

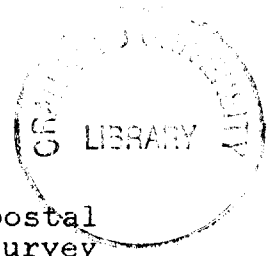


SWP 38/87 WHY DO WE OVERLOOK POSTAL RESEARCH?

**L DE CHERNATONY
Lecturer in Marketing
Cranfield School of Management
Cranfield Institute of Technology
Cranfield
Bedford MK43 OAL
United Kingdom**

(Tel: 0234-751122)

(Fax: 0234 751806)



Introduction

When constrained by financial resources, postal research can prove an ideal vehicle to collect survey data from a large number of respondents. Yet some shun postal research due to a false belief in the low level of response. Through considering the literature on postal research, this paper shows how a response rate of 49% was achieved from a postal survey at a significantly lower cost than would have resulted from personal interviews.

The need to collect data

As part of a research project to evaluate consumers' perceptions of the structure of six packaged grocery markets, a large sample of respondents were required to look at a photograph showing at least 8 competing items in the same product field and to then complete an attribute-brand battery. The only criterion for recruitment was that the person completing the questionnaire must be the person who mainly does the household grocery shopping. The questionnaire also contained a relatively low number of questions (11) concerned with factual and limited attitudinal data. All of the questions were pre-coded and there were no complicated routing procedures. It was thought that this questionnaire was ideally suited for a postal survey.

There are several advantages of postal questionnaires. Respondents can complete questionnaires at their own pace without feeling a need to rush in the presence of an interviewer. There is no interviewer bias, problems of non-contact in the sense of the respondent not being at home when the interviewer calls are avoided and all neighbourhood districts can confidently be reached at the same time.

The postal method is considerably cheaper than personal interviews. The cost of completing this postal survey, which resulted in 1065 returned questionnaires after 1 reminder letter, was just under 1,000 (postage, photocopying letters and questionnaires,

photographs and envelopes). It was estimated that to complete the study using a market research agency's interviewers would cost approximately 4,500 (assuming a daily charge rate of 50 for which 12 interviews could be completed).

There are limitations associated with a postal survey. With insufficient planning, response rates can be low. There are many cases reported though of diligent planning resulting in response rates in excess of 80%. Low response rates increase the likelihood of there being a bias in the data, since the replies received might differ from those that would have resulted if the non-respondents had replied. To reduce such bias, attempts can be made to attain high response rates, as shown by Blunberg et al, using such techniques as enclosing pre-paid envelopes and following up with reminder letters. There is no guarantee that respondents will not read all of the questions in advance of answering the first question and some may answer questions out of sequence.

Even though the covering letter asks that the person who mainly does the grocery shopping should complete the questionnaire, there may be a minority who ignore this. Any vague answers given cannot be further questioned (unless the respondent is approached again), thus when a question is malcompleted, this respondent is effectively lost.

Recognising the limitations of the postal method it was thought to be a particularly useful way to collect data from a large sample and was consequently employed. The rest of this paper describes the actions taken to increase the response rate.

The importance of a well designed questionnaire

Several helpful sources provide practical guidance on designing postal questionnaires. To reinforce the fact that the questionnaire was to be completed by the shopper who normally does the household shopping, the questionnaire opened with the first question asking about the grocery retailer most frequently used.

Attention was paid to ensure that the appearance of the questionnaire made it look easy to complete and that it was attractive. As part of this aim, no column-punching codes (to facilitate later data processing) were included on the questionnaire. The questionnaire was not compressed, since research by Scott did not support the proposition that shorter questionnaires achieve a higher response rate than longer ones.

Unambiguously phrased questions using simple words were employed and clear instructions were shown. As there is a learning process associated with completing postal questionnaires, easy questions that were thought to be more interesting were placed early in the questionnaire, with the more difficult battery question towards the middle.

