The Effects of Cover Letter Format and Appeal on Mail Survey Response Patterns

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Abstract

Low response rates remain the primary obstacle to the cost effective use mail surveys in market research. This study examines the efficacy of two cost-free techniques for improving the efficiency of this methodology. The effects of three different appeal strategies and cover letter formats were examined in 3 X 3 factorial design. The egoistic appeal produced higher response rates than either "help-the-sponsor" or social utility appeals. This effect was most pronounced when the appeal was presented in the post script of the cover letter. Consistent with the results of a previous study, a control group which received no appeal manipulation yielded the highest response rate. Psychological reactance and self-perception theory were used to account for these results.

Introduction

One of the most frequently used data collection techniques is the mail questionnaire or survey. Surveys are widely regarded as a cost effective means of gathering information from diverse populations and markets in a relatively unobtrusive manner. Of the three primary survey media--mail, telephone and in-person techniques--mail surveys have traditionally been the least expensive. As printing, postage and follow-up costs have steadily increased in recent years, however, the cost effectiveness of this technique has been substantially reduced.

Despite the popularity of mail surveys in public opinion and market research, there are several drawbacks involved in the application of this methodology. The most serious of these is generally regarded to be low response rates. Response rates as low as 5 to 10 percent are not uncommon in research settings and rates higher than 40 percent are rare. Low response rates reduce the cost effectiveness of mail surveys and threaten the statistical representativeness of the sample. Recently, researchers have independently considered a number of other factors which are related to sample representativeness, includ-

ing response completeness and item omission (11), response speed (13), and response quality (17). This study will focus on the initial area of concern to researchers and practitioners, low response rates, and examine the efficacy of several cost-free techniques to increase mail survey response rates.

Using experimental, quasi-experimental and descriptive designs, a number of studies have explored the effectiveness of various techniques in increasing mail survey response rates. There have been several major reviews of empirical studies relating to response rates. These reviews have covered the disciplines of statistics (24), marketing (18, 28), public opinion research (19), and management (13). The independent variables included in these studies have explored a wide variety of strategies and techniques which were expected to improve response rates. These dimensions have included: variations in questionnaire color; layout; format and length; the wording of the cover letter; personalization of the salutation or signature; the manipulation of survey sponsorship; reinforcing the assurance of anonymity; the inclusion of return deadline dat-

es; the provision of return envelopes and postage; the pre-notification of respondents; sending survey recipients follow-up reminders; and, the inclusion of monetary incentives or other premiums.

In spite of extensive research on the impact of the above factors on response rates in mail surveys, a clear-cut consensus regarding the effects of these variables has not yet been reached (11). The only areas of agreement to date appear to be the positive effect of monetary incentives and survey follow-up techniques. Although providing preliminary notification in advance of the survey mailing may also produce higher response rates (20, 27), survey follow-up techniques are regarded as a better investment (18, 16, 4). The cost effectiveness of mail surveys begins to diminish, however, when these types of costly devices are employed to overcome high non-response rates. Of greater value to researchers would be the identification of cost-free techniques which improve response rates without increasing the cost of survey administration.

Problem Definition

One technique which may effectively improve the cost efficiency of survey administration utilizes the cover letter which precedes the questionnaire or survey instrument. The cover letter, part of the "core package" of the survey, is the first page which recipients are exposed to after opening the envelope. Unfortunately, the impact on response rates of the actual content and order of presentation within cover letters has received scant experimental attention (18). One source of variation within the cover letter which has been the focus of limited study is the nature of the appeal used to persuade recipients to complete and return the questionnaire.

Traditionally, these appeals have been of three different types: social utility appeal is one which seeks to emphasize the importance of completing the survey to the general population of which the respondent is a member. Conversely, an egoistic appeal stresses the personal relevance or importance of the survey to the recipient. A help-the-sponsor appeal is one which encourages a subject to complete the questionnaire and return it out of concern for the sender.

In a brief but thorough review of past studies

which employed these types of appeals, Childers, Pride and Ferrell (10) concluded that past research in this area has produced both confusing and conflicting results. One of the problems which these authors confronted in attempting to compare the results obtained in a number of different experiments is that researchers have not employed standardized manipulations of the appeals across studies. This necessarily confounds any attempt to arrive at a valid assessment of the value of these appeals in increasing response rates. In an effort to facilitate comparability, Childers et al. chose to formulate their appeals to correspond as closely as possible with those employed in a previous study by Houston and Nevin (14).

