

Which Letter Worked Best?

Philip Gendall

This note reports the results of a study which applied direct marketing techniques to the writing and presentation of a covering letter for a mail survey of the general public. The vehicle for this research was the 1993 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey on attitudes to the environment. Nine versions of the covering letters were produced (examples of these are reproduced in the Appendix). Eight letters were based on two different appeals, an altruistic appeal and an egoistic appeal. Within each appeal were four versions of the covering letter, differing in terms of complexity, tone, and the presence or absence of graphics. The ninth letter was written by a direct marketing consultant on the basis of a brief provided. The results of this study suggest that the content and appearance of covering letters can influence the response rate for mail surveys, but that the effect may depend on the type of appeal and on the way in which it is conveyed. For mail survey practitioners, the implication is that they need to tailor the appeal they use and its execution to the characteristics and expectations of the target population. This would be no surprise to direct marketers. They have known for years that, after the medium and the list, the two most important leverage points in direct marketing are the offer (What's in it for me?) and the format. The same, it seems, applies to mail survey covering letters.

Keywords: mail survey, response rates, cover letter, questionnaire design

Introduction

The parallels between direct marketing and mail survey research are obvious. Both use covering letters to generate action; direct marketers to persuade consumers to buy or donors to give, survey researchers to induce respondents to fill out and return questionnaires. However, very little of the knowledge which direct marketers have about the effectiveness of various letter elements has been adopted or applied by mail survey researchers.

Some research has been done on the effect on mail survey response rates of personalisation (mixed results), response deadline (also mixed), assurance of anonymity (no effect), hand-written postscript (no effect) and of different appeals (mixed results). But there have been few attempts to examine the consequences of varying the content or appearance of covering letters.¹ This seems like a major oversight, given that the letter is generally regarded as the most important component of a direct mail package. Furthermore, since all mail surveys need a covering letter, writing more effective ones offers the prospect of higher response rates with no increase in survey costs.

This note reports the results of a study which applied direct marketing techniques to the writing and presentation of a covering letter for a mail survey of the general public.

Method

The vehicle for this research was the 1993 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey on attitudes to the environment. Nine versions of the covering letters were produced (examples of these are reproduced in the Appendix). Eight letters were based on two different appeals, an altruistic appeal and an egoistic appeal. Within each appeal were four versions of the covering letter, differing in terms of complexity, tone, and the presence or absence of

graphics. The ninth letter was written by a direct marketing consultant on the basis of a brief provided.

This research design is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The experimental design

Altruistic Appeal	Egoistic Appeal
Complex	Complex
Simple	Simple
Simple and friendly	Simple and friendly
Simple and friendly with graphics	Simple and friendly with graphics
Direct Marketer's Letter	

Type of Appeal

Studies of the use of appeals in covering letters have used one or more of two basic approaches - egoistic, or altruistic. Egoistic appeals emphasise the importance of the survey to recipients, stressing the value of their opinions. Altruistic appeals either emphasise the opportunity to help those conducting the study (help-the-sponsor) or stress the benefit of the research to the general population of which the recipient is a member (social utility). The altruistic appeal used in this study combined elements of both social utility (help to increase international understanding) and help the researcher requests. By contrast, the theme of the egoistic appeal was "Your views are important" "make your opinion count".

Complexity

A common caution to questionnaire designers and survey researchers is to remember that they are better educated than most of their respondents, particularly for surveys of the general public. On a practical level this caution is translated into the advice not to overestimate the reading ability of respondents and to write in simple straightforward language. The implicit hypothesis is that a simple, readable covering letter should be more effective than a complex, less readable one.

In this study, complexity was measured in terms of readability, based on Flesch Reading Ease Scores and Gunning's Fog Index. For the complex letters the Flesch Scores were in the low 50's, and the Fog Indexes were around 15. This indicates that the complex letters were "fairly difficult", requiring a reading age of approximately 13. The simple versions of the letters had Flesch Scores in the low 70's and Fog Indexes of around 10, indicating that they were "fairly easy", requiring a reading age of only nine or ten years.

