

The Effect of Stamped Versus Franked Outgoing Envelopes on Mail Survey Response Rates

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This study examined the effects of stamped versus franked envelopes on the response rate to a survey of the New Zealand general public. The experiment was conducted during the first mailout only. One group received the survey material in a plain white easy-seal envelope with a 45c stamp affixed. The other group received identical material in identical envelopes, except that the name "MASSEY UNIVERSITY, PALMERSTON NORTH, NEW ZEALAND" was printed in blue ink in the top left hand corner, and the envelopes were franked. Neither the stamped nor the franked sponsored envelope made any significant difference to the response rate at any stage in the survey. Both treatments achieved response rates of approximately 30% to the first mailout, and a final response rate of around 63% after three mailouts.

Keywords: mail survey, response rates, non-response bias, stamp vs frank

Introduction

The need to minimise non-response bias in mail surveys has given rise to a wide range of techniques intended to improve response rates. These include such things as the use of incentives, follow-up letters, and numerous variations in the form and appearance of the covering letter and questionnaire (Kanuk & Berenson 1975; Linsky 1975; Harvey 1987; Fox, Crask & Kim 1988). However, a point that has often been overlooked is that, for any of these techniques to be effective, a respondent must first open the survey envelope.

It seems intuitively obvious that the appearance of the survey envelope could significantly affect response rate, either by affecting the frequency with which the letter is discarded unopened, or by affecting a respondent's evaluation of the importance of the contents. A researcher must therefore take great care to ensure that a respondent does not mistake the survey letter for "junk mail", or unsolicited direct-mail material. Maintaining this distinction will become increasingly difficult with the rapid growth of direct marketing, since both survey and direct mail companies tend to use franked envelopes and computer generated address labels, and sometimes the same sampling frames.

Surprisingly, relatively few studies have examined the effect of survey envelope on response rates (Kanuk & Berenson 1975; Linsky 1975; Harvey 1987; Fox, Crask & Kim 1988), and those that have, have mainly concentrated on the effects of different classes of postage. Moreover, most of these studies are dated, and examine postage options that are not applicable to New Zealand. The purpose of this study was to consider the effects of stamped versus franked envelopes on the response rate to a survey of the New Zealand general public.

Method

The sample comprised 965 New Zealand residents, randomly selected from the electoral rolls. The mailing list was ordered alphabetically within electorate, and the names in the list

were assigned alternately to each of the two experimental groups. The address labels contained the respondent's first name (in full), surname and address.

The experiment was conducted during the first mailout only. For this mailout, Group A (N=483) received the survey material in a plain white easy-seal envelope with a 45c stamp affixed.

Group B (N=482) received identical material in identical envelopes, except that the name "MASSEY UNIVERSITY, PALMERSTON NORTH, NEW ZEALAND" was printed in blue ink on three lines in the top left hand corner, and the envelopes were franked. The frank was printed in red ink, and consisted of a rectangle containing the words "MASSEY UNIVERSITY, Palmerston North" to the left of a circular postmark containing the date, followed by a stylised stamp bearing four stars (the Southern Cross) and the words NEW ZEALAND POSTAGE.

Follow-up postings were made to non-respondents two weeks after the initial posting, and again two weeks after the first follow-up. Both groups received identical material in the follow-up mailouts, which were sent in franked, sponsored envelopes, identical to those used for Group B in mailout 1.

Results

The results of the experiment are displayed in Table 1, where the sample sizes have been adjusted to account for verified and estimated invalid addresses. Although the experiment was only conducted in mailout 1, the responses to all three mailouts are presented for the sake of completeness.

Neither the stamped nor the franked sponsored envelope made any significant difference to the response rate at any stage in the survey.

Table 1. Survey response rates after each mailout

Cumulative Returns	Group A		Group B		d.f.	X ²	p
	Stamped	Plain	Franked	Sponsored			
	n	%	n	%			
Mailout 1	116	30.5	118	31.4	1	0.08	>.3
Mailout 2 ¹	205	53.8	195	51.9	1	0.29	>.3
Mailout 3 ¹	238	62.5	239	63.6	1	0.09	>.3
Sample (N) ²	381		376				

Notes: 1. Both Group A and Group B received franked sponsored envelopes in mailouts 2 and 3.

2. Sample size adjusted to remove verified and estimated invalid addresses.

Discussion

The results of this study suggest that it does not matter whether outgoing survey letters use postage stamps on plain envelopes, or franked postage on University sponsored envelopes; both are likely to achieve a similar response rate.

Although the sponsor in this study was Massey University, there is no reason to believe the result could not be generalised to all New Zealand universities. This means that the usual method of sending out surveys in franked university stationery can continue in confidence. It will certainly be the preferred method, since franking is much less time consuming, and therefore less expensive, than affixing stamps.

Unfortunately, the question of whether attaching stamps or franking would elicit a higher response rate with unsponsored envelopes remains unanswered. Some studies have found that university sponsorship tends to increase response rates (Fox, Crask & Kim, 1988), so that the results achieved in this study might not apply to franking in general. While the use of university sponsorship did not lead to higher response rates in this study, it could be that the sponsorship merely countered the effect of using a frank. Clearly, further investigation is required.

References

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