

Ethical Corporation magazine

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ciples and codes should be consulted upon widely throughout the company. Some suggested that staff consultation should be totally comprehensive and inclusive – others felt that the various codes should be designed by management and that how to implement and interpret them in particular countries and circumstances should be an ongoing conversation with as many groups as possible. The latter strikes me as a balanced approach.

A theory I have recently heard about “the corrosion of character” has suggested that constant flux and movement in business life erodes the longevity of employees’ involvement, connections with and perspective of their organisation – as a consequence people have less judgement. What seems obvious then is that companies need to encourage every individual they employ to have the courage and confidence to make their own judge-

ments, but with reference to a clear “topline” ethos of non-negotiables and having been given some tools to use in times of uncertainty. Of course, having empowered employees of conviction may not suit everyone and despite what it is “correct” to believe, not all individuals are comfortable with autonomy. ■

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Analysis



Getting questionnaires right

Many companies are feeling overloaded with requests to fill out surveys on corporate responsibility while having to design their own for internal and external purposes. **Ian Buckland** looks at how good questionnaires are designed and used

It seems like every week that a survey prompting headlines such as ‘Cause Related Marketing may backfire’, ‘Healthcare Companies Head Sustainability List’ or ‘Top Bribe Payers Exposed’ appear in the press. Surveys play a vital part in our understanding of the state of social environmental and ethical (SEE) performance and issues, yet we pay little attention to how the results are collected except when we participate or commission surveys ourselves. However, if SEE issues are to be considered as the basis for reliable management decision making, practitioners must familiarise themselves with the opportunities, limitations and current developments of surveys techniques.

For many SEE practitioners,

surveys equal questionnaires, and as more organisations rely on more surveys for more information, questionnaire usage has burgeoned. One effect is an increasing potential for survey unreliability as negative attitudes to survey participation, or ‘questionnaire fatigue’ develop. Jayne Beer, Partnership Manager at the Co-operative Bank (which recently produced a 92 page ‘Partnership Report’) says; “Filling in one questionnaire took over three weeks even with the Report – for other organisations it must have been extremely demanding.” Questionnaire fatigue can be tackled from two fronts. Firstly, questionnaires can, in many instances, be substituted by more suitable techniques. And secondly, if using a questionnaire, its

design must seek to optimise participant input.

To ensure survey focus and efficient resource usage, it is vital to define research objectives at the outset. By using the prompts in Table 1, the suitability of the questionnaire approach to survey objectives can be found.

Design and Statistical Aspects

Good questionnaire design boosts response rates, improves the reliability of results and serves as a reputation enhancing communication with participants. Table 2, gives 10 principles of good questionnaire design, while a critique of examples from recent questionnaires appears in Appendix A. Questionnaire reliability also increases with sample size and the number of respondents. For

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example, if 110 questionnaires were sent out, 86 would need to be completed for a statistically acceptable level of confidence (95%) that the results would be less than +/- 5% of the actual figures if all 110 were completed. Given that for one recently published survey only 24 of a sample of 80 responded, great care should be taken when extrapolating from small samples with low response rates.

Table 1: Which survey technique?

1 Does the information exist elsewhere?	No - use other techniques
2 What is the sample size?	Questionnaires need samples >100
3 Are quantitative outputs important?	Questionnaire
4 Is depth of attitudinal analysis important?	Other techniques better
5 Is the standardisation of responses important?	Questionnaire
6 How similar are sample characteristics?	Broadly similar - use questionnaire
7 Are you looking to use results for diagnosis?	Use other survey techniques
8 Are you looking to use results for creative stimulus?	Use other survey techniques
9 Is benchmarking of results important?	Questionnaire
10 Are free responses from respondents needed?	Other survey techniques probably better
11 Are limited responses from respondents needed?	Questionnaire probably better

Golden rule: secondary research first Alternatives to questionnaires

Secondary research such as library or Internet-based searches, contacting a trade body or seeking expert opinion is an essential part of any survey. It is particularly useful in establishing basic corporate information, sample size and diversity, and in the development of survey objectives. The reliability of published secondary research can be easily ascertained through any previous exposure to public criticism. Its weaknesses are unpredictability, the comparative expertise needed to source relevant information and its poor coverage of attitudinal material. Secondary research is repaid many times over by the avoidance of double working later on.

An increasingly important resource for secondary research is sectoral and industry guidelines which are prompting the standardisation of policy, practice and reporting. Richard Neill, Quality Assurance Controller at Woolworth Plc, states; "As well as our own social and ethical surveys, conditions and audits for the supply of unbranded goods, we comply with the British Toy and Hobby Association Code of Practice, work with the British Retail Consortium and we're moving to reporting along the lines of the government's new reporting standards." As Neill suggests, the changes in UK company law and its enhanced disclosure requirements on SEE performance

also seem likely to boost the material available through secondary sources.