Tone

It has been suggested that "personal, friendly" covering letters are more effective than impersonal ones, and this would certainly be consistent with the approach taken by direct marketers. In this study, a friendlier tone was achieved by adding to the simple letters a personalised introduction: "Hello. I'm Phil Gendall from Massey University"; changing "Yours sincerely" to "Kind regards"; and changing the signature from "P J Gendall" to "Phil Gendall". (These changes had virtually no effect on the readability of the letters.)

Graphics

In the same way as advertising may need to "break through the clutter" before it is noticed by consumers, it is possible that a similar problem exists for mail surveys. Covering letters may simply not be read by potential respondents subjected to increasing numbers of mail surveys. If this is so, then perhaps the covering letter needs to be visually striking in order to encourage the recipient to read the text.

Computer-generated graphics were introduced into the "simple, friendly" letters and the text reformatted to accommodate them. There was no particular rationale for the graphics chosen, except that they had to be neutral in terms of the two appeals used. Nevertheless, the combination of the graphics used and the informal tone of the text produced what could be described as strikingly informal letters.

Direct Marketer's Letter

This letter combined elements of both altruistic and egoistic appeals. It included a salutation, "Dear Fellow Citizen", a headline, and two postscripts. It also made use of bold text, for emphasis, but, unlike the other letters, did not explain how the respondent was chosen for the survey. Furthermore, no countries were mentioned, on the grounds that particular countries might have undesirable associations for some respondents.

This letter was considerably shorter than all of the other letters. However, its readability was closer to that of the complex letters than the simple letters.

The Survey

In September 1993, a questionnaire, covering letter and reply-paid envelope were sent to 1881 New Zealanders aged 18 and over, selected randomly from the electoral roll. The sample was randomly allocated to nine groups, each containing 209 potential respondents. Each group received a different version of the covering letter.

Unlike other research on covering letters, this study replicated the experimental design for two reminder letters as well as the original covering letter. Consequently it provides results for a complete mail survey rather than just first-wave responses.

Results

At the end of 12 weeks, response rates for the nine treatment groups ranged from 62% to 75% (see Table 1).

Table 1. Response rates for nine letters

Treatment	Altruistic Appeal		Egoistic Appeal	
	n	%	n	%
Complex letter	151	75.1	142	69.6
Simple letter	147	72.5	136	66.3
Simple, friendly letter	144	71.3	135	67.5
Simple, friendly letter with graphics	151	75.1	125	61.9
Direct Marketer's Letter				
	n	%		
	137	68.8		

Note: Response rates adjusted for "Gone-No-Address" and ineligible.

The response rate for the altruistic appeal was significantly higher than that for the egoistic appeal ($X^2 = 10.1$, *d.f.* 1, $p < 0.1$). Within each appeal, the simple letters and the simple, friendly letters actually produced a lower response than their more complex counterparts, but these differences were not significant.

Within the **altruistic** appeal, the inclusion of graphics increased responses by about 4%, whereas, within the **egoistic** appeal, the effect of graphics in the simple, friendly letter was to **reduce** the response rate by more than 5% (though neither of these differences is significant for samples of this size).

The response to the direct marketer's letter was comparable to that achieved by the three egoistic appeals without graphics, but lower than the response to each of the four altruistic appeals (again, however, these differences are non-significant).

Discussion

In a university-sponsored mail survey of the general public an altruistic appeal appears to be more effective than an egoistic appeal. This is consistent with the findings of Houston and Nevin (1977). There is no evidence that simplicity increases the effectiveness of the covering letters (in fact, if anything, this study suggests the opposite). However, it could be argued that the difference in readability of the letters used was relatively small, and it would seem unwise to assume that letters that were very difficult to read would not reduce responses.

