RESPONSE PRESSURE AND UNINFORMED RESPONSES TO FACTUAL SURVEY QUESTIONS

Kenneth C. Schneider, Marketing, St. Cloud State University

James C. Johnson, Marketing, St. Cloud State University

Abstract

This article examines the impact of follow-up techniques (designed to increase the survey response rate) on uninformed responses to factual survey questions. Such questions of fact can be used as filters to measure a respondent's base of information, knowledge or experience on a topic prior to measuring his/her opinions on that topic, but only if uninformed responses are less likely to be given to the factual filter questions than to the opinion/attitude questions. Previous research suggests that response pressure (including follow-up contact) tends to exacerbate the uninformed response rate to opinion or attitude questions. However, the research reported here suggests that is not so with factual questions; follow-up contact does not result in increased levels of uninformed response to questions of fact.

Seventy percent of a sample offered substantive opinions when asked about the fictitious "Metallic Metals Act" in the earliest known study of uninformed responses (Gill 1947), though specifics concerning the population sampled and the sample size were not disclosed. The existence of uninformed responses, or the tendency of respondents to answer survey questions when they lack sufficient knowledge of the issue to provide an informed response, was verified by Ferber (1956) in a survey of residents of an Illinois community. In that study, substantial percentages of those surveyed offered opinions on a variety of public policy issues even though, as discovered through factual questions posed later, many were uninformed about the issues in question. (The percentage of uninformed respondents in the study who nonetheless offered an opinion varied from a low of 14.1% for a question on fair trade laws to a high of 82.7% for a question on guaranteed annual wages.)

received increased attention in the early 1980's with the publication of three mutually supportive studies. Schuman and Presser (1980), reporting on two separate national phone surveys, found that five to ten percent of those surveyed about their opinions on real, but highly obscure, federal bills, offered substantive opinions even when a "don't know" option was provided. When no such option was provided, the percentage increased to between twenty-five and thirty percent. Bishop, et. al. (1980) reported similar results in response to a question seeking opinions on the fictitious "1975 Public Affairs Act." Finally, Hawkins and Coney (1981) reported that the phenomenon of uninformed response occurs in mailed surveys as well, though the differential in substantive responses to a fictitious issue (in this case, the "National Bureau of Consumer Complaints") when a "don't know" option is versus is not provided was less than reported in the previous studies involving phone surveys.

The issue of uninformed responses

The Hawkins and Coney study is

particularly intriguing since it raised a disturbing question about the relationship between uninformed response and various techniques commonly used to increase the surveyed response rate, as follows:

... one might logically assume that variables which have been found to increase the response rate of a questionnaire will also increase the percentage of uninformed responses. That is, techniques which increase a respondent's motivation to return a questionnaire may also encourage "guessing" at answers about which the respondent is uninformed (Hawkins and Coney 1981, p. 371).

Hawkins and Coney then proceed to discuss how interest in the topic, monetary and other physical inducements, social pressure (i.e., the presence of an interviewer), appeals to complete the questionnaire and follow-up contacts increase the response rate and, by implication, exacerbate the problem of uninformed response. If true, the questions raised by Hawkins and Coney pose a serious problem for survey researchers. Attempts to increase the response rate may do as much (perhaps even more) harm, by increasing the rate of uninformed response, as good, by increasing the precision of the reported survey results.

Indeed, that very issue was addressed in at least one recent publication. Using a sample of 800 supermarket managers, Schneider (1985) found that the uninformed response rate increased significantly when pressure to respond was exerted on respondents even when a "don't know" option was present, but only for opinion questions. It did not increase for factual questions. The distinction between questions of opinion and questions of fact is not a trivial one. A potential technique for identifying uninformed responses to opinion or attitude questions is through the use of one or more filter questions--usually questions of fact, with just one

"correct" answer -- designed to measure whether or not the respondent is informed on any given issue. That technique, of course, is much more reliable if respondents are less likely to "guess at" answers to the questions of fact than to the questions of opinion. In addition, researchers can then make use of various methods to increase the response rate with some assurance that those methods will not affect the rate of uninformed response to the filter questions which, in turn, can then be used to identify uninformed responses to the opinion questions.

Thus, it would be valuable to further investigate the relationship between response pressure and the rate of uninformed responses to factually-based questions. Drawing on the previously cited research (Schneider 1985), the appropriate hypothesis is:

H1: Exerting pressure on respondents--to return a questionnaire (or otherwise participate in a survey) will NOT increase the uninformed response rate for questions of fact.

SOURCES OF DATA

By re-analyzing the results of a recent study, additional light can be shed on the relationship between uninformed response and a variable known to increase the survey response rate; follow-up contact (Kanuk and Berenson 1975). That study was originally designed to compare understanding of various provisions of the Robinson-Patman Act across four populations: marketing vice-presidents (MKT V-P), corporate legal counsels (LAWYER), retail merchandise managers (MDSE MGR) and marketing professors (EDUCATOR). National probability samples of size 450 were selected from each population. Using a mailed questionnaire, respondents were asked to indicate whether each of eight statements about the Act was true or false.

