



SWP 23/88 GETTING THE MOST FROM POSTAL RESEARCH

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INTRODUCTION

Postal research is a particularly useful and important technique for industrial market researchers. After identifying a sample of potential respondents, the researcher is able to send a postal questionnaire with an explanatory letter to key decision makers or influencers. If the technique is properly executed, the market researcher should receive a high response of sufficiently good quality to enable analysis to be confidently undertaken and the results reported to management. There are many instances reported of response rates in excess of 70%, yet there is a misconception that postal research should only be considered in industrial marketing research when an organisation is constrained by financial resources. Visions of poor response rates are conjured up by many market researchers when thinking about postal research and this data collection technique is consequently maligned as a "second division" technique. But, as this paper sets out to show, by appreciating the accumulated wealth of experience available on postal research, and providing the market researcher is then prepared to invest effort in the planning stage, good response rates can be achieved.

WHY UNDERTAKE POSTAL RESEARCH?

Before embarking upon a postal research programme the researcher should be aware not only of the advantages of this data collection technique, but also of the disadvantages. One of the many strengths of this technique is that respondents can complete the questionnaire at their own pace, encouraging a greater chance of a more considered reply to each question. Industrial buyers are able to consult their files to quantify, for example, the degree to which they second source certain materials, rather than making a hasty estimate in front of an interviewer. Within reason, questionnaires are completed when it is most convenient for the respondent, rather than for the interviewer.

When seeking usage information on products employed in disparate industrial sectors which are geographically dispersed, the expense of contacting industrialists can be significantly reduced through postal research. Furthermore, the contacts are all being made simultaneously, reducing any effect from competitors' unforeseen marketing activity. This ability to sample nationally at low contact costs has the attendant advantage of not biasing the results to those industries clustered in a confined geographical area. Groups usually regarded as being difficult to access for personal interviews, eg farmers, can be surveyed more easily with postal techniques. Interviewer bias is negated and with no need to pay interviewers, or their travel costs, postal research is often viewed by market researchers as being cheaper than personal interviews.

LIMITATIONS OF POSTAL RESEARCH

There are limitations associated with a postal survey. With insufficient planning, response rates can be low, introducing the problem of bias (ie would the non-respondents have replied in the same manner as those replying?) There are many cases reported though of diligent planning resulting in response rates over 70%. With the absence of a skilled industrial interviewer, vague replies cannot be probed. There is no guarantee that respondents will not read all of the questions prior to starting the questionnaire. Some questions may be missed by the respondent and some participants may answer questions out of sequence (particularly damaging when assessing buyers spontaneous then prompted attitudes towards different suppliers). When investigating new markets it is difficult to know who to address the questionnaire to and there is a danger of the wrong person completing the questionnaire (eg decision implementer rather than decision maker). In view of these weaknesses, some surveys (eg unearthing buyers motivations

for choosing a particular supplier) are better suited to personal interviews than postal questionnaires because of the nature of the problem.

PLANNING FOR POSTAL RESEARCH

There are several ways that can be used to reduce the non-response problem on postal research, as will now be considered.

(i) Directing the questionnaire to the correct person

It is wise to identify the job title of the most appropriate person in each organisation to be approached, ideally also with their name. Previously developed contact lists held by the sponsoring organisation can be one means of identifying the right person, albeit these lists need to be updated to take account of people moving. If such lists are not available the market researcher is advised to undertake a quick telephone survey, talking directly to the organisations of interest to ascertain the names of the right people. To reinforce the fact that the questionnaire is to be completed by a person with a particular role in the organisation, the questionnaire should, in its early part, open by asking the potential respondent if their job description encompasses a specific role. Time needs to be invested in correctly specifying the respondents' job titles, rather than using too general a job title and having to wait longer for the re-routing process to take place (hopefully!)

(ii) Well designed accompanying letter

With the wide availability of word processing capabilities, today's researcher can more easily produce high print quality, personalised letters, than would have been the case 10 years ago when debate would have ensued about the cost of personalising letters. The issue of costs and time involved in personalising letters is becoming a secondary matter and it is recommended that word processing capabilities be employed to produce well presented letters.

When directing questionnaires to people in large organisations, the immediate advantage of personalising the envelope and letter, by name, is that it stands a greater chance of arriving on the right person's desk. There are equivocal findings about the effect of using "Dear Sir" rather than the person's name, but it would appear that if the letter has the respondent's address on it, has a personal salutation and has a handwritten signature, there may be a small increase in response rates.

The issue of personalising letters is confounded by respondents concern about the confidentiality of information. The experience from other surveys is specific to different types of information, making it difficult to infer any conclusion. However, recognising the importance of operating within the Code of Conduct, respondents should be assured that the information will remain confidential, and this scrupulously ensured. Guaranteeing respondents anonymity needs to be carefully considered. By doing this, not even the researcher knows who has and has not replied and this will cause practical problems when sending a reminder letter - a particularly powerful way of increasing response rates.

