



Crafting Questions with Less Bias

Are questions that require a yes-no response a poor choice? Yes or No?

In a first draft of a survey for a needs assessment, baseline, or post program evaluation, you may craft questions with a yes-no response to ask about management practices.

For instance, for a baseline survey:

Have you worked with your veterinarian to develop a treatment plan for sick cows? (circle number)

- 1 YES
- 2 NO

Once you get your initial ideas on paper however, consider **recasting** the question with the yes-no response. It can result in biased data.

Your concern is not the respondent who is already performing the practice in the question. Your concern is the respondent who is **not** performing it. You want to know the truth from these people so you can plan your program content accordingly. But respondents may be reluctant to admit it to others on a survey either because of 'social desirability' bias (wanting to give the impression of doing what is appropriate) or researcher bias (wanting to please you). Additionally, asking questions with a yes-no format can feel like a police interrogation to respondents, put them on the defensive and reluctant to tell the truth.

There are many ways to improve this line of questioning and the validity of your data. Often the best way is to recast the question. If not, improve the answer categories. Make the answer 'no' as comfortable as possible for respondents to choose. For example, replace the 'no' with the following:

Have you worked with your veterinarian to develop a treatment plan for sick cows? (circle number)

- 1 YES OR 1 YES
- 2 NOT YET 2 NOT AT THIS TIME

Another way is to present a face saving answer category for the respondent so that you are more likely to get the truth. Plan to recode that answer category as a 'no' when doing the analysis. For instance,

Have you worked with your veterinarian to develop a treatment plan for sick cows? (circle number)

- 1 YES
- 2 NO
- 3 Plan to do this within 3 months

The bottom line is to be leery of behavior questions with a yes-no response. The same principle applies to questions with a yes-no response for opinions, intentions or knowledge.

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