Although Childers, Pride and Ferrell replicated the appeal manipulations used by Houston and Nevin, there are three important dimensions on which the two studies differ: sponsorship, format and populations surveyed. The Houston and Nevin experiment sought to examine response rate differences obtained when surveys were presented as being sponsored by either a university or commercial establishment. Their subjects were randomly chosen household residents. In contrast, Childers et al. used only one sponsor (a research firm) while surveying two distinctly different populations: academicians and business practitioners. In addition, the latter study incorporated a format manipulation to test the effect of handwritten versus typewritten postscripts on response rates.

A comparison of the results from these two studies fails to reveal any clear conclusions regarding the effectiveness of appeal types. Houston and Nevin found that the social utility appeal yielded the highest rate (47%) followed by help-the-sponsor (45%) and the egoistic (36%) appeals. A cover letter which combined all three appeal strategies in a single letter yielded a 42% rate of return. The Childers et al. study yielded opposite findings. The egoistic appeal yielded the highest response rate (39%) followed by the help-the-sponsor appeal (38%) and then the social utility treatment condition (28%). The pairwise comparisons of treatment level means show that Houston and Nevin obtained higher response rates for the social utility and help-the-sponsor appeals than for the egoistic treatment condition ($<.05$). Conversely, Childers et al. found that the egoistic and help-the-sponsor appeals outper-

formed the social utility appeal ($p < .05$).

The Childers, Pride and Ferrell study also included a "no appeal" control group which received only a simple request to return the survey. Surprisingly, the control condition produced the highest response rate observed in the study (44%). Although not discussed in their study, psychological reactance is one possible explanation for the superiority of the "no appeal" group. According to Brehm's theory of reactance (5, 6), individuals may react adversely to attempts to limit their freedom of thought and action. In the control group condition, there is no attempt at social influence. Thus, there is no threat to the subjects' freedom, which enables them to respond more positively to the request for assistance.

As a consequence of the inconsistent findings obtained in the two earlier studies, the current research attempted a systematic replication of the Houston and Nevin (14) and Childers, Pride and Ferrell (10) studies. In addition to the three appeals described above, a control group was used to examine the effect of no appeal. Also, the placement of the appeal within the cover letter was varied. It was placed either in a postscript, in the final paragraph, or integrated throughout the letter. The increasing popularity of postscripts as a direct mail technique prompted its use, with the prediction that the post-scripted appeal would produce the highest response rates. In this format alone, respondents can skip immediately to the postscript and still receive the central message of the sponsor, as well as be exposed to the appeal that was being used. In the Childers et al. study the postscript was used with all experimental groups but was not used with the no appeal control group. Since the control group yielded the highest response rates, the authors concluded that "the use of appeals presented as postscripts does not improve survey response" and they recommended that researchers avoid the use of post-scripted appeals (10). The conventional wisdom and predominant practices of direct marketers, however, do not support this finding (15).

Methodology

The research study required a 3 x 3 between-subjects factorial design. One independent variable was type of appeal. The three levels of this

factor were social utility, help-the-sponsor, and egoistic. The wording for the help-the-sponsor appeal was: "WE NEED YOUR ASSISTANCE. Your attitudes and opinions are very important to the successful completion of this study. We truly appreciate your cooperation." The wording used for social utility was: "YOUR ASSISTANCE IS NEEDED. Your attitudes can contribute to understanding how others in your position can be better served in the future. Your cooperation is truly appreciated." The wording for the egoistic appeal was: "YOUR OPINIONS ARE IMPORTANT. It is important for YOU to express your opinions and ideas so that we can endeavor to better meet YOUR needs in the future. Thanks for expressing your opinions." The wording of all three appeals was comparable to that used in the two earlier studies.

The second independent variable used was type of format. The three levels were integrated, final paragraph, and postscript. The integrated format placed the first sentence of the appeal at the beginning of the letter, second sentence in the middle of the request, and the third sentence at the end of the letter. The final paragraph format placed the entire appeal in a final paragraph before the close of the letter. The postscript format placed the entire appeal in a P.S. following the close of the letter. In addition to the nine experimental conditions, there was a control group that received a simple request to complete the survey. The control group treatment consisted of those elements common to all of the experimental treatments. The request described the purpose of the survey and asked the respondent to fill it out and return it. As suggested earlier, the purpose of the control group was to help assess the magnitude and direction of the incremental effects realized from the experimental treatments.

