

Science of Surveys Series: Types of questions

This series, *The Science of Surveys*, explains the world of surveys for the busy, on-the-go restaurant owner: best practices, tips & tricks, and heads up in designing, collecting, and analyzing surveys.

Understanding the types of questions available at your disposal will help you design a more effective survey. There are many ways to categorize survey questions; many classification systems focus on the nature of the answers, and the following framework is no exception. This framework proposes 4 types of survey questions to ask.

		Subject of question	
		Self	World
Verifiability	Objective	Income, age, purchase frequency	Population, measured rankings
	Subjective	Likelihood to buy	Best restaurant

Figure 1: Survey question matrix

The two main dimensions are the subject and the verifiability. Verifiability breaks down into facts, which can be proven or disproven, and opinions, which can be neither proven nor disproven. The subject of the survey question is either the respondent himself/herself or the world external to the respondent. The 2 dimensions and 2 possible values per dimension give us 4 types of survey questions.

A **self-objective** question asks the respondent for information about themselves that can be verified. (By verified, we mean that the statement could be verified in general, not that the surveyor has the information on-hand to verify.) For example, a survey can ask the respondent for their age, income, gender, and occupation. This type of survey question helps to place respondents into groups based on their answers (e.g., female millennials) and then look at the group's answers to other questions.

A **self-subjective** question asks the respondent about himself – preferences, opinions, and future-state assessments. For example, a survey can ask about their favorite pizza toppings. It is subjective, because a personal preference is not factually verifiable. This information can help determine what type of promotions to run or whether to add or remove menu offerings. This is an important type of survey question, because there are few non-survey ways to gather this type of information.

A **world-objective** question asks the respondent for his assessment of things beyond himself, and the answer can be verified for accuracy. For example, a survey can ask what pizza delivery chain has the

most on-time deliveries. This type of survey question measures people's perception of reality. The point of this question is not to find out which pizza delivery chain *has* the most on-time deliveries. It is to find out which pizza delivery chain *people think has* the most on-time deliveries. If the most punctual pizza company is *not* getting credit for being punctual, its marketing department may need to work on changing consumer preferences.

A **world-subjective** question asks the respondent for his assessment of aspects of the world that cannot be proven true or false. For example, a survey can ask if it is okay to eat at a certain restaurant after a headline-grabbing event. This type of survey question measures people's perception of reality on topics that cannot be verified. Many brand perception questions can be classified as world-subjective, so any restaurant interested in how customers perceive its brand may want to ask these types of questions.

This subject-verifiability framework can help survey writers design stronger surveys. Using this framework, a survey writer can generate questions, ensure an appropriate mix of questions, and articulate how each question is going to be used... making sure there are no unused questions.

There are many other factors to consider in survey design, and there are many other frameworks to use. This is a good starting point for a busy, on-the-go restaurant owner who needs fast insights and actions.