ONE OR TEN: RANKING VS RATING
Asking Questions People Can Answer for the
Best Findings and Actionable Recommendations

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Abstract

Survey-based research often asks respondents to assign rating scores (e.g., 0 to 10) to a series of factors to measure the degree of agreement, satisfaction, influence or importance that the respondent feels toward each factor.

This approach can be effective for measuring the intensity of respondents' opinions or satisfaction levels. Rating requires relatively low effort to complete; is easy to collect and encode; and produces data that is consistent and easily analyzed and compared across respondents and over time.

However, rating data often fails to yield useful information due to varying interpretations of the response scale and a tendency for respondents to cluster their responses, or give the same or a similar score to many factors. Clustering can result from central tendency bias, where respondents avoid using the extremes of the scale, or leniency bias, where they rate items more favorably than they feel.

It is impossible to know which of the clustered ratings represent the factor that a respondent finds most impactful and deserves the greatest resources from program administrators and implementers.

An alternative to the rating approach is to ask respondents to rank the factors of interest from most to least important or influential. While ranking may be more cognitively demanding than rating, it has clear advantages: it eliminates interpretations of scale and clustering by forcing the respondent to prioritize items, thus offering a clearer picture of preferences and relative importance and making comparisons more straightforward.

Generally, rating questions collect broad information about the topic while ranking questions help understand preference, influence and priorities. Qualitative rating data is less informative than quantitative ranking data when ascribing attribution or determining where to devote resources. But how will respondents react to ranking?

Methodology

This research presents fresh analysis of data collected from 2023 through 2025 to compare rating and ranking of program influence for a variety of energy efficiency programs, trade ally processes, and resident and business priorities. Respondents were asked to rate multiple program factors using a 0-to-10 scale and later asked to rank the same program factors from most to least influential on their decision to participate in the program or use a platform.

Results

The paper will answer questions including are clustered ratings an issue; do respondents confuse influence with satisfaction questions; are respondents willing and able to answer ranking questions; are rating and ranking results consistent; how do rating and ranking results compare to open ended responses; how would ranking data have impacted free rider and process research findings and recommendations.