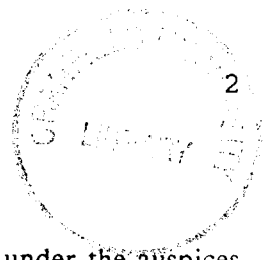




**SWP 9/89 ACHIEVING HIGH RESPONSE RATES:
A SURVEY OF "POSTAL RESEARCH
SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP" MEMBERS**

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Introduction

In March 1988 the Postal Research Special Interest Group was formed under the auspices of the Market Research Society. Members were particularly interested in learning about those practices which led to high response rates, without impairing the quality of replies. At the inaugural meeting it was decided to undertake a survey of the Special Interest Group members to:

- appreciate how members undertook postal surveys
- gain a better understanding of those factors influencing response rates
- act as a pilot study for a future survey of MRS members

Consequently a questionnaire was designed and completed by 14 of the 16 members of this newly formed group. This paper summarises how members approached their last postal research survey and, by briefly reviewing some of the literature on postal surveys, comments on those mechanisms associated with increasing response rates. In common with all low sample research, only tentative inferences are drawn from the membership survey.

The paper opens by detailing the data collection procedure. It considers each aspect of the postal survey process, describing what the published literature regards as being good practice and relating this to members experience. Conclusions are tentatively drawn about influencing factors and recommendations made for further research.

Methodology and Sample Details

The 16 members of the Postal Research Special Interest Group received a fully-structured, self completion questionnaire in May 1988 that asked them how they went about their last postal survey and what response rate they achieved. With the use of a reminder letter, 14 members had replied by the middle of August 1988 when the results were analysed.

Half the replies were from commercial organisations, 4 from market research agencies, 2 wished to remain anonymous and one was from an academic institution. The majority

of members (II) had last completed a consumer survey while 3 replied about surveys conducted amongst industrialists.

Purpose for which Postal Survey Used

Postal research was employed to satisfy a wide variety of objectives. Four members used postal surveys to track basic market behaviour and opinions (eg monitor market share, respondents opinions, experiences and satisfaction with different services) while another member had developed a regular omnibus survey using postal techniques. Of the ad-hoc studies completed the research objectives included:

- measuring perceptions of market structure
- assessing readership profiles
- measuring reader habits
- identifying the attitudes of book club readers
- testing the effectiveness of an advertisement
- gauging the demand for a new product
- product testing
- recruiting respondents for a future product test.

Clearly there are instances where postal research could not be that effectively employed (eg measuring spontaneous then prompted awareness), however, the diversity of applications noted amongst members, along with the other examples cited by Erdos (1970) indicates the value of postal techniques to market researchers. As evidence of the importance of postal surveys as an important data-collection tool Bruvold and Comer (1988) reported that amongst a sample of American householders participating in survey research in 1984, after telephone research, postal questionnaires were the next most frequently used survey method.

Sampling Respondents and Responses Achieved

Of the 14 postal studies completed, 12 used customer files to select a sample of potential respondents, while the remaining two used the electoral register.

Depending upon the marketing problem, so a particular sample size would have been selected. This research found that members approached between 380 to 8,700 people for

their postal survey, the most frequently noted contact sample being approximately 2,000 respondents. The response rate achieved (ie total number of replies) varied between 13% to 84%, with over half the members achieving a response rate of 60% or more. Table 1 provides more detail about response rates:

Number of members achieving response rates of:

10-19%	1	}	Low
20-29%	1	}	
30-39%	1	}	
40-49%	3	}	Medium
50-59%	0	}	
60-69%	3	}	
70-79%	3	}	High
80-89%	2	}	
	14		

Table 1: Response rates achieved

While this survey of Special Interest Group members has shown that high response rates can be achieved, the review article by Kanuk and Berenson (1975) also shows a large number of studies with response rates in excess of 80%. To gain more insight into those factors associated with high response rates, the remainder of this paper considers how members undertook their postal research survey. To facilitate the analysis, three categories of response rates were arbitrarily defined ie low (10-39%), medium (40-69%) and high (70-89%) and in some sections of this paper the results are considered in terms of these three response categories.

