

ABSTRACT

EXPERIMENTING WITH TWO WAYS OF OFFERING MAIL SURVEY RESULTS

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During the 1970s several mail survey practitioners recommended offering survey results to potential respondents. Experimental investigations of this technique, however, have consistently shown it to be ineffective in both industrial and household surveys. One must wonder why offering survey results does not enhance the response to a mail survey. The effectiveness of the appeal could be limited by the fact that potential respondents may not be exposed to it. That is, if cover letter recipients are not reading the cover letter or are merely skimming it, any appeal in the cover letter would have little chance of success. Researchers at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center conducted a study that investigated the readership of cover letters, and they found that over 50% of those who were mailed a cover letter and brochure did not recall reading either item in a subsequent interview (Survey Research Center 1965). An offer of results might have a greater chance of success if it were presented in a manner that drew attention to the offer.

A device used by direct mail marketers to focus the potential respondent's attention on the benefit of an offering is the lift letter (Gosden 1985; Nash 1986). A lift letter is a second letter that is added to the mailing. It is usually folded, is about a quarter of the size of a standard cover letter, and invariably has some enticing handwritten copy on the outside of it, e.g., "Read this only if you're not buying!" The lift letter generally describes another benefit that could be obtained from purchasing the advertised product. Direct marketers claim that because the lift letter is small, folded, and personalized, it provides a dramatic and suspenseful way to make an important selling point. The primary purpose of the present study is to determine whether an offer of mail survey results will be effective when presented in a lift letter.

A secondary purpose of this study is to compare how commercial and noncommercial populations respond to a lift letter. Jobber (1986) has illustrated that commercial and noncommercial populations do not always react similarly to response inducing techniques.

Surveys of commercial populations have generally resulted in lower response rates than surveys of household populations

(Thompson, 1984). A third purpose of this study is to compare how commercial and noncommercial populations respond to the same questionnaire.

RESEARCH METHOD

A mail survey experiment was conducted among three populations: personal computer owners, computer retailers, and computer manufacturers. Within each group, subjects were randomly assigned to receive either a standard cover letter, a cover letter that offered results to respondents, or a standard cover letter along with a lift letter that offered results to respondents.

RESULTS

The results of the experiment showed that offering mail survey results to respondents in a cover letter or lift letter did not increase the rate or speed of response, and had only a minor effect on reducing the number of item omissions. Offering survey results increased the costs of the survey while providing minimal benefits. Additional analyses revealed that although the three groups of subjects responded similarly to the treatments, the retailers and manufacturers were much less likely to respond to the survey than the PC owners.

REFERENCES

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