As far as tone is concerned, there appears to be an interaction between tone and appeal and response rate. While a "friendlier", tone by itself had no effect on response rates, the combination of informal graphics and personal, friendly style did. For the altruistic appeal a strikingly informal covering letter increased the response rate, whereas for the egoistic appeal this treatment produced the opposite effect. A possible explanation for this result may be that such informality is consistent with an altruistic appeal but not with an egoistic appeal. Perhaps a very informal tone reinforces a request for help, whereas the same tone reduces the credibility of the proposition that respondents' opinions are important.

The fact that a letter designed by a direct marketing professional did no better than those written by a survey researcher might suggest that special skills are not required to write effective mail survey covering letters. However, it seems more likely that the most important direct marketing principles had already been incorporated in the other letters, so that the room for improvement in them was minimal.

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that the content and appearance of covering letters can influence the response rate for mail surveys, but that the effect may depend on the type of appeal and on the way in which it is conveyed. For mail survey practitioners, the implication is that they need to tailor the appeal they use and its execution to the characteristics and expectations of the target population. This would be no surprise to direct marketers. They have known for years that, after the medium and the list, the two most important leverage points in direct marketing are the offer (What's in it for me?) and the format. The same, it seems, applies to mail survey covering letters.

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Footnote

¹. For details of research on mail survey response rates see the comprehensive reviews by Herbelein & Baumgartner 1978; Yu & Cooper 1983; Harvey 1987; Fox, Crask & Kim 1988; Conant, Smart & Walker 1990; Yammario, Skinner & Childers 1991; and Brennan 1992.

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Appendix: Examples of initial covering letters used

Egoistic Appeal: Complex Letter

Egoistic Appeal
Complex Letter



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September 1993

ENVIRONMENT SURVEY

Have you ever wanted to have your say about the environment? We hear such a lot about environmental issues these days, but it is often difficult to identify what New Zealanders really think is important. Here is your opportunity to express your opinions and to have your voice heard.

Enclosed is a copy of a questionnaire on the environment, which I would be grateful if you would answer and return in the envelope provided (there is no need to put a stamp on it).

You may be wondering how you were chosen for the survey. I took a random sample of names from the electoral rolls and your name was one of those selected. However, all your answers will be completely confidential. The number on the questionnaire is to allow me to cross your name off once you have returned your questionnaire and ensure that I don't send you a reminder.

The results of this research will be made available to government officials and politicians so they are informed of how New Zealanders feel about the environment. This is a chance for people to make their views on the environment known to policy makers, so please make the most of this opportunity to make your opinion count.

I hope you will enjoy filling out the questionnaire, and I look forward to receiving it as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'P. J. Gendall'.

P J Gendall
Professor of Marketing

PS If you have any questions about the survey, or would like to talk about it, please phone me on (06) 356 9099.

Altruistic Appeal: Complex letter

Altruistic Appeal
Complex Letter



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ENVIRONMENT SURVEY

Massey University is a member of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Each year the 21 countries in the ISSP carry out a survey on a topic of interest, using a common questionnaire. The countries share the information collected and use it to compare the attitudes and values of people in different parts of the world. This year the topic is the environment.

Membership of the International Social Survey Programme provides a link between New Zealand and countries as different as the USA, Russia, Philippines, Japan, Norway and Israel, and with your cooperation, an opportunity to increase international understanding.

I am writing to you to ask for your help in this international programme. Enclosed is a copy of the ISSP questionnaire on the environment, which I would be grateful if you would answer and return in the envelope provided (there is no need to put a stamp on it).

You may be wondering how you were chosen for the survey. I took a random sample of names from the electoral rolls and your name was one of those selected. However, all your answers will be completely confidential. The number on the questionnaire is to allow me to cross your name off once you have returned your questionnaire and ensure that I don't send you a reminder.

Thank you for your help. I look forward to receiving your completed questionnaire as soon as possible.

Yours sincerely,

P J Gendall
Professor of Marketing

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Egoistic Appeal: Simple Letter

Egoistic Appeal
Simple Letter



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ENVIRONMENT SURVEY

Have you ever wanted to have your say about the environment? Well, here's your chance. I'm doing a survey on the environment, and I'd like your views.