Advance Notification of Survey

Only one member sent a letter in advance of the questionnaire to try to increase the response rate. While a 79% response rate was achieved on that particular study, two other members achieved higher response rates without using advance notification to

potential respondents. A review of others results from advance notification (Kanuk and Berenson, 1975) shows inconsistent results (due in part to problems with control groups). The only firm view from the literature is that advance notification accelerates the rate of return. It is tentatively thought that advance notification does not have an influence on response levels.

The Covering Letter

All members employed the wise practice of sending a covering letter with their questionnaire. The majority (11) had the covering letter printed on a separate page, rather than including it on the questionnaire. The fact that printing the covering letter on the questionnaire resulted in a low (13%) a medium (40%) and a high (79%) response level may indicate that there is minimal effect from printing the questionnaire on either a separate sheet or on the questionnaire.

Reflecting to some extent whether a market research agency was commissioned to work on the postal survey, five of the fourteen covering letters were printed on the market research agency's letter headed paper. An analysis of the three response rate categories shows no clear pattern in terms of any effect from whether the covering letter was printed on the market research agency's paper or the survey sponsors paper. Scott (1961) used three different letterheadings (Central Office of Information, London School of Economics and British Market Research Bureau) and did not find a significant difference in response rate. However, when government sponsorship was compared with the pooled results of the two non-government sponsors, a significant advantage for government sponsorship was noted. Baumgartner and Heberlein's (1984) review of American studies also found that government sponsorship enhanced response rates. Furthermore they suggested that University sponsorship increased response rates and that there may be a slight reduction by using a market research agency's letter heading.

A minority (4) of the surveys used a personalised salutation on the covering letter (ie Dear Mr Jones rather than Dear Sir). On these particular studies medium to high response levels were recorded (49-84% response), however there is insufficient evidence to support a firm conclusion about any affect from personalising the salutation on the covering letter. The reviews by Linsky (1975) and Kanuk and Berenson (1975) indicates equivocal results. One reason for this may be certain groups fearing loss of anonymity (eg the lottery winners of Andreassen, 1970). Dillman (1978), argues that covering letter

should be personalised, presumably since respondents may think some effort has gone into the letter and may then be more likely to participate.

Of the four studies where personalised salutations were used on the covering letter, only one study had each salutation handwritten (2,196 letters), and while a 48.5% response was achieved, higher responses were noted from those studies where typed salutations were used. All but two of the members used personally addressed envelopes and these two achieved response of 13% and 60%. Dillman (1978) believes that personalisation is an effective device to increase response levels, but a holistic approach to personalisation must be employed. Thus besides a personalised salutation, the date of posting, a blue ink signature and an individually typed address on the envelope must all be present. If one of these is missing, any beneficial advantage is thought to be lost.

Detailed advice on the content of covering letters is provided by many authors, eg Erdos (1970), Dillman (1978) and Hoinville et al (1982). Many of the points appear to have been incorporated in the members survey, ie:

- why the survey is being undertaken
- why it is important for people to participate/only a small number were approached and its important to achieve a good response
- who should complete the questionnaire
- returned questionnaires will be regarded as confidential
- this is a bona fide market research survey
- how the survey will help people in the future
- how people were selected for the survey
- how to return the questionnaire (eg pre-paid envelope), please reply as soon as possible
- thank you for your assistance

None of the members stipulated a deadline by which postal questionnaires had to be sent back. Such practice appears sensible as there appears to be no evidence of this affecting response rates (eg Vocino, 1977). Jobber (1986) identified three broad appeals that could be used in the covering letter, ie an altruistic appeal (emphasizing the importance of a reply to assist the market researcher), an egoistic appeal (emphasizing the importance of a reply due to the persons special knowledge/importance and a social utility appeal (how response will help contribute to understanding of the topic). His review found that

an altruistic appeal achieved the best response. Dillman (1978) points out some of the weaknesses of following an altruistic appeal (eg effective only as long as the person does not have to go out of their way to comply) and proposes "convincing people first that a problem exists that is of importance to a group with which they identify, and second, that their help is needed to find a solution" (p162). This would appear to be a combination of both an altruistic and a social appeal.

