

Threats to Survey Research: Excessive Interviewing and 'Sugging'

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This research examined the prevalence, in New Zealand, of two threats to survey research: excessive interviewing and 'sugging'. Face-to-face interviews are conducted with a random sample of householders in the Palmerston North urban area. In 1990, 686 interviews were achieved, giving a response rate of 54%. In 1991, 427 interviews were obtained, giving a response rate of 55%. Approximately 49% of the 1991 respondents had been asked to take part in a survey in the previous 12 months, compared with 46% of the 1990 respondents. This difference is not significant. The prevalence of the four types of survey was similar in 1990 and 1991. Approximately 20% of respondents in 1990, and 13% of respondents in 1991, were asked to participate in more than one survey in the previous 12 months. The claimed level of participation in surveys was high for all types of surveys in both 1990 and 1991 (67% to 88%), with the 1991 rates marginally higher overall. Approximately 20% of the 1990 respondents had reportedly been sugged, 60% within the previous 12 months. In comparison, only 9% of the 1991 respondents claimed to have been sugged, 84% within the previous 12 months.

Keywords: survey research, sugging, excessive interviewing

Introduction

The demand for information about people's opinions, attitudes and behaviour has led to the widespread use of surveys. Industry sources suggest that the commercial market research firms alone are currently conducting over 300,000 interviews with New Zealand citizens each year. This figure does not include surveys of businesses, or surveys conducted by universities or other non-commercial organisations. Clearly, survey research is a pervasive activity.

The success and usefulness of survey research depends on public cooperation, and New Zealanders have always been willing participants in this type of research. However, there are signs that public attitudes towards surveys are beginning to change. Anecdotal evidence suggests that response rates are falling, and it is no longer so unusual for respondents to demand payment for their participation. To date, however, very few New Zealand studies have formally examined this situation.

Studies in the United States have identified a number of 'threats' to survey research (Day 1975), which may also apply to New Zealand. Some of these threats have been described as 'uncontrollable', because they are beyond the control of research companies. One example is the government's recent adoption of a 'user-pays' philosophy, which has almost certainly affected the general public's willingness to provide researchers with 'free' information.

Other threats, however, are 'controllable', in the sense that the research industry can do something about them. These controllable threats include excessive interviewing, abuse of respondents' rights, lack of consideration for respondents, and selling under the guise of research ('sugging'). The prevalence of these four threats in New Zealand is examined in

detail by Brennan (1991). The purpose of this paper is to report the results of a programme implemented to monitor two of these threats, excessive interviewing and 'sugging'.

Excessive Interviewing

With over 300,000 interviews conducted each year, in a country with only 2,600,000 citizens aged 15 or older, it is likely that a high proportion of the New Zealand population has been interviewed at some time in the recent past, and inevitable that some people will be interviewed more than once. Recent studies support this conjecture. In a 1987 survey of Hamilton residents, Phee and Taylor (1988) found that 70% of their sample had been interviewed in the past 12 months. A nationwide MRL survey in 1990 found that 64% of respondents had been surveyed before, 46% within the last 12 months.

Neither of these studies reports the number of times respondents had been interviewed. In 1989, Brennan found that 60% of a national random sample had been surveyed in the past 12 months; 40% had been surveyed at least twice, while 10% claimed to have been surveyed five times or more (Brennan 1991).

Sugging

'Sugging', or selling under the guise of research, is expressly forbidden by the Code of Practice of the Market Research Society of New Zealand, and by the Code of Standards of the New Zealand Direct Marketing Association. Despite this, sugging is prevalent, and of concern to both the MRS and NZDMA because it brings both industries into disrepute and may contribute to respondent resistance (Opinions 1990). Brennan (1991) found that respondent attitudes towards survey research were indeed more negative among those who had been 'sugged'.

According to an MRL study (Opinions, 1990), 8% of their national sample claimed to have been sugged. The main culprits were sellers of encyclopedias or other educational books, time-share apartments, vacuum cleaners, insurance and superannuation. Sugging was much more prevalent in Brennan's (1991) study; over 30% of respondents claimed to have been sugged, and over 60 products associated with sugging were identified. Again, the main culprits were time-share, encyclopedias, and insurance.

Each of the above studies was conducted in a different year, using different survey methods, and a different sampling frame. It is therefore impossible to judge whether the level of exposure to surveys, or sugging, is increasing or not. To address this issue, a standard set of questions has been included in the Palmerston North Household Omnibus Survey, conducted annually by the Marketing Department, Massey University. This note reports the findings of that survey for 1990 and 1991.

Method

Five questions were included in the Palmerston North Household Omnibus, conducted in May 1990 and May 1991. The Omnibus is conducted by second year marketing students in the Department of Marketing, Massey University. Face-to-face interviews are conducted with a random sample of householders in the Palmerston North urban area. The sample is based on clusters of four interviews, two with males and two with females aged fifteen years or older.

Substitutions are made for households where an interview is refused, or where no contact is made after two callbacks. In 1990, 686 interviews were achieved, giving a response rate of 54%. In 1991, 427 interviews were obtained, giving a response rate of 55%. The number of interviews conducted depends on the number of students involved. The data were weighted so the distributions of ages and sexes were identical to that of the Palmerston North population.

