

ABSTRACT

TOTAL DESIGN METHOD FOR MAIL SURVEYS: OVERVIEW AND APPLICATIONS

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OVERVIEW

Given the frequent usage of mail surveys by marketing educators and the problem of low response rates in business surveys, the purpose of this paper is two-fold: (1) to discuss the Total Design Method (TDM), an approach intended to maximize the quantity and quality of responses in mail and telephone surveys, and (2) to illustrate the application and effects of the TDM in two marketing-related mail surveys of business populations.

The TDM was developed by Don Dillman, a rural sociologist at Washington State University, who was concerned about the increasing costs of surveys and the problems of low response rates and poor response quality in mail and telephone surveys. Dillman (1978) reports an average response rate of 74% for 48 surveys that used elements of the TDM.

THEORETICAL BASIS OF TDM

TDM is based on the theory of social exchange, which simply says that people make decisions based on a cost-benefit evaluation. The TDM administrative plan builds on the notion that recipients of survey questionnaires engage in some form of cost-benefit analysis in deciding whether to respond.

Three inputs to this cost-benefit analysis are costs, rewards, and trust. The researcher's challenge is to minimize the respondents' costs and maximize their rewards, while establishing trust that the rewards will be received.

TDM ADMINISTRATIVE PLAN

The intent of the TDM procedure is to optimize the three researcher-controlled variables of content development, questionnaire construction, and survey implementation to improve response rates and quality. This paper focuses on selected aspects of the latter two variables, paying particular attention to procedures that are somewhat controversial.

Questionnaire Construction

Since the mail questionnaire comes under the respondent's complete control, Dillman emphasizes the need for careful construction. The paper contains a summary of Dillman's recommendations related to questionnaire format and printing, formulating pages, and designing the questionnaire cover. Several of his recommendations are discussed in more detail.

Survey Implementation

Dillman emphasizes that poor response rates can occur for reasons other than a questionnaire's appearance or content. Among these problems are a respondent discarding the questionnaire as "junk" mail or only partially completing it.

A table in the paper summarizes Dillman's recommendations regarding the basic appeal, cover letter, identifying the questionnaire, other contents of the questionnaire packet, the transmittal envelope, mailing procedures, and follow-up mailings.

Dillman reports that the first follow-up (involving a post card) generates about as many returns as the initial mailing. Furthermore, the third follow-up (involving certified mail) increases the response rate about 13 percentage points.

APPLICATION OF TDM IN MARKETING SURVEYS

No TDM surveys discussed in Dillman's book were directly related to marketing of business in general. As a step toward answering the question of whether the TDM can be effective in marketing-related surveys, the paper describes two surveys of business populations that employed the TDM in large part.

The first survey (Walker 1986) was applied in nature while the second (Conant 1986) was academic in orientation. These two researchers applied many TDM elements; a table in the paper reports deviations from the TDM. Conant and Walker achieved response rates of 37% and 65%, respectively. Considering the surveys' samples and complexity, both response rates were comparatively high.

CONCLUSION

The TDM holds substantial promise for helping to overcome the persistent and serious problem of low response rates in mail surveys. Just as a questionnaire recipient basically decides whether to respond following an implicit or explicit cost-benefit analysis, a marketing educator can--and should--conduct a cost-benefit analysis in deciding whether it would be worthwhile to use the TDM in a mail survey.

REFERENCES

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