The researchers were fortunate in being able to execute this study in conjunction with a survey conducted at a large midwestern university. The survey was sent to a sample of 10,297 students and examined respondents' attitudes about the quality of student life. Due to administrative constraints, the exact number of surveys sent to the different conditions varied slightly, but it was never less than 951 and never more than 1,183, averaging to approximately one thousand subjects per treatment. No follow-up letters were sent but a deadline date was given.

To pre-test whether the appeals conveyed the desired meaning, a manipulation check was performed. Houston and Nevin (14) did not undertake any pretest measures. Childers, Pride and Ferrell (10) did utilize a simple pre-test methodology and it was decided to adopt those same procedures for this study. Seventy-five graduate students were used to judge and categorize the appeals within the context of the cover letters. Of 25 students, 22 were able to correctly classify the three different appeals used within the integrated format. All 25 students were able to correctly classify the appeals used within the final paragraph format. When the postscript format was presented, 24 of 25 judges successfully categorized the appeal types. The results support the contention that the appeals were worded correctly. The minimum correct identification of the appeals was 83% in the Childers et al. study and 88% in the current research.

Data were analyzed by analysis of variance. The vast majority of studies examined in the area of response rates used analysis of variance as the statistical technique. In this case, the dependent variable is whether the subject responded ($X = 1$) or not ($X = 0$). The independent variables are type of appeal and type of format. Both studies on which the current research is based used analysis of variance. How-

ever, data were also analyzed by means of Z-tests for proportions. This procedure may be preferable to analysis of variance since the analysis of nominal level and proportional data is not normally considered an ANOVA task (9,22). Further, since the cell sizes in this experiment were not exactly equal, analysis of variance is not an ideal procedure.

Results

Overall, the response rate for the surveyed population was 21 percent. Within the nine experimental cells, the response rate ranged from a low of 15 percent for the social utility appeal in the final paragraph format to a high of 28 percent for the egoistic appeal presented in the postscript format. The response rate of 26 percent for the control group exceeded the highest response rate for any overall format or appeal class. Response rates for each cell and for each independent variable are shown in Table 1.

Results for the analysis of variance are shown in Table 2. Cover letter format, appeal type and their interaction accounted for 8.7% of the variation in response rates (Omega squared = .087). There was a significant main effect for type of appeal. Examining Table 1, it can be seen that at the very least, the social utility appeal yielded

TABLE 1.
RESPONSE RATES

APPEAL TYPE	Integrated Format	Final Paragraph Format	Postscript Format	Overall Totals
	$\frac{\# \text{ Returned}}{\# \text{ Sent}}$ (%)	$\frac{\# \text{ Returned}}{\# \text{ Sent}}$ (%)	$\frac{\# \text{ Returned}}{\# \text{ Sent}}$ (%)	$\frac{\# \text{ Returned}}{\# \text{ Sent}}$ (%)
Social Utility	$\frac{222}{1050}$ (21.1%)	$\frac{145}{954}$ (15.2%)	$\frac{199}{1137}$ (17.5%)	$\frac{566}{3141}$ (18.0%)
Help-the-Sponsor	$\frac{233}{1024}$ (22.8%)	$\frac{190}{968}$ (19.6%)	$\frac{222}{1051}$ (21.1%)	$\frac{645}{3043}$ (21.2%)
Egoistic	$\frac{277}{1183}$ (23.4%)	$\frac{158}{958}$ (16.5%)	$\frac{291}{1021}$ (28.5%)	$\frac{726}{3162}$ (23.0%)
Overall Totals	$\frac{732}{3257}$ (22.5%)	$\frac{493}{2880}$ (17.1%)	$\frac{712}{3209}$ (22.2%)	$\frac{1937}{9346}$ (20.7%)

Note. Survey totals (including the control and all experimental groups): 2,182 were returned out of a total sample of 10,297 for a response rate of 21.2 percent. The control group had a return rate of 25.8 percent, with 245 returns from a sample of 951.

a significantly lower response rate than the egoistic appeal. There was also a significant main effect for type of format. The final paragraph format yielded a significantly lower response rate than either the integrated format or the postscript format. There was also a significant interaction effect between appeal and format. The cell means in Table 1 illustrate the influences of the egoistic appeal on response rates. In the integrated format, returns were roughly the same for all three types of appeal. In the final paragraph format, the rate of return showed an increase from social utility to help-the-sponsor, but then decreased for egoistic. For the postscript format, rates increased somewhat from social utility to help-the-sponsor, but then yielded the highest response rate in the study for the egoistic appeal. Figure 1 depicts this interaction effect graphically.