The questions relating to survey participation and suggesting are reported in Appendix A.

Results and Discussion

Survey participation

Approximately 49% of the 1991 respondents had been asked to take part in a survey in the previous 12 months, compared with 46% of the 1990 respondents. This difference is not significant ($X^2 = .75$, d.f. = 1, $p > .05$), and it remains to be seen whether these results signify an upward trend (see Table 1).

Table 1. Proportion of respondents asked to take part in a survey in the past 12 months

	<u>1990</u>		<u>1991</u>	
	n	%	n	%
Any survey	313	45.6	207	48.5
Home visit	155	22.6	98	23.0
Street/shop	43	6.3	19	4.6
Telephone	136	19.8	86	20.2
Mail survey	43	6.2	31	7.3
	N	686	427	

The prevalence of the four types of survey was similar in 1990 and 1991. The most frequently encountered types of survey were home visits and telephone surveys, which were reported by approximately 20% of respondents. Street/ shop intercepts and mail surveys were less common, each reported by about 6% of respondents in both 1990 and 1991 (see Table 1). Approximately 20% of respondents in 1990, and 13% of respondents in 1991, were asked to participate in more than one survey in the previous 12 months.

The claimed level of participation in surveys was high for all types of surveys in both 1990 and 1991 (67% to 88%), with the 1991 rates marginally higher overall (see Table 2). This generally high participation rate is not surprising, given that the sample is biased in favour of survey responders; non-responders and refusers are under-represented. On the other hand, the

results indicate that even among responders, between 10% to 20% do not always agree to participate in a survey. There is no obvious explanation for why the rate for mail surveys in 1990 was considerably lower than for the other survey types, and lower than in 1991.

Table 2. Proportion of respondents asked to take part in a survey in the last 12 months, who agreed to do so

	<u>1990</u>		<u>1991</u>	
	n	%	n	%
Any survey	260	83.1	177	85.5
Home visit	136	87.7	86	87.7
Street/shop	34	79.0	16	84.2
Telephone	105	77.2	69	80.2
Mail survey	29	67.4	29	93.5

Note. The sample size for each type of survey is reported in Table 1.

Sugging

Approximately 20% of the 1990 respondents had reportedly been sugged, 60% within the previous 12 months. In comparison, only 9% of the 1991 respondents claimed to have been sugged, 84% within the previous 12 months (see Table 3). A reasonably high proportion of respondents, 23% in 1990 and 16% in 1991, had been sugged more than once in the past 12 months (see Table 4).

Table 3. Proportion of respondents who have been "sugged"

	<u>1990</u>		<u>1991</u>	
	n	%	n	%
Ever	135	19.8	38	8.9
In past 12 months ¹	78	57.8	32	84.2
N	686		427	

Note. 1. Computed from the data reported in Table 4, and expressed as a % of 'ever sugged'.

Table 4. Level of sugging in last 12 months

	<u>1990</u>		<u>1991</u>		
	n	%	n	%	
0 times	57	42.2	6	15.7	
1	47	34.8	22	57.9	
2	21	15.5	71	8.4	
3	3	2.2	2	5.3	
4	3	2.2	1	2.6	
5 or more	4	3.0	0	0.0	
Total	N	135	100.0	38	100.0

Note. Respondents were those who had been 'sugged' sometime in the past

The large differences in the reports of sugging in 1990 and 1991 could be simply due to sampling error, but this does not seem likely, given the close correspondence in the data for survey participation. Another possibility is that the results may indeed reflect fluctuations in the levels of sugging from year to year, and represent the type of result one would expect if levels of sugging had been high in 1987/1988, as suggested by Brennan's data, then dropped sharply to the lower level in 1989/1990, suggested by the MRL data. Unfortunately, there is no independent data that could be used to test this hypothesised decline.

Certainly, this suggestion that there has been a decline in sugging is contrary to the beliefs of MRS commentators (Stockwell 1990; Opinions 1990), and requires verification.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study are consistent with those reported by MRL (Opinions 1990), but show considerably lower levels of exposure to surveys than both Brennan (1991) and Phee and Taylor (1989), and lower levels of sugging than Brennan (1991). The difference from Phee and Taylor (1990) in particular is surprising, since both Hamilton and Palmerston North are University towns, where one would expect higher levels of interviewing because of the high levels of student research undertaken. It may be that the results reflect important differences in the research methods used. Even so, the ongoing data from the Palmerston North Household Omnibus should provide useful information about the levels of interviewing and sugging in Palmerston North, and this data should give some indication of trends that could probably be generalised to, at least, the main urban centres in New Zealand.

References

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Appendix A. Survey Questions

1. Thinking back over the Last 12 months, have you personally been asked to take part in a survey, besides this one? That is, has an interviewer visited you at home or stopped you in a street or telephoned you or sent you a questionnaire through the mail?
2. a) How were you contacted? (Prompted: home visit, street/shop intercept, telephoned, mail)
b) Did you actually take part in this survey?
3. Have you ever taken part in a survey that turned out to be an attempt to sell you something?
4. How often has this happened in the last 12 months?