



Asking About Potentially Embarrassing Behaviors

Questions with a yes-no answer categories are often inappropriate and create bias. Are questions that require a yes-no response *always* a poor choice?

Definitely not. In fact they are used successfully in research to elicit greater truth about the frequency of some very sensitive behaviors such as smoking, drinking, sex, and drugs.

In program evaluation and needs assessments in education, there are management practices and behaviors that respondents are embarrassed about revealing especially if they are asked how *frequently* they do or do not do something.

In a context such as this, use a yes-no question as a screen question, asking the respondent if they have *ever* done it. It is easier for a respondent to admit to having done something once. Then go on to ask how often. For example:

Have you ever had a tank-load of milk rejected by the milk company because of antibiotic residues found in the milk? (circle number)

1 YES (If yes) How often in the last 6 months? _____ Times

2 NO

Other examples of behavior targeted in extension programs that respondents may feel uncomfortable about revealing either because of legal or personal reasons might include food handling in a restaurant, current manure management, or abusive behavior with kids. There are doubtless others in other program areas and specialists and agents know best which behaviors these might be.

In short, research has shown you can increase the validity of data about the frequency of sensitive behavior, if you preface the question with one that has a yes-no answer category, asking if they have ever practiced that behavior.

For further reading, see: Schuman, H. & Presser, S. (1981). *Questions and answers in attitude surveys*. New York: Academic Press, Inc.

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