

Telling the whole story: When numbers aren't enough

By Joseph Hopper, Ph.D.

While numbers and statistics can tell powerful stories, when and where to use numbers for a PR-driven survey can be confusing. You want to focus on *how many* people think or act one way or another, and maybe *how intensely* they feel or *how frequently* they act. But if you design your survey with just numbers rather than words, you will struggle to untangle the story at the back end. Readers rarely want to do math while they read—they just want to know what the numbers mean.

The Problem of Too Many Numbers

One of the biggest mistakes people make in designing surveys for public relations is using a numeric scale. A numeric scale is any type response format that asks people to give a number within a certain range to indicate the strength of feeling or opinion.

While there are many types of survey research for which numeric scales are optimal, if your objective is to use survey data for marketing materials, public relations, news releases, or white papers, numeric scales make things difficult. They are not easy to summarize

in words, and if you want to use charts that tell quick, compelling stories, you will end up having to create a chart as shown in figure 1. This chart is based on a real example found in a whitepaper circulated by a prominent financial education group.

The problem with this graphic is that the numbers inside the pie chart are confusing, and the words highly willing, not willing, and neutral were never actually used or selected by most respondents. Here is the question that was used: “When thinking of your financial investments, how willing are you to take risks? Please use a 10-point scale, where 1 means Not At All Willing, and 10 means Very Willing.” Somebody wrote the questionnaire and used a numeric scale without first considering how they were going to use and present the data.

Here is a better option: “When thinking of your financial investments, how willing are you to take risks? Would you say: Not at all willing, not very willing, somewhat willing, or very willing? If “neutrality” were an important idea in this context, it should be included as well. With this scale, you can create a less confusing chart that more accurately reflects what people said, as shown in figure 2. A scale based on words rather than numbers is more useful in talking about how investors are willing or not willing to take risks.

Best Practices for Better Surveys

This example highlights some best practices to keep in mind when designing response scales for PR surveys:

- Use words rather than numbers. They are much easier to report,

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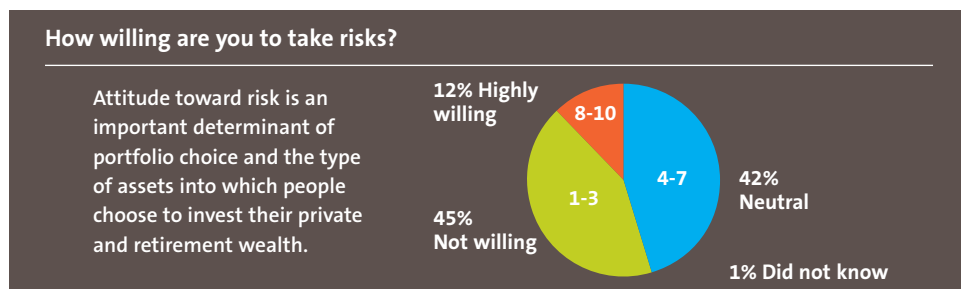


Figure 1. Example of a confusing chart

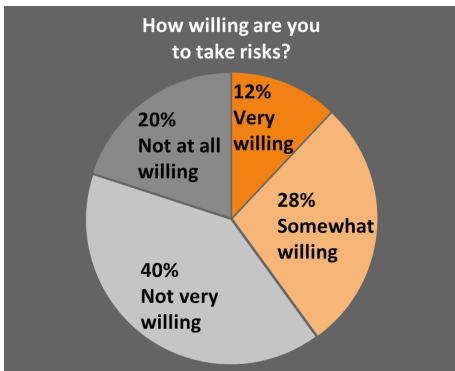


Figure 2. Example of a better chart

they keep readers focused on the statistics that matter (for example, how many people said they agree), and the story will be a more honest reflection of what respondents actually said.

- *Avoid more than five answer options.* While it is good to offer options that measure intensity

(for example, not at all, not very, somewhat, very) too many words and choices in answer scales will confuse respondents and readers. Plus, most articles and press releases report simple dichotomies (how many agreed vs. disagreed, for example), so finer distinctions are typically not necessary.

- *List response options from the “negative” end of the scale to the “positive” end.* The examples above do this, going from “not at all willing” to “very willing.” It helps overcome a cultural bias that people in this country have to select positive responses before considering negative ones.
- *Offer a “neutral” or “don’t know” option only if it makes sense.* Many PR-driven survey questions

can be written so that everyone will or should have an opinion. In these cases, a “don’t know” option allows respondents to move on without giving careful consideration to the question being asked, and the strength of your data may be diluted.

Survey response scales need to be designed to deliver on the core objectives of a survey, and the objectives for PR surveys are different from other types of surveys. Telling a story with numbers can make your message come alive as surely as any anecdote, but only if the numbers, the survey questions, and answer options are carefully designed to support that story. Good response scales are one critical piece that will enhance the key messages of your campaign.

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