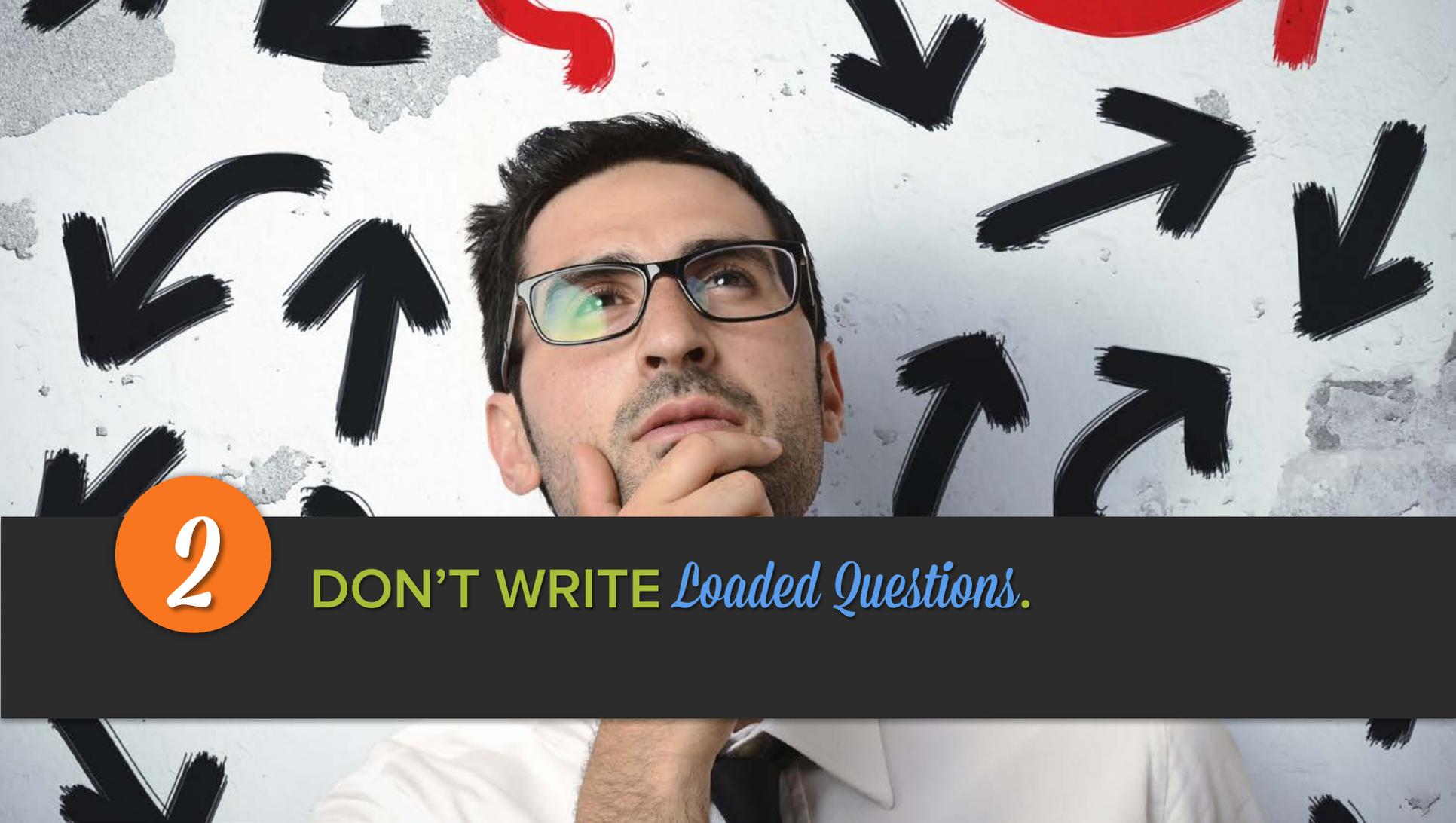
By indicating that SurveyMonkey is a first class tool, you're encouraging respondents to respond positively to the site upgrade.

Instead, replace with something like this:

What are your thoughts on the changes to SurveyMonkey?

Removing the bias allows respondents to answer more objectively.

They get to focus on what they like or don't like about the site changes without the survey designer steering them one way or another.



2

DON'T WRITE *Loaded Questions.*

Loaded questions contain emotionally charged assumptions that can push respondents towards a specific answer choice. By choosing that answer choice, they thereby agree to the question's presupposition.

For example: How terrible is dairy for your health?

By answering this question, the respondent must agree that dairy is unhealthy.

Instead, consider something like this:

Do you think dairy is healthy, unhealthy, or neither?

The respondent gets to determine whether dairy is unhealthy or not by choosing from a balanced set of options.