Two weeks after the original questionnaires were mailed, each respondent was sent a follow-up letter and a second copy of the questionnaire. The cover letter thanked those (unknown) respondents who had already returned the questionnaire and requested, through an altruistic appeal, that those who had not yet returned it please do so as soon as possible. Thus, two waves of questionnaires were ultimately received; those who responded to the original request (Wave 1) and those who responded only after receiving the follow-up letter (Wave 2). Response rates, by wave, for the four populations were as follows:

Population	<u>Percent Returned</u>		
	<u>Wave 1</u>	<u>Wave 2</u>	<u>Total</u>
MKT V-P	24.9%	7.3%	32.2%
LAWYER	24.2%	6.9%	31.1%
MDSE MGR	17.6%	5.8%	23.4%
EDUCATOR	27.1%	10.9%	38.0%

Regarding the relationship between follow-up contact and the rate of uninformed responses, Hawkins and Coney (1981, p. 371) remark, "By 'pressing' sample members to respond, follow-up contacts may also encourage uninformed responses." In the context of this study, Wave 1 responses are classified as "low pressure" and Wave 2 responses as "moderate pressure." (It should be noted that since the original study was not specifically designed to measure uninformed response, respondents were not preassigned to one of these two conditions. Hence, the variable "response pressure" is viewed as a classification variable rather than an experimental variable.)

Uninformed response was operationally defined as the number of incorrect responses (to the eight true-false statements about the Robinson-Patman Act) given without supporting explanation or interpretation. "No responses" as well as incorrect answers accompanied by supporting explanations (which, incidentally,

were not explicitly requested) were NOT counted as incorrect. Also, since a "don't know" option was not specifically stated in the questionnaire, "no responses" consisted of just those who chose not to answer a particular question.

(The definition of uninformed response used here is considerably different than that utilized in previous investigations, all of which sought answers to nonexistent -- or highly obscure -- issues. The questions in this study were all questions of fact concerning a very real issue; the Robinson-Patman Act. As such, they are questions that might well have been used in another context as filter questions to measure knowledge of or familiarity with the Act prior to seeking opinions concerning, perhaps, whether or not the Act should be left alone, amended or repealed. Also, this measure of uninformed response likely understated the real extent of "guessing" by about fifty percent since half of the "guesses" would have been correct through sheer luck.)

Given this reasoning, the preceding hypothesis specifying no relationship between response pressure and uninformed responses to questions of fact can be stated operationally as follows:

H1: Respondents who respond only after moderate pressure is exerted (i.e., after follow-up contact) are NO MORE likely to provide uninformed responses (i.e., "guess" at answers, measured as the number of incorrect responses) to questions of fact (i.e., true/false statement about the Robinson-Patman Act) than are respondents who respond under low pressure (i.e., return the initial questionnaire).

BASIC FINDINGS

The mean number of incorrect responses by level of response pressure for the four respective samples were as follows:

Mean Number of
Incorrect Responses

<u>Population</u>	<u>Low Pressure</u>	<u>Moderate Pressure</u>	<u>t*</u>	<u>Significance Level</u>
MKT V-P	1.95	1.91	-.138	NS
LAWYER	1.12	1.39	.855	NS
MDSE MGR	2.80	3.04	.895	NS
EDUCATOR	1.16	1.53	1.740	<.10

Exerting response pressure in the form of a follow-up contact significantly increased the rate of uninformed response for just one of these four populations (i.e., EDUCATOR), and then only at the ten percent level of significance. For the other three populations (i.e., MKT V-P, LAWYER and MDSE MGR), follow-up contact did not significantly affect the uninformed response rate. (Indeed, for marketing vice-presidents, follow-up contact actually decreased -- but not significantly -- uninformed responses.)

On balance, then, these results support H1, that there is not a relationship between response pressure and uninformed responses to questions of fact, and reconfirm the earlier findings by Schneider (1985).

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Based on the analysis of these data, it appears that, unlike previous research showing a link between response pressure and uninformed responses to opinion questions, response pressure -- at least the moderate pressure of follow-up contact -- does not appreciably increase the uninformed response rate to questions of fact. Of course, this was a rather specialized survey dealing with four rather specialized populations. Thus, it would certainly be warranted to investigate the extent to which these findings can be generalized to other topic areas and/or other populations, especially in consumer markets. In addition, the pres-

sure to respond used here was only a moderate one. It would be interesting to examine whether these results hold under more substantial levels of inducement; for example, monetary rewards, in-person interview settings or the arousal of "guilt" feelings.

In the meantime, it seems that marketing researchers can make use of factually-based questions as filters to measure respondents' level of knowledge or experience with issues relevant to the particular survey without great concern that techniques designed to increase the response rate to the survey will also result in significantly more uninformed responses to those questions of fact than would otherwise have occurred. Responses to the questions of fact can then be utilized to identify informed versus uninformed respondents prior to analyzing questions of opinion regarding the same issue, for which the uninformed response rate is more susceptible to response pressure.

Finally, it would seem especially important that marketing researchers conducting commercial research become more sensitive to the issue of uninformed responses. In such research, the appropriate communications or other marketing strategy often depends on whether consumer attitudes are informed or uninformed. To counter negative attitudes toward a product, service or company which are informed dictates the use of a strategy designed to change attitudes. Conversely, to counter negative attitudes which are uninformed requires a strategy based on

educating consumers. Although researchers have developed sophisticated techniques to measure the direction and intensity of a respondent's attitude, much remains to be done in devising ways to measure whether or not that attitude is informed or uninformed.

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