

Don't know what to do about "Don't know" responses?

Are you concerned that including a "Don't know" option in your survey will risk a proportion of lazy respondents answering "Don't know" when in fact they do know? Or, by omitting a "Don't know" option, you will be forcing respondents to choose a response that is meaningless, but which will be hidden among the valid data?

When designing a survey, it is important to bear in mind that minor adjustments in the formulation of questions and answers can have major effects on the responses obtained and, therefore, the conclusions drawn. For example, with a drop-down list or a scale response of answers to a closed question, without a "Don't know", respondents will either choose another response or will choose not to continue with the questionnaire, neither of which are desirable outcomes.

There are two main concerns when deciding whether to include "Don't know".

By not including a "Don't know" option, there is a risk to the validity of the data by gathering uninformed or even incorrect responses among the valid data as respondents will try to be helpful by answering the question even if they are unsure. This is a particular risk with online questionnaires which often require a response to a question in order to move through the survey. These forced answers will impact the data quality.

On the other hand, including a "Don't know" may contaminate the data in a different way as it could encourage satisficing with "Don't know" responses to minimise effort. Surveys run on goodwill and if surveys are too long-winded or use language that is too complex for the respondents, goodwill soon runs out and satisficing takes over. It could also encourage respondents who are unsure to respond "Don't know" when they are uncertain as to their knowledge of a topic.

Is a midpoint a substitute for "Don't know"?

If there is no "Don't know" option, research suggests that where it is not available respondents choose the closest option ^[1]. The midpoint can be considered a neutral option in that case and a valid response in the case of a respondent who doesn't have a response.

If there is a "Don't know" response offered, and this is particularly the case when (See Image 1) "Don't know" is added at the end of a list of responses with no break ^[2], it can lead the respondent to change their perception as to where the midpoint of scale is. This is a particular concern for scale responses as it needs to be clear that these responses do not form part of the scale.

Is "Don't know" even a valid answer to the question posed?

Research ^[3] has shown that "Don't know" is, rightly, often perceived differently to "No opinion". Respondents may not want to admit they "Don't know" the answer to a question, therefore "No opinion", a more neutral option that doesn't imply a lack of knowledge of the topic of the survey, is preferable. The option of "Don't Know" in the list of answers may incite respondents who believe not knowing an answer will reflect badly on them to respond by guessing the answer. Hence, "No opinion" or "Not Applicable" should replace "Don't know" where these other expressions would improve the accuracy of the responses available.

Apart from explorative studies, the sample surveyed should be reasonably familiar with the topic in order to be able to answer the questions asked, therefore a large proportion of "Don't know" answers will signal problems with the question and will have been ironed out in the testing phase.

Therefore, including a “Don’t know” option in your survey is usually best practice^[4]. Concerns can be minimised by:

- taking care to avoid an overly long survey and vocabulary too complex for the respondents should minimise the possibilities of bored, unengaged respondents choosing to satisfice by answering “Don’t know” as a result of respondent fatigue.ⁱ
- limiting “Don’t know” to questions where it is a genuine response, and if necessary, replacing it with or adding slightly different options such as “No Opinion” or “Not Applicable” when they are more correct responses.
- ensuring the layout of the questionnaire (see image below) allows the respondent to clearly see that “Don’t know” does not form part of the response scale by using, for example, a dotted line, as suggested by Brace (see figure 1).

Figure 1:

Version 1	Version 2
<input type="checkbox"/> Far too much	<input type="checkbox"/> Far too much
<input type="checkbox"/> Too much	<input type="checkbox"/> Too much
<input type="checkbox"/> About the right amount	<input type="checkbox"/> About the right amount
<input type="checkbox"/> Too little	<input type="checkbox"/> Too little
<input type="checkbox"/> Far too little	<input type="checkbox"/> Far too little
<input type="checkbox"/> Don't know	----- <input type="checkbox"/> Don't know
<input type="checkbox"/> No opinion	<input type="checkbox"/> No opinion

References:

Brace, Ian (2008) “Questionnaire Design: How to Plan, Structure and Write Survey Material for Effective Market Research” Kogan Page Business Books

Dolnicar & Grün (2013) “Including Don’t know answer options in brand image surveys improves data quality” International Journal of Market Research Vol. 56 Issue 1

Lietz, Paula (2010) “Research into questionnaire design A summary of the literature” International Journal of Market Research Vol. 52 Issue

Oppenheim, A (1992) “Questionnaire Design, Interviewing and Attitude Measurement”, London, Pinter

^[1]Dolnicar & Grün “Including Don’t know answer options in brand image surveys improves data quality”

^[2] Brace, Ian (2008) “Questionnaire Design: How to Plan, Structure and Write Survey Material for Effective Market Research”

^[3] Brosnan, Babakhani & Dolnicar

^[4]Oppenheim, A (1992) & Brace, Ian (2008)

^[5] Brace, Ian (2008) “Questionnaire Design: How to Plan, Structure and Write Survey Material for Effective Market Research “ pp46