Of the 12 survey questionnaires where a reply on this issue was received, 6 relied solely on a social appeal, five appeared to follow Dillman's suggestion and one used all three appeals (this latter approach only achieving a 26% response). No clear pattern emerged in terms of there being any relationship between type of appeal and response level.

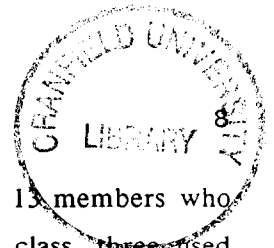
Only one of the members reported personally signing each of the covering letters. On that particular study, which achieved a 48.5% response, a handwritten personal salutation appeared on each letter, but any effect from preparing what may have appeared to be individual letters was negated by "date as postmark" at the top of each letter.

Use of Incentive

The review by Harvey (1987) of predominantly American studies shows that cash incentives led to increased response levels. Promises of rewards, or promises of donations to charity were reported as having no effect on response levels. Nine of the fourteen members used an incentive in their postal survey, and where incentives were used response levels varied from 26% to 84%, compared with 13% to 81% for those not using incentives. These results would suggest that incentives have increased response rates. Of the 9 using an incentive, the majority (7) enclosed the incentive with the postal questionnaire. The two promising an incentive only achieved responses of 26% and 35%. Of the eight who stated what incentive was used, over half (5) sent a pen/pencil (responses of 40% to 84%), one sent 1 USA dollar bill (65% response), one a map booklet (71% response) and one offered a draw for wine vouchers (26% response).

Posting/Postage Details

Much of the earlier research on the class of postage has shown conflicting results about any effect on response levels (eg Kanuk and Berenson, 1975). More recently published work in the USA (McCrohan and Lowe, 1981) and the UK (Harvey, 1986) found that



the class of postage had no significant impact on return rates. Of the 13 members who knew what class postage was employed, the majority (8) used second class, three used first class and one had a "rebate under contract". Where first class postage was used, responses varied from 13% to 79%, compared with 26% to 84% for second class. It would thus appear that second class postage is as effective as first class in achieving good response rates.

Conflicting results have been reported in terms of whether a stamp is more effective in increasing response rates rather than franking envelopes. Peterson (1975) showed evidence of stamps increasing response levels, while the Kanuk and Berenson (1975) review showed there was no effect from the stamp/franking. Amongst members in this survey, franking appeared the more popular procedure (6), followed by affixing stamps (4), using postage paid imprint (3) and finally one member was testing different procedures with half the envelopes franked, half postage paid imprint (results not supplied). With a spread of response levels in each of these categories of posting, no clear effect could be discerned.

Dillman (1978) recommends that Monday posting be avoided when mailing out surveys, due to the build up of post over the weekend, and advocates sending out questionnaires on a Tuesday. Of the 10 members who knew which day they posted their survey, there was no one day that stood out as being more popular for posting.

Stemming back from the early work of Ferriss (1951), which showed the power of enclosing a stamped reply envelope, it is common practice to include a stamped reply envelope with postal questionnaires. All of the members in this survey enclosed a postage paid self addressed envelope with the questionnaire. Approximately half the members (8) enclosed a business reply paid envelope (13% to 84% response) with the other half (6) enclosing a stamped self addressed envelope (47% to 81% response). The return postage was predominantly (11) second class.

Questionnaire Details

Controversy still remains about whether response rates will be higher using short, rather than long questionnaires. Harvey (1986) shows examples of studies where short questionnaires achieved higher response rates, but also cites contrary findings. Of particular interest was the work by Scott (1961). He sent one third of his sample a long

questionnaire, one third of his sample half of the original long questionnaire and another third the final half of his questionnaire. An examination of the response levels showed no significant differences.

Amongst the 13 members replying, the maximum number of questions that a respondent would have to be answered varied from 5 to 158 and response rates of 81% and 71% respectively were recorded. These results would indicate that there is only a marginal effect on response from questionnaire length. Five of the surveys had no open-ended questions (49% to 84% response levels) and while the number of open-ended questions was generally kept low (no more than 10 open-ended questions), one survey had virtually half its questions open-ended (85 questions) yet still achieved a 71% response level. Thus supporting the research review by Linsky (1975), open-ended questions can be used effectively on postal surveys.