TABLE 2.
SUMMARY OF ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

Source of Variation	Sum of Squares	Degrees of Freedom	Mean Square	F	Significance (F)
Main Effects					
Appeal	218.70	2	109.35	224.08	.005
Format	127.28	2	63.64	130.41	.01
Interaction Effects					
Appeal x Format	384.16	4	96.04	196.80	.01
Error	4392.76	9000	.49		

FIGURE 1.
RESPONSE RATES FOR TYPE OF APPEAL AND FORMAT CONDITIONS

Multiple pair-wise comparisons were performed using Z-tests for proportions. Differences in mean response rates for appeal type and format are shown in Table 3. The differences observed between many pairs were statistically significant. The control group produced higher rates of response than either the social utility or the help-the-sponsor appeal. Response rates for the control group also exceeded those observed for the integrated format. Comparing the appeal treatments, social utility yielded significantly lower rates of return than either the help-the-sponsor or egoistic appeals. Within the format treatments, the final paragraph strategy yielded significantly lower returns than either the integrated or postscript formats.

Discussion

The results of this study address several major issues within the area of response rates to mail questionnaires. One purpose of the research had been to untangle the results of two prior studies that had used essentially identical methodology to that used in the present investigation. Houston and Nevin (14) found that a social utility appeal yielded higher returns than help-the-sponsor, and both were significantly higher than ego-

istic. Childers, Pride and Ferrell (10) found that both egoistic and help-the-sponsor appeals yielded better returns than social utility, the opposite of the earlier study. It was found here that egoistic and help-the-sponsor appeals yielded better returns than social utility, a replication of the Childers et al. finding.

A second finding that pertains to the replication effort of the study is the comparison between experimental and control groups. Although Houston and Nevin had not used a control group, Childers and his colleagues did. They found that the highest response rates were observed in their no appeal group. In this study as well, the control group outperformed the experimental groups. The best overall returns were from that group, although some individual cells yielded higher rates. Consequently, this study replicated the superior performance of the control group as well. Two alternative perspectives from social psychology may account for this effect. For the control group effect replicated here, psychological reactance theory may partially explain the findings. This theory, developed by Brehm and his associates (5, 7) states that subjects may react adversely to perceived attempts to limit their freedom of thought and

TABLE 3.
RESULTS OF Z-TESTS FOR PROPORTIONS ON DIFFERENCES IN RESPONSE RATES

Comparison	Z-Value
By Appeal Type	
Social Utility Appeal (18.0%) vs. Control (25.8%)	-4.91 ^a
Help-the-Sponsor Appeal (21.2%) vs. Control (25.8%)	-2.85 ^b
Egoistic Appeal (23.0%) vs. Control (25.8%)	-1.75
Social Utility Appeal (18.0%) vs. Help-the-Sponsor Appeal (21.2%)	-3.15 ^b
Social Utility Appeal (18.0%) vs. Egoistic Appeal (23.0%)	-4.87 ^a
Help-the-Sponsor Appeal (21.2%) vs. Egoistic Appeal (23.0%)	-1.67
By Format Type	
Integrated Format (22.5%) vs. Control (25.8%)	-2.06
Final Paragraph Format (17.1%) vs. Control (25.8%)	-5.46 ^a
Postscript Format (22.2%) vs. Control (25.8%)	-2.24
Integrated Format (22.5%) vs. Final Paragraph Format (17.1%)	5.28 ^a
Integrated Format (22.5%) vs. Postscript Format (22.2%)	0.27
Final Paragraph Format (17.1%) vs. Postscript Format (22.2%)	-5.00 ^a

Note. All experimental groups (20.7%) vs. Control group (25.8%) yielded a Z-value of -3.40^a.

^a_p < .001.

^b_p < .01.

action. Within a number of different contexts, Brehm found that if an attempt at social influence threatens an individual's freedom, there is a resulting tendency to reject the influence (6, 8). Within the mail survey setting itself, it has been similarly found that greater personalization of requests often has a detrimental effect on response rates (1, 13). It has been suggested that subjects may regard the personalization of these solicitations as impinging upon their freedom to refuse (21). Thus, the appeals used in this and other similar survey experiments may be perceived by respondents as constituting a limit to their freedom of choice.

