

Two Attempts to Increase the Response to a Mail Survey

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Two measures intended to increase response were tested in a mail survey of members of the New Zealand general public. The first involved an envelope message designed to establish the non-commercial status of the survey and emphasise its importance. The treatment had the opposite effect to that expected. The second measure involved the use of a graphic design to create a more likeable questionnaire cover. The treatment had no effect on response. Both measures tested were identified by previous mail survey non-respondents as influencers of survey response, but these results emphasise the fallibility of survey respondents as predictors of their own or other respondents' behaviour.

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Introduction

It is generally accepted that mail survey response rates are declining or, if they are not, it is only because more effort is being expended to maintain them at previous levels (Gendall 2000). Some evidence of this decline in New Zealand comes from the International Social Survey Programme surveys conducted by the Department of Marketing at Massey University since 1991.

The International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) involves leading academic and research institutions in 40 countries in an annual survey of economic and social policy issues. The ISSP addresses a different topic each year in a roughly seven-year cycle; between 1991 and 2003 five of these topics have been repeated: religion, social inequality, the environment, the roles of men and women in society, and national identity. This allows for a comparison of response rates for surveys on the same topic over time. The response rates for the surveys are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison of ISSP response rates in New Zealand

Religion		Social Inequality		Environment		Roles of Men and Women in Society		National Identify	
1991	66%	1992	68%	1993	70%	1994	71%	1996	67%
1998	65%	1999	61%	2000	62%	2002	60%	2003	56%

Because the same methodology was not used for all of the surveys shown in Table 1 it is impossible to say conclusively that response rates have declined over the last ten years. Nevertheless, it is hard to escape the conclusion that this is the case. Furthermore, the usual practice of using only two reminders in the 1990s gave way to using three reminders from 2000.

While it is possible to vary the nature of the contact stimuli – to substitute a pre-notification letter for a reminder letter, to use a postcard instead of a reminder – there is no convincing evidence that this has any material effect on response beyond the effect of the contact itself (Wright 2000). And four contacts is about the reasonable limit for a mail survey; beyond this researchers run the risk of being accused of harassment. Thus the question for researchers is what else can be done to increase the response to a mail survey. This note discusses two attempts to answer this question.

Test of Envelope Message

Since 2000, ISSP survey packages mailed by the Department of Marketing have consisted of an A4 questionnaire booklet, a covering letter, a reply-paid envelope, and an official Massey University addressed cover sheet that acted as an outer ‘envelope’. Each survey package has been shrink-wrapped in clear plastic.

As part of a qualitative study of the behaviour of mail survey non-respondents (Finn, 2004), some participants suggested that the plastic shrink wrapping used in the ISSP surveys made the survey package resemble a direct mail sales catalogue or some other form of junk mail. These participants speculated that this might deter potential respondents from opening the package and examining its contents. To test this possibility, the following statement was inserted on half of the address cover sheets for the 2003 ISSP survey on National Identity:

“IMPORTANT SURVEY ON NEW ZEALAND’S NATIONAL IDENTITY ENCLOSED”

The assumption was that this statement would establish the non-commercial status of the survey, emphasise its importance and clearly distinguish it from a piece of direct marketing.

The survey involved a stratified sample of 2200 voters selected from the New Zealand electoral roll. Potential respondents were randomly assigned an address sheet with or without the explanatory statement. Table 2 shows the response rates for the two sub-samples after two reminders¹.

Rather than increasing the survey response rate as expected the explanatory statement on the address sheet actually reduced it, by around 6%. This difference is not significant but under the circumstances that is hardly relevant.

¹ The response rates shown in Table 2 are lower than the response rate for the National Identity survey shown in Table 1 because they were calculated after two reminders, whereas the final response rate for the survey is based on three reminders. The same final reminder, with no cover message, was sent to all remaining non-respondents after two reminders with different cover messages.

Table 2. Response rates with and without cover message

Outcome	With Cover Message	Without Cover Message
	%	%
Valid	399	457
Gone-no-address	68	71
Ineligible	14	30
Refused	23	24
Not returned	595	521
Total	1099	1103
Response Rate (%)	39.2	45.6

Note: Response Rate = [Valid/(Total – (GNA + Ineligible))] * 100

Test of ‘Likeable’ Questionnaire Cover Design

Research on the effect of questionnaire cover design on mail survey response rates has suggested that a ‘likeable’ questionnaire cover design can increase the response to a mail survey (see Gendall, 2003). The effect is not large, on average around 2%, and is not guaranteed, but in some cases can be as high as 3% or 4%. Gendall’s research does not reveal what constitutes a ‘likeable’ cover design, but judging by the cover designs he tested it seems that this may involve the use of colour and an appropriate graphic design.

Finn (2004) found some support for the effect of questionnaire cover design likeability on survey response in her study of mail survey non-respondents. Finn’s participants rated a cover that included a graphic design as more likeable than one that didn’t, and some thought they would be more likely to respond to the questionnaire with the graphic cover design.

To test the proposition that a more likeable questionnaire cover will enhance the response to a mail survey, two questionnaire covers were designed for a survey on the regulation of prescription medicine advertising, conducted in 2003. One cover included a coloured graphic consistent with the survey topic; the other had no graphic but was otherwise identical. The two covers are shown in Figure 1.

