

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

THE BEHAVIOUR OF MAIL SURVEY NON-RESPONDENTS

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Business Studies in Marketing at
Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Anna Jeanette Finn

2004

ABSTRACT

Over the past fifty years, researchers have become increasingly concerned with declining response rates to mail surveys. Previous attempts to increase response rates have focused on encouraging people to respond to a survey without necessarily determining why some have not responded. As a result, relatively little is known about the process of mail survey non-response. It has been suggested that by examining mail survey non-respondent behaviour and the reasons for it, future research can focus on factors with the greatest potential to increase response rates.

To test this proposition, the non-respondents of three separate mail surveys were followed-up. Each non-respondent was asked at which point non-response occurred and the reasons for their non-response. Some non-respondents were also asked how they could be influenced to become respondents.

A key finding was the large number of unreturned 'gone, no address' (GNA) survey packages. In the three surveys studied, an average six percent of packages neither reached their intended recipient, nor were 'returned to sender'. This suggests that conventional mail survey response rate calculations may underestimate actual response rates. A response rate formula that incorporates an allowance for unreturned GNAs would acknowledge this. Ideally, however, researchers would obtain the most recent sampling frame possible. But when this is not practical, they should be prepared to increase initial sample sizes to allow for unreturned GNAs.

In the three surveys studied, the most common stage for non-respondents to withdraw from the survey response process was once they had opened the survey package, but not started the questionnaire. The next most common source of non-response was potential respondents who began the questionnaire, but did not finish or return it. Lack of time was the reason most often given for not responding, and future research needs to investigate ways of reducing the perceived burden of mail surveys. Whether this could be achieved by reducing the questionnaire length, or by manipulating the visual cues and graphic paralanguage of the survey package, requires further investigation.

Other factors that may increase the probability of non-respondents participating in a survey include the survey topic and sponsor. Unfortunately, these aspects of a survey cannot easily be manipulated. Non-respondents are most likely to respond to local/social or politically-based surveys and least likely to respond to topics of a commercial nature. This suggests commercial or personal topics should, if possible, be nested amongst local/social or politically-based questions in a survey. Non-respondents are least likely to respond to surveys conducted by private research companies. If these companies can find a co-sponsor, approved by a respected organisation relevant to the study, this could help to increase their mail survey response rates.

Several researchers have suggested that attitudes to surveys, in particular, negative attitudes, affect the response to individual surveys. However, this suggestion was not supported in the research reported here. Only a small proportion of non-respondents studied were seriously concerned with issues of privacy and confidentiality. Few non-respondents felt over-surveyed, despite receiving on average five survey requests every six months. The only negative attitudes detected were that surveys often took longer than claimed, and that some mail surveys involved deception. While such perceptions cannot be changed quickly, it is possible for researchers to include honest time estimates in covering letters and to do their best to discourage sugging (selling under the guise of research).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisor Phil Gendall; not only for all his guidance, patience, and support this year, but for the opportunities he has given me.

I would also like to thank my advisor Janet Hoek for allowing access to her articulate writing, perceptive thinking, and superb vocabulary.

I would again like to thank Phil Gendall, and Janet Hoek and also Justin Ward for allowing me to conduct this study in conjunction with their research projects.

A huge thank you to all the interviewers who helped me track down survey non-respondents throughout Palmerston North and the rest of the country – a task I could not have completed alone.

Also, thanks to my fellow postgraduate students and staff within the Department of Marketing for their advice, assistance and laughs during the year.

As always, thank you to my parents; Lyn and Murray Finn, who, despite their long distance, have continued to supported me - even if they weren't interested in proof-reading this time around!