Why should you bother to take part? We hear a lot about the environment these days, but it's often hard to know what is really important to New Zealanders. Here's your opportunity to have your voice heard.

Please answer the questionnaire I've enclosed. Then send it back to me in the envelope provided. The envelope is reply paid, so there is no need to put a stamp on it.

How were you chosen? I took your name at random from the electoral rolls. However, all your answers will be completely confidential. The number on the questionnaire is so I can cross your name off when you send it back. This makes sure I don't send you a reminder.

I'll be sending my results to government officials and politicians so they can see how New Zealanders feel about their environment. This is a chance for people to express their views. So, please take this opportunity to make your opinion count.

I hope you will enjoy filling out the questionnaire. I look forward to getting it as soon as possible.

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Altruistic Appeal: Simple Letter

Altruistic Appeal
Simple Letter



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ENVIRONMENT SURVEY

Here at Massey we are members of an international survey programme involving 21 countries. Each year these countries carry out a survey on a topic of interest and share the answers. This means they can compare the attitudes and values of people in many parts of the world. The topic of this year's survey is the environment. I'm writing to ask for your help in this survey.

Why should you take part? Because, with your help, we can create a link between New Zealand and countries as different as the USA, Russia, Philippines, Japan, Norway and Israel. We can also create better understanding between countries.

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Professor of Marketing

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Egoistic Appeal: Simple, friendly letter with graphics

Egoistic Appeal
Simple, friendly letter with graphics

September 1993



ENVIRONMENT SURVEY

Hello! I'm Phil Gendall, from Massey University.

Have you ever wanted to have your say about the environment? Well, here's your chance. I'm doing a survey on the environment, and I'd like your views.

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Kind regards

A handwritten signature in cursive that reads "Phil Gendall".

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Altruistic Appeal: Simple, friendly letter with graphics

Altruistic Appeal
Simple, friendly letter with graphics

September 1993

ENVIRONMENT SURVEY



Hello. I'm Phil Gendall, from Massey University.

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Thank you for your help. I look forward to getting your questionnaire as soon as possible.

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Direct Marketer's Letter

Direct Marketer's Letter



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Dear Fellow Citizen

Your Attitude to the Environment Matters!!

Please take a few minutes to express it.

Here is your chance to express your views about the Environment. And your views will count!

Massey University has become a member of the International Social Survey Programme. Each year the 21 countries in the ISSP carry out an important survey on a topic of national and international interest. **This year the topic is one of vital concern to all caring New Zealanders: The Environment.**

Please help us to express the New Zealand view, by completing the enclosed questionnaire.

Your views are important, because results of the survey are collated internationally, providing an opportunity to increase understanding between countries on vital issues.

Please fill out the questionnaire and return it to me as soon as possible. All your answers are confidential. The number on the questionnaire is so that I can cross your name off once you have returned it and ensure that I don't send you a reminder.

Kind regards

Phil Gendall
Professor of Marketing

PS Your input really is important. Don't miss this opportunity to have your say and make it count.

PPS If you have any questions or would simply like to talk about the survey, please call me on (06) 356 9099.

Second reminder Altruistic Appeal: Simple, friendly letter with graphics

Second reminder
Altruistic appeal
Simple, friendly letter with graphics

November 1993

URGENT



Yes, it's me again!

Near the end of September I sent you a questionnaire as part of an international survey on attitudes to the environment. Unfortunately I still haven't had a reply.

Perhaps you haven't got around to answering the questionnaire yet. Or maybe you don't have strong views on the environment. Whatever the reason, your ideas and opinions are as important as anyone else's. Without them, this survey won't properly represent the attitudes of all New Zealanders.

Please take a few minutes to help me by answering your questionnaire and sending it back.

Kind regards,

Phil Gendall
Professor of Marketing



PS Thank you, if you have already returned your questionnaire.



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