

The Effect of Researcher Status on Mail Survey Response Rates

Mike Brennan

This study examined the effect of researcher status on the response rate to a university sponsored survey of a random sample of 250 New Zealand businesses obtained from the Department of Statistics. All businesses were sent identical material, which identified Massey University as the sponsor of the research, except for the status of the researcher. For Group A, the researcher was identified as an honours student; for Group B, the researcher was identified as a research officer. For each mailout, a higher response rate was obtained from respondents who received a letter from a Research Officer than from respondents who received a letter from an Honours Student. However, the differences in response rates were not statistically significant.

Keywords: mail survey, response rates, researcher status

Introduction

The need to obtain high response rates in mail surveys is generally accepted. However, obtaining a high response rate from New Zealand businesses is problematic. New Zealand businesses are heavily surveyed and, not surprisingly, respondent resistance is high. A researcher must therefore find a way of obtaining a response from respondents who are very busy and already inundated with advertising and direct marketing material, if not other surveys. Since busy people do not want to waste their time, a survey must be perceived as being important enough to warrant their time and effort.

This problem is not new, and is not confined to New Zealand. Numerous studies have examined a wide range of factors that may affect respondents' perceptions of the importance of a survey. One of these factors is the identity of the survey sponsor. For example, Jones and Linda (1978), in an experimental study, obtained a higher response rate when the sponsor was a university than when it was a government agency or a private company. Unfortunately, this result is of limited use, since it is neither ethical nor usually possible to alter a sponsor's name. However, one might expect that the status of the researcher could have a similar effect on response rates. Indeed, Roehrer (1963) obtained an 81% response rate to a survey about services for the handicapped when the title "Director of Rehabilitation" appeared under the researcher's name, compared with a 55% response rate when only the researcher's name was used.

Roehrer's findings suggest a simple method for improving survey response rates at no additional cost. However, it is not clear whether this approach would be effective with a different survey population, different topic or different type of title, since no other published study appears to have examined this issue. Thus, the purpose of this study was to examine the effect of researcher status on the response rate to a university sponsored survey of businesses.

Method

Sample

The sample was a random sample of 250 New Zealand businesses obtained from the Department of Statistics. The sample was stratified by New Zealand Standard Industrial Classification (NZSCI), and included businesses from three categories: manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade (including restaurants and hotels), and business and financial services.

The sample was also stratified by size of business, to ensure businesses of all sizes were represented. The mailing list was ordered by size of business within industry classification, and businesses were alternately assigned from the list to each of two experimental groups.

Procedure

All businesses were sent identical material, which identified Massey University as the sponsor of the research, except for the status of the researcher. For Group A, the researcher was identified as an honours student; for Group B, the researcher was identified as a research officer.

Two follow-up postings were sent to non-respondents: the first, two weeks after the first mailout; the second, two weeks after that.

Results

The results of the study are presented in Table 1, where the sample size of each group has been adjusted to exclude businesses verified as no longer being at the specified address.

Table 1. Survey response rates

	Group A		Group B		d.f.	X ²	p
	Research Officer		Honours Student				
Cumulative Returns	n	%	n	%			
Mailout 1	38	45.2	37	42.1	1	0.18	>.5
Mailout 2	61	72.6	53	60.2	1	2.96	>.1
Mailout 3	66	78.6	64	72.7	1	0.79	>.3
Sample (N) ¹	84		88				

Note 1. Sample size adjusted to remove businesses no longer at the specified address.

For each mailout, a higher response rate was obtained from respondents who received a letter from a Research Officer than from respondents who received a letter from an Honours

Student. However, the differences in response rates were not statistically significant (see Table 1), and may be due to chance.

Discussion

The findings indicate that, for university sponsored surveys of businesses, the status of the researcher may affect the response rate; businesses were more likely to respond to a survey from a Research Officer than from an Honours Student. As the sample sizes were too small for us to be certain that this difference is not due to chance, further investigation is required.

Whether the status of the researcher is important in non-university surveys remains unknown, and these results cannot be generalised to that situation. Previous studies report higher response rates to university sponsored surveys than to commercial surveys (Doob, Freeman & Carlsmith, 1973; Peterson, 1975; Jones & Linda, 1978), so the effects of university sponsorship may have interacted with the status of the researcher in this study. Even so, until there is evidence to the contrary, the present results suggest that students conducting research as part of their university courses would be better off not to identify themselves as students. Clearly there would be ethical problems if students claimed status they did not have, but one possibility would be for letters to be signed by their supervisor.

References

- Doob AN; Freeman JL & Carlsmith JM (1973). Effects of sponsor and prepayment on compliance with a mailed request. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 57, 346-347.
- Jones WH & Linda G (1978). Multiple criteria effects in a mail survey experiment. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 15, 280-284.
- Peterson RA (1975). An experimental investigation of mail survey response. *Journal of Business Research*, 3, 199-210.
- Roehrer GA (1963). Effective techniques in increasing response to mailed questionnaires. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 27, 299-302.

Mike Brennan is a Lecturer in the Department of Marketing, Massey University.