Qualitative techniques

When a questionnaire is inappropriate and secondary research is not providing the information needed, qualitative survey techniques come into their own. Their particular strengths are:

- when samples are small or diverse
- in accessing attitudinal information
- their use as a diagnostic tool
- their usefulness when creative guidance is needed

The most frequently used qualitative approach is the in-depth interview. These are especially useful with individuals who would reject a questionnaire but who may be prepared to give their opinions personally, such as senior staff members. Alternatively where larger samples are possible, such as with suppliers or customers, it may be possible to recruit 6 – 8 people for a focus group where ideas can spark between participants. Focus groups, along with in-depth interviews, are particularly good at teasing out difficult issues. Qualitative survey does require well-developed facilitation skills to elicit important trends and attitudes but provided participants are carefully selected, these can be uncovered from a small number of interviews or groups.

Using research agencies

For most practitioners, running simple surveys should not be a problem, however for large or complex surveys, research agencies are an alternative. The Co-operative Bank uses research agencies extensively to understand the nature and strength of its stakeholder relationships and to help formulate product and process development. Jayne Beer summarises below the advantages and disadvantages of working with outside research agencies.

Advantages

- Third party researchers offer greater assurance in accuracy of response – particularly where respondents, such as with suppliers/staff, have an existing relationship
- The independence of survey, analysis and recommendation given by a third party can provide a reality check on research objectives and the result significance
- Expertise in methodologies and approaches, plus greater impartiality ensures minimisation of errors
- Expertise in sector may bring additional advantage in benchmarking

Cautions

- Agencies may be expensive
- The understanding of the organisation's culture, structure, policies, performance etc. (essential in developing and carrying out the survey) may be missing

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Other considerations when working with agencies:

- How will the information generated by the survey be handled? Research agencies offer analytical services and debriefings
- Select agencies on the basis of personal recommendations when possible
- Use an agency registered with the British Market Research Society
- Shop around; prices between agencies can vary markedly
- As for any research, outcomes cannot be predetermined, so be prepared for others to tell you what you may not want to hear
- Establish at the outset the sample size, survey period, techniques used, likely response rates and ensure that survey objectives are achievable.

Corporate response to survey

Despite questionnaire fatigue, Jayne Beer sees a positive role for questionnaires. “The gaps in our information highlighted by the questionnaires we receive are always the most useful aspect for us. They prompt debate about new agendas and issues and about whether we should be covering these areas.”

For Rio Tinto, the frustration felt by Peter Cunningham, Head of Investor Relations, by the fact that “no two questionnaires are the same” has provided the stimulus to manage responses “in a more disciplined way,” via a Rio Tinto ‘Road Map’ of frequently asked questions. This six page document (also available at www.riotinto.com/investors/investment/default.asp) brings together information from reports, briefing papers and websites that summarise the company’s economic, environmental and social performance and policies in a way that Cunningham believes “seems to work well for us and our stakeholders.” In addition to the ‘Road Map’, Rio Tinto also holds ‘Investor Seminars’ where investment analysts including the SRI community have the opportunity to follow up on specific issues outside the existing information. As a first step to a deepening engagement, Rio Tinto also holds in-depth interviews with this group of stakeholders.

An understanding of the nature and strength of stakeholder relationships has never been more important to CSR practitioners. By better understanding the full range of techniques available, the reliability of SEE survey information and the consequent decision making can only benefit. Practitioners need to be aware of how trends for greater disclosure are not consistent throughout industry. For some companies a survey may seem naïve while for others, particularly SMEs, it may cause panic. Either way, it is certain that with the greater scrutiny SRI analysts and others are bringing to SEE practice and performance the need for appropriate survey and reliable results will only increase. ■

Appendix: Real world examples of questionnaires**Example 1: Poor questionnaire design**

7. Overall¹, do you believe that the adoption or not² of ethical³ behaviour by a company influences its corporate image? Please, if possible⁴, give examples.

- 1 *ambiguity introduced by use of modifying term*
- 2 *this is actually a closed question but its confusing style and absence of yes/no tick box leaves the respondent unsure what to do*
- 3 *the definition of ethical behaviour is unclear, and used differently in a previous question*
- 4 *the gap below the question seems to suggest an open response, but the request for this is weak*

Example 2: Good questionnaire design

Does current corporate reporting provide you with the necessary Social, Environmental, and Ethical (SEE) information?

Yes No Partially

If “No” what other information would you like to see?

.....
.....

- *closed and open questions separate*
- *straightforward question*
- *definition of subject matter*
- *dotted, defined space for open response give respondent clear instructions on where to write and length of response required*

Table 2: 10 Principles of good questionnaire design

- Think about how the questionnaire will be tackled. Has the correct respondent been targeted? Completion may have low priority in a busy office. Test surveys for comprehension and respondent completion time
- Think about the possible range of answers at the same time as the questions
- Think about the instructions – clear guidance on completing the questions at all stages is essential
- Think about the layout – clear and easy to read with ample space for free response (if needed)
- Think about the respondent – logical groupings of questions flowing easily from one to the other. Tick boxes with ranges of values aid completion particularly as they lessen problems with divulging sensitive information
- Think about how the data will be processed – large samples with free responses can be difficult to analyse and individual detail may be swamped
- Ensure that questions are without bias, are very specific and as simply put as possible
- Avoid terminology where ambiguity exists – a particular problem for SEE. Avoid ambiguous moderating terms such as frequently or usual
- Avoid asking negative or hypothetical questions as they’re harder to answer
- Allow for ‘other’ or ‘not applicable’ in fixed response – without these, respondents may skip questions or guess answers, thereby skewing results

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