To reduce any difficulties respondents might have with the postal questionnaire and to determine what they understood from each question, a series of pilot interviews were undertaken. Twelve householders were asked to read the proposed covering letter (as will be considered later) and to then complete the questionnaire imagining they were alone. While they were doing this they were observed and after they had finished were debriefed. On the basis of comments received changes were made which were tested until the questions were understood and respondents were able to successfully complete the questionnaire. Observation showed that the questionnaire took between 15 to 20 minutes to complete.

The 4 page questionnaire was produced as 2 double sided pages that were stapled together. An alternative presentation was to photo-reduce each page, such that a 4 page booklet type questionnaire on one sheet of A4 was available. Respondents reaction to the booklet was less favourable, since they felt it was difficult to read and looked more complex.

Achieving a high response rate

To achieve a high response rate the experience of other researchers was considered and those features thought to increase response rates were included.

All questionnaires were accompanied by a covering letter and a colour photograph of the competing items in one of the six grocery markets under investigation. The letter explained the purpose of the survey, gave an assurance of confidentiality and stated why the respondent should reply. The form of this letter followed recommendations from Erdos except that respondents were not told how they were selected for fear of introducing a "Big Brother" syndrome. The letters were all printed on the academic institution's headed paper since the limited research reported by Kanuk and Berenson indicated that this may help achieve a better response. Linsky's review of the effectiveness of personalising letters by addressing respondents personally and signing each letter indicated an equivocal result, which may be due to certain groups fearing loss of anonymity (eg the lottery winners of Andreasen). It was felt that if respondents thought some effort had gone into the letter this might be a further reason to encourage their participation and there were no topics in the questionnaire over which fears of anonymity would reduce response. All letters began with a personal, handwritten salutation and were signed using blue ink to make this more apparent. Likewise each envelope was handwritten and was addressed to potential respondents by name. Respondents' christian and surnames were used throughout without any reference to their title.

Minimal differences were expected using second rather than first class postage to mail out the questionnaires following the work of McCrohan and Lowe . All outgoing envelopes had a stamp rather than being franked albeit Peterson found a non significant increase in response rate by using stamps rather than franking. Included with the questionnaire was a second class business reply paid envelope to encourage a higher response. It is interesting to note that Harvey found no significant difference in UK response rates when using a second or first class stamp on the reply envelope.

The review by Kanuk and Berenson showed that follow-up letters are a powerful means of increasing the response rate to postal questionnaires. By recording

the serial numbers of all returned questionnaires, those who had not replied were identified and were sent a follow up letter. Amongst professionals VonRiesen found a significantly higher response rate if a further questionnaire was included with the reminder letter, while amongst consumers Etzel and Walker found no significant differences in response rates. As this study was directed at consumers it was decided to only send a reminder letter. This again was personalised on the academic institution's headed paper. The respondents name and address were handwritten on an envelope to which was affixed a second class stamp.

The decision as to when the reminder letters should be sent out was taken based upon a graph of the daily cumulative responses. When returns started to dwindle the reminder letters were sent. The "rule of thumb" suggestions of some researchers (eg Nichols and Meyer Etzel and Walker) were not applied since these appear to be specific to certain samples and are based on their views about respondents likelihood of replying.

Response level achieved

Using the 1985 electoral register for Hertford a systematic sampling procedure was employed to select 2196 individuals. Each individual was sent a questionnaire and a colour photograph for one of the six product fields. These were systematically allocated in such a manner that each polling district had an equal proportion of the six product field questionnaires. The postal survey was ready for mailing during July 1985 but was held back since it was felt that school holidays might slightly reduce the response rate. The 2,196 questionnaires were sent out on Wednesday 28th August 1985. As can be seen from figure 1 the daily response rate had started to slow down by Friday 7th September and with confirmation of this reduced response rate seen on Monday 9th September, the follow up letters were sent on 9th September to the 1,560 householders who had not replied. Thus 12 days after the questionnaires were sent, the reminder letter was issued. On the day that the reminder letters were sent a 29.0% response rate had been achieved from 636 replies. After the reminder letter was sent a further 429 replies were

received (a further 19.5% response) giving a total response of 1065 questionnaires, or 48.5% of the total number approached. With 37 questionnaires later returned as "moved/demolished/deceased" the effective response rate was 49.3%. It was felt that this was a sufficiently large response level to minimise the problem of response bias. By Friday 4th October 1985 the daily response had virtually stopped and analysis began.