Related to the above are the implications of self-perception theory. According to this perspective, developed by Bem and colleagues (2, 3), people make attributions about the intentions of others and about their own behavior by observing how they themselves respond in a situation. In the experimental (non-control) groups used here, subjects could less easily attribute their response to their attitudes, since intent was manipulated by the appeals incorporated in the cover letter. That is, the cover letter provided a rationale or motivation for the recipient. But in the control group, subjects were free to make their own attributions about the sender's intent and about their own behavior. In this group, behavior could not be easily attributed to external constraints. For these respondents, pre-existing attitudes were the sole source of motivation to comply with the sender's request. Attempting to manipulate the tendency to respond through various appeals provided an unnecessary inducement which may have depressed response rates. Within this context, the effect of an appeal may boomerang and reduce the tendency to comply unless it corresponds to the subject's intrinsic motivations. Consequently, the exclusion of any effort to manipulate or motivate survey recipients may produce higher rates of response and yield a more accurate, less biased assessment of individuals' true attitudes.

Comparing the three types of experimental appeals used in the study, it is apparent that the egoistic appeal was the most effective of the three. It was only marginally less effective than the control group, but was marginally more effective than the help-the-sponsor request and significantly more effective than the social utility appeal. To the researchers, it initially appeared

that the egoistic appeal was the most manipulative and therefore would show the lowest rate of return. However, it may be that the subject matter of the survey (quality of student life) influenced the effectiveness of the egoistic appeal. Since the content of the survey pertained directly to the respondents' situation, the egoistic appeal may have been regarded as credible and consistent with students' desires to promote their own welfare. In this context, the egoistic appeal may have most closely corresponded to the subjects' intrinsic motivations and, therefore was not regarded as manipulative.

A second major area of investigation within this study was the use of three different formats within each of the three appeal manipulations. The effectiveness of each appeal type was related to where the appeals were placed within the survey. In the Childers et al. study, the postscript format did not perform well. However, the postscript format was confounded with the type of appeal, since the control group did not receive a post-scripted letter. In the current research, integrated and postscript formats performed equally well, whereas the final paragraph format was ineffective by comparison. In terms of the effect of format for different appeals, the integrated format yielded consistently lower returns. But the interaction of the postscript format with appeal type produced more erratic results. There was an 11 percent difference between the response rate for the social utility appeal (17.5%) and the egoistic appeal (28.5%, $p < .01$) in this format.

It is not clear why these results were obtained. In addition to being very much in use currently, the postscript has been highly recommended by practitioners. *Communication Briefings*, a periodical for fund-raisers and public relations experts, strongly endorses the use of the postscript format in direct marketing solicitations. As stated in a recent issue, "If you use a P.S. in a promotional letter (and you should) remember that many prospects will read the P.S. before the rest of the letter. So, design the P.S. to entice the prospect into the letter" (15). Similarly, other practitioners have also advocated the inclusion of a motivational appeal in the postscript of a cover letter as an effective part of direct mail solicitations (26).

In an effort to uncover an explanation for the

response rates obtained, a series of post-hoc interviews with a random sample of 200 subjects was carried out. All had received the survey, but not all had returned it. Almost 60 percent of those interviewed exhibited a set predisposition to respond. Of this total, 10 percent indicated that they always or almost always return surveys no matter what the content. The remaining 50 percent claimed they never return surveys, again regardless of content. Of those who had responded to the survey, some reasons given were unclassifiable. However, 14 percent said that the sponsorship of the study by the university had a positive effect on their decision to complete it (help-the-sponsor). Another 8 percent said that the content of the survey was interesting enough to warrant their filling it out (egoistic). Another 8 percent stated that the personal importance of the issue prompted them to respond, including a group who felt their responses would make a difference (egoistic).

In considering these responses, it appears that the appeals used were able to reach a portion of the total sample. In principle, the choice of persuasive appeals should be contingent upon the characteristics of the target audience to which the message is directed. With respect to the

population surveyed in this study, it appears that the egoistic appeal was the most appropriate. An egoistic appeal may constitute a better fit with the motivation of university students than with other groups, however. Consequently, pre-testing alternative appeals may be required to identify those which best match the motivations of the target population.

Future research should be directed towards gaining greater insight into those factors which contributed to the effectiveness of the "no appeal" treatments in this and the Childers et al. studies. It may be that for those populations which have been inundated with requests for survey participation and other mail solicitations the best appeal is no appeal. A simple request for help may be more effective than more manipulative requests. In addition, the source of the apparent advantage of the postscript format needs to be more fully understood. The use of postscripts may become increasingly less effective as they grow in popularity. Continued investigations of the effectiveness of cost-free techniques to increase response rates is of critical importance if mail surveys are to remain cost effective market research tools.

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