The number of sides of paper that the questionnaires filled varied from one to eleven, with the majority of members using no more than five sides of paper (10 respondents). Amongst the three using a one sided postal questionnaire, response levels varied from 13% to 81%, while the survey with eleven sides of questionnaire achieved a 71% response level. Thus supporting the earlier findings of Scott (1961), questionnaire length did not appear to adversely affect response levels.

Both Dillman (1978) and Erdos (1970) stress the importance of the questionnaire looking attractive to potential respondents and appearing easy to complete. They both believe that questionnaires should not be compressed in an attempt to make them look less daunting tasks. Dillman (1978) contends that the questionnaire should be printed to look like a booklet, while Erdos (1970) recommends that it should be printed on both sides of paper. Amongst members participating in this survey, 9 printed on both sides of paper (26% to 79% response) and 5 on single sheets (13% to 81% response). A minority (5) of the sample printed their questionnaire in a booklet form, achieving responses of between 26% to 72%.

Dillman (1978) urges market researchers to use white paper for their questionnaires and the limited results on the influence of colour, reviewed by Linsky (1975), indicate that there is no significant impact from colour. Only one member did not print their questionnaire on white paper, and using yellow paper they achieved a 79% response.

It might be thought that printing coding instructions for the data processors on the questionnaire may make the questionnaire look daunting to respondents and depress response levels. The majority of members (10) printed coding instructions on their questionnaires and achieved responses of 13% to 79% (cf 26% to 84% for those not printing coding instructions). Off-set litho printing of the questionnaire was the most commonly used process (11 respondents). One questionnaire was glossy printed (72%), one was letter press quality (26%) and one laser printed (79% - 84% response).

Use of Reminders

Follow-up letters are a successful means of increasing response rates (Moser and Kalton, 1981) and 10 of the members sent out reminder letters in their surveys. As further evidence of the power of follow-up letters, when these were employed higher response levels were seen (47% to 84%) then when not employed (13% to 40%).

Blumberg et al (1974) recommended that follow-up letters be sent only when the response to the survey tails off. This can most easily be seen by plotting a graph of the cumulative response against time and taking action when the first plateau is observed. Of the 10 members using follow-ups, this method to decide when to send out reminders was specifically cited by 5 of the members. Amongst the others, most appeared to be following experience rules (eg "its standard to send them out after 10 days"). None of the members sending follow-ups did so before 10 days had elapsed from the initial mailing of the survey, and all had sent their reminders within 21 days of the initial mailing.

Where members had analysed the proportion of replies received after sending reminder letters, at least a third of the total number of replies were received after reminders were sent. Thus emphasising the point earlier made, follow-up letters are a powerful means of increasing response.

When sending out follow-up letters, VonReisen (1979) found that amongst professionals a significantly higher response rate was achieved if a further questionnaire was included with the reminder letter, while amongst consumers Etzel and Walker (1974) found no significant differences in response rates. Amongst the MRS members interviewed in this survey, it was common practice not to send a further questionnaire (6 of the 9 replying). Where extra questionnaires were sent, responses of 65% to 81% were achieved (cf 49% to

79% when not sent). Amongst those using follow-ups, a further self-addressed, pre-paid envelope was only sent to respondents by the minority enclosing an extra questionnaire.

Only two members used two follow-up letters (64% and 71% response). They allowed between 14 to 18 days after mailing the first follow-up before sending the second reminder.

The length of time for "fieldwork" varied from 21 days (79% and 81% response rates) to 57 days (64% response), the average period being 35 days.

Coping with Partially Completed Questionnaires

One of the weaknesses of the postal survey method is that if respondents have only partly completed their questionnaire, without further contacting them their response is effectively lost. Of those members who analysed their last survey regarding partially completed questionnaires, between 70-78% of the replies received were fully completed. One member, who only had 5 questions on his survey, reported that all of the returns were fully completed.

The most popular way of presenting survey results, to take account of the partial replies, was to provide different base sizes for each question (5 respondents). Three members used the same base size for the analysis of each question and recorded the appropriate number of "no answers". Another three members totally ignored any questionnaires which were not fully completed.