The accompanying letter should be brief. It should explain why the survey is being undertaken (where it is thought this might not bias the questions), the benefits that will accrue, why the respondent was contacted and the importance of them completing and returning the questionnaire. Where the questionnaire is short, it is important to make this point in the letter. Also where a lengthy questionnaire has several sections that may not be applicable, this should be mentioned. By stressing the fact that a pre-paid, stamped addressed envelope is enclosed, this further emphasises that there is no cost in returning the reply. A style implying urgency in reply helps, but it is being too forceful to impose a deadline.

(iii) Use of Incentives

There are a variety of incentives that have been employed in industrial postal surveys, the more commonly used ones being pens, money, promise of report, products or services for which the sponsoring organisation is well known, other small gifts, entry into a lottery and money donated to charity. The main aim of the incentive is to increase response rates, but there is a danger that the incentive might offend the potential respondent and hinder, rather than enhance the survey. Results on the effect of an incentive mainly relate to the USA and the evidence indicates that monetary incentives, particularly when enclosed with the letter rather than promised, do increase response rates. The difficulty is deciding what amount to enclose since little has been reported on the relationship between the amount of incentive and response rate. There is evidence that the offer of a copy of the survey results does not effect response rates. A note of appreciation at the end of the letter is to be encouraged.

(iv) Well designed questionnaire

It is important that the appearance of the questionnaire makes it look easy to complete and that it looks well presented. Trying to compress a long questionnaire into a few pages to make it look short can work against the researcher. As there appears to be no difference according to whether single or double sided printing is used, it is worth considering printing on both sides of paper if constrained by costs. There appears to be no advantage from printing on coloured rather than white paper.

While some have reported questionnaires with only a few questions yielding higher response rates, others have reported very good response rates with very long questionnaires. It should be appreciated that the type of respondent and the question topics will influence what is perceived as a long questionnaire, and good questionnaire design skills need to be creatively employed, ensuring that "wouldn't that be nice to know" questions are avoided. While the questionnaire needs to be designed to ensure ease of analysis, the inclusion of instructions for data processing on the questionnaire can confuse respondents and this is often best not printed.

In terms of questionnaire design, instructions should be printed on the questionnaire to facilitate respondents' tasks. To distinguish between instructions and questions, the instructions should be shown in capital letters. The instructions should be easily understood and appear with the appropriate question. It is usual to ask respondents to indicate their reply by them ticking the appropriate boxes.

Unambiguously phrased questions using terminology familiar to respondents should be employed. The early questions should be interesting and easy for respondents to answer. The early question should also be used to ensure that the correct person is completing the questionnaire. As there is a learning process associated with postal research, more difficult questions should appear later in the questionnaire. The majority of the questions should be pre-coded, since postal questionnaires are ideal for these types of questions. If there are a significant number of open-ended questions, the researcher should consider the use of other data collection techniques. In the instance where a long questionnaire is used, it is wise to employ sublettering with question numbers eg Q7(a), Q7(b) etc, to overcome any resistance to seeing for example Q68!

Pre-testing a postal questionnaire is essential since there is no interviewer to clarify ambiguities. Much can be learnt from observing a few people completing postal questionnaire and then encouraging them to explain what they thought each question was asking and whether they encountered any difficulties.

At the end of the questionnaire it is wise to ask respondents to check that they have completed all of their questions and to remind them to return the questionnaire as soon as possible. A message of thanks at the end is to be encouraged.

(v) Postage

Minimal differences have been reported according to whether first or second class postage is used on outgoing mail. Responses to a postal survey are believed to be higher if respondents receive a self addressed envelope with the postage already paid. The experience of others suggests that there is a small improvement in response rates when using a stamp on the reply envelope, rather than a business reply paid envelope. Again there appears to be minimal effect on response rates from first or second class postage on the return envelopes.

(vi) Follow-up letters

The follow-up or reminder letter is regarded as being one of the more powerful means of increasing the survey response rate. One of the better ways of deciding when to send out a follow-up letter is to plot a graph of the cumulative response level against the number of days since the questionnaires were posted. Initially there will be a steep gradient, but over time, depending on the nature of the study, the curve will level off. When this plateau effect has started, the follow-up letters should be sent out. By recording the serial numbers on each questionnaire (provided anonymity was not mentioned in the first letter), a system can be implemented to send follow-up letters only to those who have not yet replied. The reminder letter should briefly summarise the points from the original letter and should emphasise how important it is for the respondent to reply. As some people will unavoidably receive a reminder letter, even though they have just replied, reference should be made to this in the letter. Multiple follow-ups have been shown to further increase response rates, but the most dramatic increase is generally noted with the first follow-up.

THE NON-RESPONSE PROBLEM

As the survey response level increases, so the degree of confidence in the survey results increase, but there remains the doubt about any bias resulting from the non-respondents. While the main section of this paper has focused upon activity to reduce non-response bias, the researcher needs to be aware of this ever present problem. Unless telephone or personal interviews are undertaken with non-respondents, there is little to indicate how the replies from the non-respondent differed from respondents.

CONCLUSION

This paper has presented the advantages and disadvantages of postal research techniques. It has explored various means of increasing the level of response and hence the extent of management's confidence in the survey results. This paper is not exhorting industrial market researchers to rely solely on this data collection technique, but providing the researcher believes a postal survey will satisfy his information needs, it has shown how to achieve the most from the market research budget.