AM Last Page: Avoiding Four Visual-Design Pitfalls in Survey Development

A previous AM Last Page presented five common pitfalls of survey design as well as several solutions. This AM Last Page presents four visual-design and layout pitfalls and offers solutions.

### Pitfall: Explanation and Example

#### Labeling only the end points of your response options

Labeling only the end points leaves the meaning of the unlabeled options open to respondents’ interpretation. Different respondents can interpret the unlabeled options differently. This ambiguity increases measurement error.

**How interesting did you find this clinical reasoning course?**

- not at all interesting
- slightly interesting
- moderate interest
- quite interesting
- extremely interesting

#### Labeling response options with both numbers and verbal labels

Because of the additional information respondents must process, providing both numbers and verbal labels extends response time. The implied meaning of negative numbers can be particularly confusing and may introduce additional error. For example, in the item below, learning “a little bit” seems incongruous with learning the amount of “−1.”

**How much did you learn in today’s workshop?**

- almost nothing
- a little bit
- some
- quite a bit
- a tremendous amount

#### Unequally spacing your response options

The visual spacing between options can attract respondents to certain options over others, which in turn might cause them to select these options more frequently. In addition, unbalanced spacing of the response options can shift the visual midpoint of the scale.

**How much did you learn from your peers in this course?**

- almost nothing
- a little bit
- some
- quite a bit
- a tremendous amount

#### Placing nonsubstantive response options together with substantive response options

Placing nonsubstantive response options such as “don’t know,” “no opinion,” or “not applicable” together with the substantive options can shift the visual and conceptual midpoint of the response scales, thereby skewing the results.

**How satisfied are you with the quality of the library services?**

- not at all satisfied
- slightly satisfied
- moderately satisfied
- quite satisfied
- extremely satisfied
- not applicable

### Solution: Explanation and Example

#### Verbally label each response option

Labeling each response option increases consistency in the conceptual spacing between response options and increases the likelihood that all respondents will interpret the response options similarly. Additionally, the response options have comparable visual weight, so the respondents’ eyes are not drawn to certain options.

**How interesting did you find this clinical reasoning course?**

- not at all interesting
- slightly interesting
- moderately interesting
- quite interesting
- extremely interesting

#### Use only verbal labels

In general, use only verbal labels for each response option. Doing so will reduce the cognitive effort required of your respondents and will likely reduce measurement error.

**How much did you learn in today’s workshop?**

- almost nothing
- a little bit
- some
- quite a bit
- a tremendous amount

#### Maintain equal spacing between response options

Maintaining equal spacing between response options will reinforce the notion that, conceptually, there is equal space or “distance” between each response option. As a result, the answers will be less biased, thereby reducing measurement error.

**How much did you learn from your peers in this course?**

- almost nothing
- a little bit
- some
- quite a bit
- a tremendous amount

#### Use additional space to visually separate nonsubstantive response options

Using additional space to visually separate nonsubstantive response options from the substantive options will align the visual midpoint with the conceptual midpoint, thereby reducing measurement error. This recommendation is an important exception to the guidance above about maintaining equal spacing between response options.

**How satisfied are you with the quality of the library services?**

- not at all satisfied
- slightly satisfied
- moderately satisfied
- quite satisfied
- extremely satisfied
- not applicable

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**References:**

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