Analysis of Early vs Late Respondents

A review by Kanuk and Berenson (1975) shows differences between early and late respondents, however there does not appear to be any generalisations that can be made about such differences. Only three of the members interviewed mentioned that they had undertaken any analysis of differences between early and late respondents. Two had found no significant differences whilst the third member reported that the late respondents were less satisfied with the service being investigated and tended to write in extra comments.

Identifying Respondents

If reminder letters are to be used, some system needs to be developed to record those individuals who have not replied to the questionnaire. Where follow-ups were employed, all members printed individual identifying reference numbers on the questionnaires, while one member printed both a reference number plus the person's name and address.

Whether Last Survey Showed Typical Response

Of the 13 completing this part of the questionnaire, 11 felt there was nothing unusual about the response they had achieved from their last survey. One member, who achieved a response level of 60%, spoke about previous surveys achieving between 20% to 85% response rates. Another member who had achieved a 65% response had previously only achieved a 52% response. No reasons were advanced as to why such differences resulted.

Usage of Postal Surveys

As table 2 shows, most members regularly undertook postal surveys.

Number of studies completed in past 12 months:

None	1
1 - 5	2
6 - 10	4
11 - 20	5
21 - 30	1
30 - 100	1

Table 2: Details of Postal Surveys in Past 12 months

The number of questionnaires sent in the past 12 months by each member varied from 2,400 to 300,000. Only three of the members reported undertaking any methodology

tests on their postal surveys in the past 12 months. Those members doing methodology tests did so on approximately one in every ten surveys.

Conclusions

This survey has shown how members of the Special Interest Group have undertaken postal surveys to achieve response rates of 13% to 84%. It was found that:

- Members rarely sent out advance notification of their survey. There are inconsistent results on the impact of advance notification, but it does appear to accelerate the rate of return.
- All members sent out a covering letter, usually not printed on the same page as the questionnaire. There appears to be no effect on response rates according to where the covering letter is printed.
- The letter headings were generally those of the commercial organisation sponsoring the surveys. Government sponsored letter headings may increase response rates.
- A minority used a personal salutation on the covering letter and it was rare for the salutation to be handwritten. It was also rare for a personal signature on the letter. The majority used personally addressed envelopes. There are equivocal findings about personalisation, but this may be due to a non-holistic approach to personalisation.
- The key points needed in covering letters were identified. Both altruistic and social appeals were commonly adopted in the covering letters.
- It was common practice to use an incentive, frequently enclosing a pen/pencil. Response rates are believed to be increased by incentives, particularly when enclosed with the questionnaire.

- Second class, rather than first class, postage was most frequently used. The class of postage is not thought to influence response rates. Franking appeared the more popular procedure and there is not thought to be any influence from a stamp/franking/postage paid imprint.
- No particular day emerged as the more popular for posting surveys.
- All members enclosed a postage paid self addressed envelope with the questionnaire, with approximately equal proportions using a stamped or business reply paid envelope. The return postage was predominantly second class. There is clear evidence of response rates being increased by the use of pre-paid return envelopes.
- The number of questions on the surveys varied from 5 to 158 and good response levels were obtained even when open-ended questions were used. Questionnaires filled 1-11 sides of paper, with the majority printed on both sides. White paper was predominantly used and coding instructions were frequently printed on the questionnaire. The literature shows that response rates are not depressed when long questionnaires are used and it is important to make the questionnaire look attractive.
- The majority of members sent out follow-up letters, which are a powerful means of increasing response rates. Half the members tracked response levels before sending out reminders, while the rest used experience rules. Only a minority sent out further questionnaires, which are not thought to significantly increase response rates. One follow-up was generally all that was sent.
- Approximately three quarters of the questionnaires returned were fully completed. Only a minority of members ignored partially completed questionnaires.
- It was common practice to print identification numbers on each questionnaire, to facilitate mailing follow-ups.

Recommendations

- (i) Extend the scope of this survey to all members of the Market Research Society, to obtain a much fuller picture of postal survey practice.
- (ii) Either pool or undertake experiments to more clearly identify the effect of various factors thought to have an impact on response rates. A thorough literature review would be helpful in identifying possible effects, but is subject to the limitations of the particular sample used.

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