3

DON'T *Assume.*

Don't build in assumptions into your questions. Avoid asking questions that assume the respondents are familiar with the specifics of it. Include details or additional information if necessary.

For example: What do you think of the latest feature added to the HubSpot's all-in-one inbound marketing platform?

We're assuming you not only know HubSpot sells inbound marketing software, but that you're also up to date on all its latest updates.

Instead, try something like this:

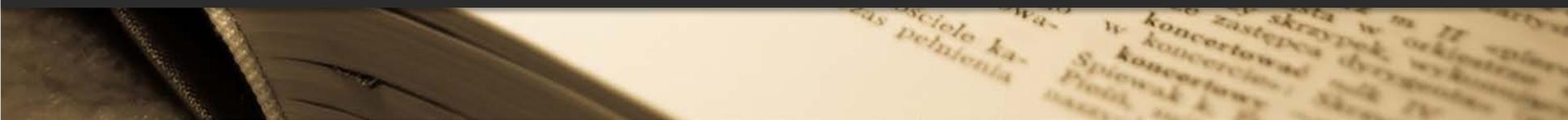
HubSpot recently launched Campaigns, an app that allows you to track all of your inbound marketing efforts back to identified campaign goals. How likely are you to try the Campaigns app?

This version of the question provides enough context as to what the Campaigns app is before asking whether the respondent would be likely to experiment with it.



4

DON'T USE *Jargon.*



Use simple words that are direct and familiar. Try not to use jargon or technical concepts, as it may make your respondents feel unintelligent, or have to pause to consult the dictionary.

For example: Who was central to your ontogeny?

Using “ontogeny” instead of a well-known synonym may confuse your respondents, and confused respondents provide inaccurate data.

Instead, consider something like this:

Who was central to your development?

See what we mean? Much better. Why use “ontogeny” when you can just use “development?”



5

DON'T USE *Double Negatives.*

Double negatives (negating adjectives) makes respondents have to think harder, which makes them irritated and impatient, which means they're more likely to provide inaccurate answers (or quit altogether!).

For example: Which of these pictures is not unattractive?

Your respondent will be thinking, "Wait ... are they asking if these are attractive, or unattractive ... or? Let me re-read ..."

Instead, why not:

Which of these pictures is attractive?

And voila! See how much easier this is to understand? The more direct, the better.



6

DON'T WRITE *Double-Barreled Questions.*

Double-barreled questions ask two questions at once. In a survey multiple ideas presented at the same time inhibits a useful response.

For example: How useful do you find SurveyMonkey's Help Center Topics and blog?

The respondent may find SurveyMonkey's Help Center Topics very useful and the blog not as useful, but the question doesn't provide them any opportunity to distinguish their opinions on either.

Instead, try:

Q1: How useful do you find SurveyMonkey's Help Center Topics?
Q2: How useful do you find SurveyMonkey's email support?

Separating the questions into two allows the respondent to focus on the helpfulness of each resource.



7

DON'T LET PEOPLE *Opt Out.*

When you give respondents the opportunity to answer a question with “no opinion,” “I don’t know,” or “not applicable,” you’re communicating that it’s okay to not provide an opinion, which defeats the whole purpose of you conducting the survey. *Force respondents to provide an opinion* by doing the hard work up front and ensure you’ve provided them with sufficient responses to choose from.

Eliminate questions that include “no opinion” as a response, only use “I don’t know” as a possible response for really difficult questions, and instead of using “not applicable” as a response option, use [skip logic](#).

For example, instead of pairing:

“How useful is our blog?” with “Not applicable” ...

Consider asking a “yes” or “no” question such as:

“Have you ever visited our blog?” and use skip logic to direct respondents to applicable follow up questions.

(Assessing past behavior is an example of when “yes” or “no” questions make sense: Either they’ve visited the blog or they haven’t).

Wrap Up:

**GETTING STARTED
WITH YOUR OWN
SURVEY.**

The main point we're trying to get across is this: *Don't get lazy when designing your survey.* Do the hard work for your respondents so they can breeze through your survey while providing you with quality data.

If your survey doesn't seem to have a meaningful purpose, if it doesn't flow in a logical order, if it contains complicated language or tedious question types (e.g. ranking or matrix questions), or if it's for whatever reason difficult to understand, you'll annoy your respondents and you'll get data that you can't do much with. And that defeats the whole purpose of conducting a survey in the first place.

Remember: *Bad data can be worse than no data at all.* Bad data leads to bad decisions, which can end up costing your company lots of money.

So, now that you've learned some of the best practices associated with creating survey from scratch, take a stab at creating your own survey using the workbook we provided.

Once complete, you should be well on your way to distributing a survey that will help you tackle the problem at hand.

Now, *what problem do you want to solve?*

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