Finally, if it wasn't for the sense of humour and patience of Kane Hopkins, I would have found it difficult to persevere with this thesis. His unrelenting optimism made it difficult for me not to go back into the study at night, and I appreciate the help he has given me.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures.....	viii
1 INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Trends in Mail Survey Response Rates.....	1
1.3 The Problem of Survey Non-Response	3
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	7
2.1 Introduction	7
2.2 Determinants of Mail Survey Response	7
2.3 Underlying Psychological Theories of Survey Response.....	12
2.4 Theories of Behaviour Modification	20
2.5 Models and Conceptualisations of Survey Response Behaviour	23
2.6 Studies of Mail Survey Respondent Behaviour.....	34
2.7 Summary.....	37
2.8 Objectives	38
3 METHODOLOGY	39
3.1 Introduction	39
3.2 Survey One: Roles of Men and Women in Society.....	39
3.3 Survey Two: National Identity	43
3.4 Survey Three: Advertising Regulation and Consumers	45
4 RESULTS	47
4.1 Introduction	47
4.2 Levels of Non-response	47
4.3 Reasons for Non-response	51
4.4 Reactions to Aspects of a Mail Survey.....	57

5	DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	74
5.1	Introduction	74
5.2	Levels of Survey Response.....	75
5.3	Reasons for Non-response	78
5.4	Reactions to Aspects of a Mail Survey.....	82
5.5	Strengths and Limitations	88
6	REFERENCES	90
7	BIBLIOGRAPHY	98
8	APPENDICES	99
	Appendix A.....	100
	Appendix B.....	107
	Appendix C.....	116
	Appendix D.....	118
	Appendix E.....	121
	Appendix F.....	128
	Appendix G.....	130
	Appendix H.....	131
	Appendix I.....	137
	Appendix J.....	140
	Appendix K.....	142
	Appendix L.....	143
	Appendix M.....	151
	Appendix N.....	158
	Appendix O.....	159
	Appendix P.....	161
	Appendix Q.....	165
	Appendix R.....	170

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1	Classification of Literature Reviews on Mail Survey Participation Inducers	8
Table 2	Summary of Reviews of Determinants of Mail Survey Response Rates	9
Table 3	Percent Distribution and Standard Errors for Census Participation	26
Table 4	Roles of Men and Women in Society Survey Response Details	40
Table 5	Subsequent Face-To-Face Interview Response Details	41
Table 6	National Identity Response Details	43
Table 7	Subsequent Questionnaire Response Details	44
Table 8	Advertising Regulation and Consumers Survey Response Details	45
Table 9	Subsequent Telephone Interview Response Details	46
Table 10	Stage of Roles of Men and Women in Society Mail Survey Participation	48
Table 11	Stage of National Identity ISSP Mail Survey Participation	48
Table 12	Stage of Advertising Regulation and Consumers Mail Survey Participation ...	49
Table 13	Comparison of Relative Levels of Non-Response	50
Table 14	Second Comparison of Relative Levels of Non-Response	50
Table 15	Number of Survey Requests Received Over Previous Six Months	53
Table 16	Number of Surveys Completed Over Previous Six Months	54
Table 17	Respondents' Attitudes to Surveys	55
Table 18	Response Rates to Samples With and Without Additional Cover Statement ...	59
Table 19	Likeability Rating Summary for Survey One Original and Alternative Covers	66
Table 20	Response to Graphic and Non-graphic Cover Designs	67
Table 21	Mean Juster Probabilities for Differing Survey Topics	69
Table 22	Mean Juster Probabilities for Differing Survey Sponsors	70
Table 23	Comparison of Conventional and Alternative Response Rate Calculations	77
Table 24	Likeability Ratings: Alternative Covers for Survey One	158
Table 25	Likeability Ratings: Alternative Covers for Survey Three	158
Table 26	Frequency Details for Individual Juster Ratings for Survey Topics	164
Table 27	Frequency Details for Individual Juster Ratings for Survey Sponsors	169

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1	Survey Non-Response Equation	4
Figure 2	The Leverage Salience Theory of Survey Participation	17
Figure 3	Response Decision Process.....	24
Figure 4	Variables Found to Affect the Response Process	29
Figure 5	Conceptual Model of Survey Behaviour.....	30
Figure 6	Conceptualisation of Factors Affecting Mail Survey Response Behaviour ...	33
Figure 7	Conventional Response Rate Formula.....	76
Figure 8	Alternative Response Rate Formula	76