

# On Cue: Revisiting Open-ended Questions<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Surveyors are continually looking for methods to improve the quality and usefulness of responses from open ended questions. This study examines the effects of an importance cue on two open-ended questions. A Cooperative Extension Service customer satisfaction survey is used to test the idea that an importance cue may produce responses with more themes and elaboration than a question with no cue. The sample of participants were randomly given one of two versions of the survey, each with variations of an importance cue on one of the open-ended questions in the survey. One question, based on improvement of the program being surveyed, produced more average themes when presented with an importance cue rather than without. Other factors that were evaluated include gender, age, education and satisfaction with Extension.

## Introduction

Previous research has demonstrated that adding instruction or motivating the respondent during telephone surveys produces responses with more information (Miller and Cannell 1982). Studies have shown that including an introduction before a question on web surveys will produce longer responses (Smyth, Dillman, Christian, and McBride 2009). Other factors have also been shown to influence response length and quality on paper surveys, such as the size of the text box provided (Israel 2010). All of these factors are important, but more information is needed on the subject.

This study addresses a few main points:

- Does the presence of an importance cue influence the respondent to answer a open ended question?
- Does the presence of an importance cue affect the quality of responses?
- What other factors in association with an importance cue encourage quality responses to open ended questions?

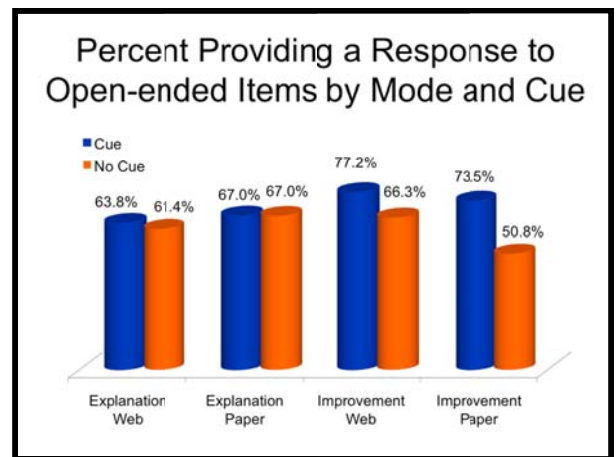
## Methods

- Data were collected for the annual survey of Florida Cooperative Extension Service's (FCES) clients in 2011.
- A sample of 1,939 participants were selected and given one of two versions of a mixed mode survey (web or paper).
- The overall response rate was 53.3%.
- Each version on the survey had an importance cue on one of two open ended questions.
- The questions asked for an explanation of their interaction with the Extension office and for their suggestions for improvement.
- Responses were coded by number of themes and whether or not elaboration was present.
- Responses were considered to have themes when the response was substantive.

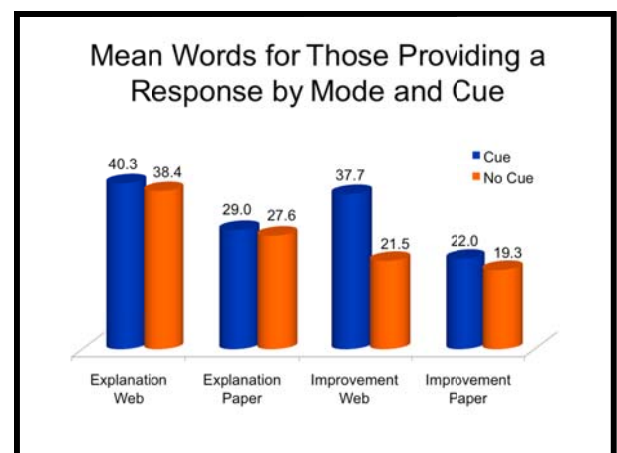
- Responses were considered to have elaboration if respondents elaborated on a theme or had an emotional response.

## Findings

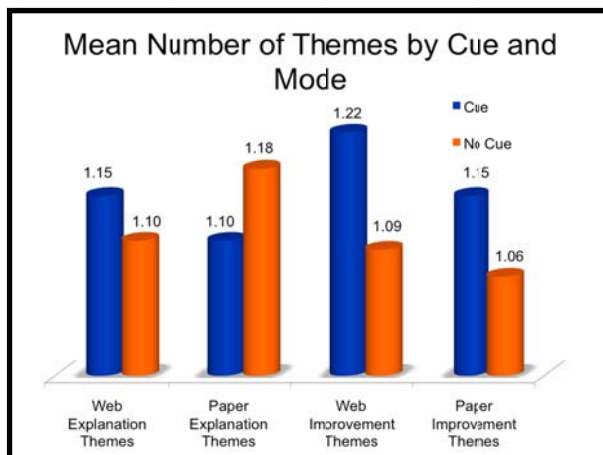
- Cue was significant on the improvement question when determining if a participant will answer the open- ended question. It was not significantly different for the explanation item.
- For the improvement question, when an importance cue was included it produced more responses than the version with no cue for both Web and paper responses.



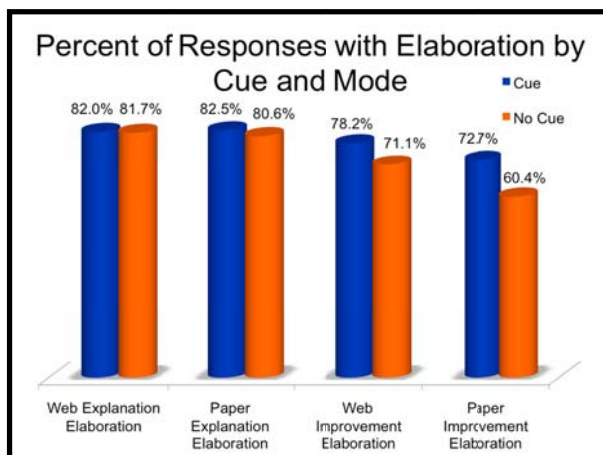
- The improvement question on the web survey showed a significant difference in the length of the answer between versions with the cue and without.
- Respondents wrote more words using the web survey with a cue. The cue did not significantly increase the number of words for the explanation question.
- In addition, females wrote more words than males overall. When mode is considered, both males and females wrote more words on the web version of the survey.



- For the most part, questions with an importance cue produced more themes than those without. The one exception is the explanation question on the paper survey. This may be explained in the way the answers were coded. Answers were only considered to have a theme if the answer was substantive. This could mean that a respondent may have recognized the cue and felt the need to answer, even if they had no substantive information to give.



- The importance cue resulted in a significantly higher percentage of respondents providing an elaboration for the improvement item than did those who answered the version without the cue.
- Although the cue did not affect whether respondents elaborated for the explanation item, women and older persons were more likely to do so.



## Conclusions and Discussion

From the findings in this study we can conclude that:

- Adding an importance cue to an open-ended question sometimes produces more responses from participants. Adding an importance cue to an open-ended question can also produce higher quality responses with more themes, words and elaboration.
- The lack of effect for the explanation item might have resulted from the position of the cue, where it

was placed after the question. In contrast, the cue occurred at the beginning of the improvement item, where it might have more prominence.

- The addition of an importance cue to open-ended questions on mixed mode surveys is a low cost way to increase the productiveness of your survey efforts. Web surveys using an importance cue will save money and produce longer responses from participants as compared to paper surveys.
- For open-ended questions based on suggestions of improvement of services, an importance cue will increase response rates and quality dramatically.

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## References

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