



Wording Bias, yes – but which Word?

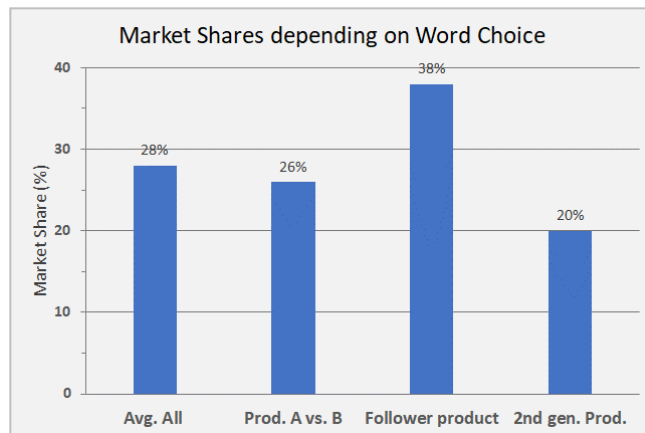
Wording bias occurs when the wording of a question systematically influences the responses given. There are plenty of examples and ‘how to guide’ in the literature with some obvious poor choices. However, in some cases it is less (or not at all) obvious what the consequences of word selection might be, because the authors of the survey are not sure themselves how the respondent might react to a particular term.

We ran into a similar situation where we were interested in future preference shares between two innovative pharmaceuticals. In the “market share question” we had to decide how to call the product of interest. We wanted to be sure that the respondents realized that the product of interest was a late entrant competing with a first to market product.

Technically in the future, we will have two products on the market - **product A and product B**, with B being the **follower product** to A, or, in other words, B being the **2nd generation product**. Which term would bias the respondent and lead to inflated market shares?

1. **“Product A vs. Product B”** – which does not really convey that one product entered the market later than the other.
2. **“Follower product”** – which may sound as a *me-too copy* of the first?
3. **“2nd generation product”** – which might imply a sense of *new and improved*?

The answer surprised us ... but probably not those of our readers who may have had different associations with the words above. As shown in the figure, the survey respondents seemed to think more positively about a “follow-on” product and allocated a market share of 38% to the follow-on product. In contrast, for the “2nd generation” product respondents expected a mere 20% share. Interestingly, the 2nd generation characterization of the product was not interpreted as the product being improved and better than the original, 1st generation product. “Product A vs. Product B” seemed the most neutral choice, matching the overall response average very closely (26% vs. 28%).



The bottom line: Words choice matters! And we may not all have the same associations with certain words. Thus, the only way to avoid introducing bias when it really matters: Pay extremely close attention to your word selection and for sensitive questions, and Test, Test, Test. Only pre-tests will reveal how our target audience perceives words, which may be different from your personal choice. We typically test multiple question versions in pre-tests and adjust our final survey instrument accordingly. It is an investment in time and effort, but one that is sure to pay off when you can say with confidence that your market research results reflect the real opinion of your survey respondents.

If you would like to discuss how to conduct PMR that you can be confident in, please contact us at info@cogent-hc.com.