

SSI POV: Online

Don't Know Response Option Best Practices

- SSI has conducted new research which shows a new way to: (1) detect bias caused by non-attitudes; and (2) filter out participants whose non-attitudes may contribute to this bias.

What the Research Literature Shows

Research literature offers two competing recommendations for dealing with “Don’t Knows.” Some say that survey “satisficers”—or those who are not engaged with the interview—are likely to select the easy “don’t know” (DK) even though they may have an opinion (Krosnick et al. 2002).

Other say that participants may hesitate to offer an opinion, thinking they don’t know enough about the topic (Hippler & Schwarz, 1989) so DK response options should not be offered.

Others say that participants who don’t have an opinion, but just want to be helpful, should be encouraged to select a “don’t know” option instead of an artificial opinion (Schuman & Presser 1981). With this approach, researchers have recommended including wording (e.g. “or don’t you have an opinion about this”), which indicates that “don’t know” is allowed. One unwanted effect of filters, though, may be that researchers suggest they want only the most knowledgeable opinions (Hippler & Schwarz 1989).

The Perils of Assuming Participants Are Knowledgeable

SSI analyzed the following two questions: 1) “Do you support providing the president with fast track negotiating authority for trade agreements?” (response options: “strongly support,” “somewhat support,” “neither support nor oppose,” “somewhat oppose,” “strongly oppose”) and 2) “How willing would you be to try Twisted Tea?” (response options: “extremely willing,” “very willing,” “moderately willing,” “slightly willing,” “not willing at all”).

Both of these items assess opinions on subject matters that many participants may not know about, and cover subject matters of the types that are commonly studied by public opinion and marketing researchers.

The results demonstrated the perils of assuming that participants are knowledgeable about the subject matters asked in public opinion surveys.

When we asked participants to describe the policy or product in their own words in an open end question, more people responded with a DK answer (or, with a midpoint answer if there was no DK option). However, when the topic or product was explained to the participant in the question wording, fewer people chose the DK or midpoint response option.

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Importantly, without any request to describe the topic, or any explanation of the topic, more participants were supportive of the subject matter, most likely due to acquiescence bias.

SSI's Recommendations

These results suggest three practical recommendations for survey researchers:

1. A DK response option should be offered because otherwise participants with non-attitudes will select the midpoint, introducing measurement error and bias.
2. Define key terms within the question wording, particularly for questions dealing with obscure topics.
3. Consider including a request to describe the topic in the questionnaire as a relatively unobtrusive way of filtering out participants who don't really have an attitude on the question.

Just offering a DK option by itself is insufficient to filter out these responses.