Of the questionnaires returned 829 had correctly completed the attribute-brand battery, enabling perception of market structure to then be calculated. Thus of the postal questionnaires received, 78% were correctly completed.

Hoinville et al have reported that there may be a difference between the early and the late respondents of postal questionnaires. For this particular study minimal differences in perception of market structure were noted between respondents who replied prior to a reminder letter being sent ("early" respondents) and those replying after the reminder letter was sent ("late" respondents).

Table 1 shows the response levels within product field analysed by the reminder letter. At the 0.05 significance level the null hypothesis that response to the follow up letter is independent of the product field was rejected using a chi-square test. A more pronounced response to the follow up letter was seen amongst people returning aluminium foil questionnaire than in the other product fields. This may reflect the extremely low level of interest in aluminium foil which was ranked as the least important item by the total sample on one of the questions on the questionnaire.

	Number sent out	Returns without reminder	Returns after reminder	Total Returns
Aluminium Foil	367	82	82	164
Bleach	365	117	74	191
Disinfectant	367	101	77	178
Kitchen Towels	366	106	70	176
Toilet Paper	366	110	60	170
Washing Up Liquid	365	120	66	186
TOTAL	2196	636	429	1065

Table 1: The impact of the reminder letter

Conclusion

By building on the experience of other researchers, this paper has shown how postal research can be a valuable means of collecting survey data. Provided sufficient attention is paid to detail, postal research amongst the general public can prove a cost effective means of collecting data. Follow up letters were shown to be an effective means of increasing response rates, particularly where the product field is of low interest to respondents.

References

1. Moser C.A., Kalton G. (1981) Survey Methods in Social Investigations. Heinemann, London.
2. Blumberg M.H., et al. (1974) Response rates in postal surveys. Public Opinion Quarterly 38 (Spring) pp113-123.
3. Hoinville G., et al. (1978) The intermarket reliability of retail image research: an empirical examination. Journal of Retailing 54 1, pp3-12.
4. England L. (1978) Telephone, mail and other techniques. Consumer Market Research Handbook (Ed. by R.M. Worcester and J. Downham), Van Nostrand Reinhold, Wokingham.
5. Scott C. (1961) Research on mail surveys. Journal of the Royal Statistical Society Series A, 124, 2, pp143-205.
6. Erdos P.L. (1970) Professional Mail Surveys McGraw Hill, New York.
7. Kanuk L. and Berenson C. (1975) Mail surveys and response rates: a literature review. Journal of Marketing Research 17, 4 pp7-12.
8. Linsky A.S. (1975) Stimulating responses to mailed questionnaires: a review. Public Opinion Quarterly 39, (Spring), pp82-101.

9. Andreasen A.R. (1970) Personalizing mail questionnaire correspondence. Public Opinion Quarterly 34 (Summer), pp273-277.
10. McCrohan K.F. and Lowe L.S. (1981) A cost/benefit approach to postage used on mail questionnaires. Journal of Marketing 45, 1, pp130-133.
11. Peterson R.A. (1975) An experimental investigation of mail-survey responses. Journal of Business Research 3, 3, pp199-210.
12. Harvey L. (1986) A research note on the impact of class-of-mail on response rates to mailed questionnaires. Journal of the Market Research Society 28, 3, pp299.
13. VonRiesen R.D. (1979) Postcard reminders versus replacement questionnaires and mail survey response rates from a professional population. Journal of Business Research 7, pp1-7.
14. Etzel M.J. and Walker B.J. (1974) Effects of alternative follow-up procedures on mail survey response rates. Journal of Applied Psychology 59, 2, pp219-221.

