

## Order, order! Order in the court form.

The order of the questions on a form may seem inconsequential to most, but there are times when the order is of significant importance.

Author: Liz Griffiths

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## Just when you thought you had it right

In many cases it could be argued that the order of the questions on a form is relatively inconsequential. Provided the form has a logical flow, there is usually some tolerance for one or two questions that may seem a little out of sequence or out of step with the rest of the form.

This very issue was raised recently in discussions with a client. They asked me what the ramifications were if we changed the flow of the questions so they would fit on a page, thereby avoiding the need for an additional page.

If you design forms, you know the problem I'm talking about. It usually occurs when you have just neatly fitted all your questions onto a page, you are feeling very pleased with yourself.

And then ... **KABAM!** The client asks to change, add or delete a question or two.



## Aaahhhh!!!!



At this stage, it feels like it is back to the drawing board because, as any forms designer will tell you, questions form shapes on the page. Once those shapes fit nicely on a page, any changes to the questions can be problematic.

If the changes are requested early in the design process when the form is still quite fluid, it's usually not an issue. The real problem occurs when you are at the end of the design process and you have already exhausted all the tricks up your sleeve.

## Dealing with the changes

After the initial "aaahhhh!!! moment", the rational side of your brain says that you have to somehow make this work. After all, a well-designed form is one that accurately reflects business requirements.

If the form is no longer in a fluid state or the design is already very tight and changes can no longer be accommodated with ease, people often start to look at how they might move questions around to make everything fit

When this occurs it is important to think carefully about the order in which the questions fall. My experience tells me that the order in which the questions are presented can affect the meaning of those questions.

Remember, meaning is contextual.

## How the order of questions can determine meaning

The most significant example of how the flow of questions in a form can affect meaning occurred when I was conducting usability testing a boat insurance proposal form. During the development of the form the Product Manager asked us to focus on how we could increase the likelihood that boat owners would declare any electronic equipment on their boats. The insurance company had a long history of claims where boat owners had failed to insure these items. In this scenario, no one wins. The insurance company falls out of favour with the client because they cannot claim for these expensive items and the client is out-of-pocket. Electronic equipment was particularly problematic because it was expensive to replace and essential for the safety of the boat and its occupants.

Our initial attempts to elicit information about electronic equipment were quite subtle. In the first draft of the form we asked whether there were any “added extras” on the boat. Usability testing showed a poor response to this question with most respondents saying they had no added extras on their boat.

For the next round of testing the question was altered to ask about any “electronic equipment added to the boat”. However, this equipment is usually on the boat when it is purchased (particularly if the boat is not purchased new) so the idea of it being “added” to the boat was a misnomer.

In the third round of usability testing we realised we had to be even more specific about what we wanted to know so we asked a series of questions specifically about 2-way radios, depth sounders, and EPIRBs or satellite phones (see questions 17 to 19 in the image above). We selected these items because they were the three items the Product Manager was most concerned about.

The rate of responses was exceptional with almost all boat owners indicating they had one or more of these electronic devices. The experience of the Product Manager indicated this was a much more realistic picture of boat owners.

### Round three of usability testing

**17** Is the boat fitted with a 2-way radio?  
 No ☐ Go to **18**  
 Yes ☐ Types, makes and models

**18** Is the boat fitted with a depth sounder?  
 No ☐ Go to **19**  
 Yes ☐ Make and model

**19** Does the boat have an EPIRB or satellite phone?  
 No ☐ Go to **20**  
 Yes ☐ Type, make and model

**20** Do you have any other additional items on the boat that need to be insured?  
 No ☐ Go to **21**  
 Yes ☐ Please give details of each item

We had finally found the right solution. However, we also had to find out about dinghies, lifeboats, life jackets, oars and other items that can be purchased separately. To accommodate these other items we finished our series of questions by asking if there were any "other additional items" (see question 20 in the image above) on the boat.

In the third round of testing almost all respondents answered "no" to question 20, indicating they had no additional items, despite the fact that many of these items are legal requirements on a boat.

We finished the interview but asking each respondent about their boat, what they used it for, what sort of equipment they had and so on. When most of the respondents said they had oars, life jackets, a lifeboat or an inflatable raft of some description, we asked why they didn't add them in at question 20.

The resounding response was "I thought you were asking me about other *electronic* equipment".

Because question 20 followed a series of question about electronic devices, the respondents thought this was a continuation of that set of questions, a catch-all question to see if there were any other miscellaneous electronic devices that had not been covered.

To overcome this issue we simply moved the last question (question 20) to a later part of the form, thereby removing the association with electronic devices.

So you see, the order of questions on a form can and does matter.