The two covers were first tested for likeability using a seven-point semantic differential scale (where 1 = I don’t like this cover at all, and 7 = I like this cover very much). A convenience sample of 40 potential respondents was shown both covers and asked to rate the likeability of each on the likeability scale described. The average likeability scores for each cover confirmed that there was a difference between the covers (see Table 3).

The two covers were then used in a mail survey of 800 members of the New Zealand general public, selected from the electoral roll. Sample members were randomly assigned one of the two cover designs. Table 3 shows the response rates for each cover design after an initial posting and two reminders.

Figure 1. Questionnaire cover designs tested

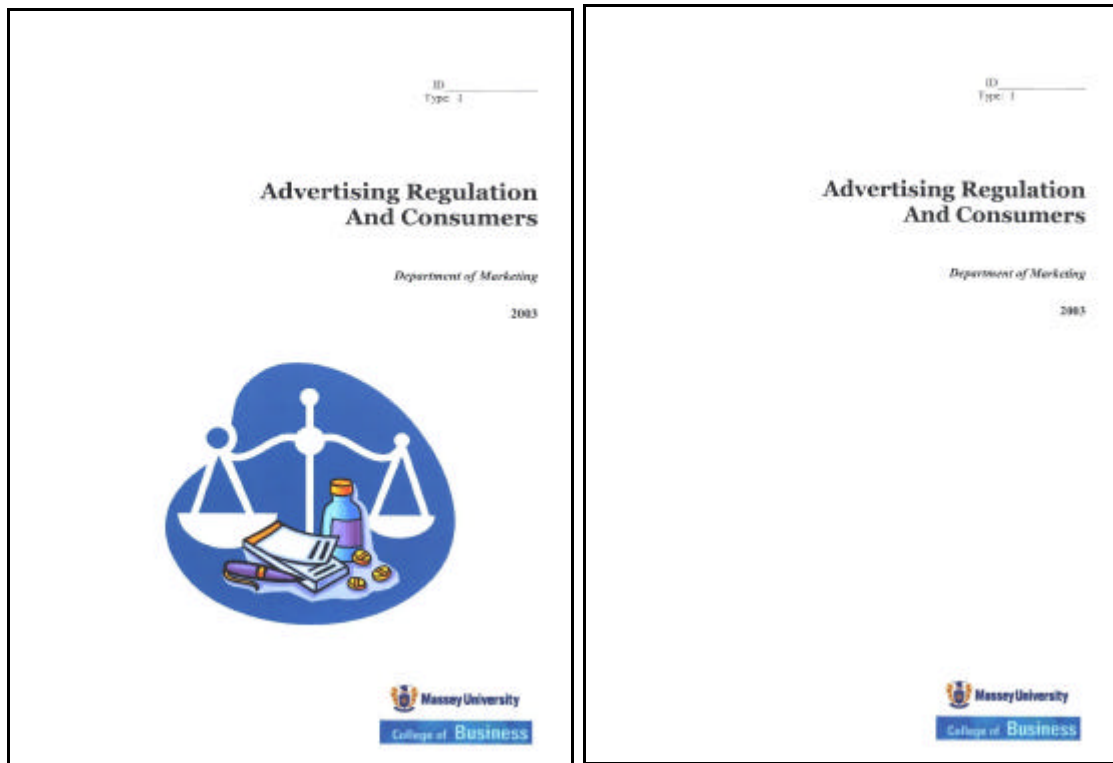


Table 3. Response to cover designs tested

Outcome	With Graphic Design	Without Graphic Design
Valid	214	215
GNA and ineligible	57	54
Refused	7	5
Not returned	122	126
Total	400	400
Response Rate (%)	62.4	62.1
Mean likeability (n=40)	4.7	3.7
Mode likeability (n=40)	5.0	3.0

Note: Response Rate = [Valid/(Total – (GNA + Ineligible)] * 100

Despite the fact that the cover incorporating a graphic design was liked more than the alternative without a graphic, the response rates achieved by the two covers were identical.

Discussion

Two measures designed to increase the response to mail surveys failed to achieve the desired effect. The first involved clarifying the non-commercial status of the survey package and emphasising the importance of its contents. It had the opposite effect to that intended. This suggests that, while the contents of a survey package are unknown, there is some incentive to open the envelope and investigate what is inside. If the content is described on the envelope, the stimulus to open the package may be removed. From our study we cannot tell if the addition of the explanatory message on the address sheet had that effect. Obviously it did something to discourage response, and it seems logical to assume that whatever this was occurred before the survey package was opened. Regardless of the explanation, the implication for mail survey researchers is clear.

The second measure, the use of a graphic design to create a more likeable questionnaire cover, does not support Gendall's (2003) conclusion that questionnaire cover likeability enhances survey response. Nevertheless, if a more 'likeable' design performs no worse than a less likeable one and sometimes performs better, then, leaving cost aside, it makes sense to try and design attractive, 'likeable' questionnaire covers.

Finally, the two studies reported here emphasise the fallibility of survey respondents as predictors of their own or other respondents' behaviour. Both measures tested were identified by mail survey non-respondents as potential influencers of survey response, but neither proved effective in practice. This is consistent with the experience reported by Gendall (1996). In Gendall's study the questionnaire cover potential survey respondents rated as most likely to encourage them to respond was actually the least successful cover out of six tested in a full-scale mail survey. Thus, while potential respondents (or non-respondents) can provide some ideas about what motivates survey response, these need to be tested empirically and not simply accepted at face value.

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