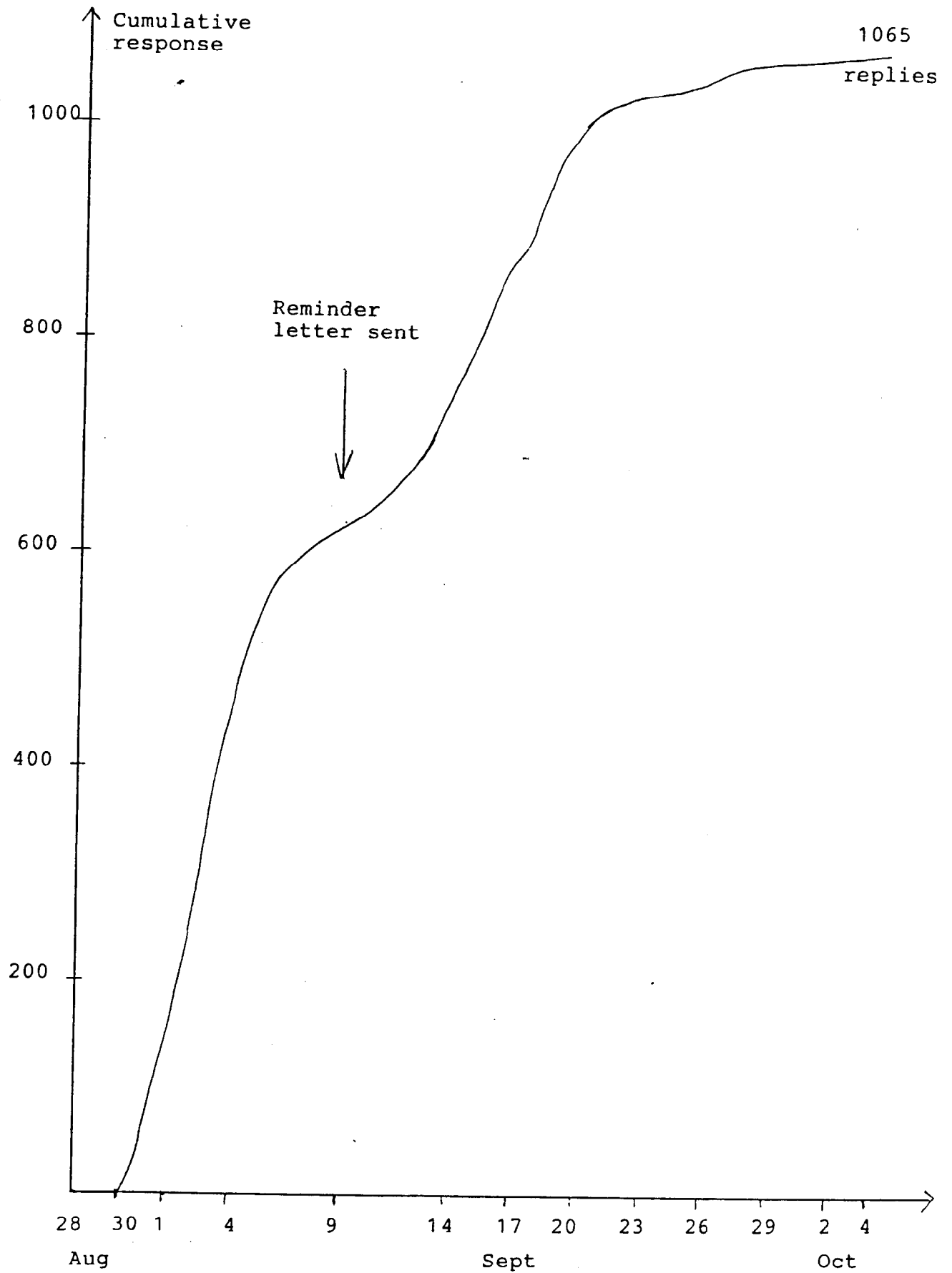


Fig 1: Cumulative response to the postal questionnaire