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# **THE BEHAVIOUR OF MAIL SURVEY NON-RESPONDENTS**

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## 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).

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>List of Tables.....</b>	<b>vii</b>
<b>List of Figures.....</b>	<b>viii</b>
<b>1 INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Background.....	1
1.2 Trends in Mail Survey Response Rates.....	1
1.3 The Problem of Survey Non-Response .....	3
<b>2 LITERATURE REVIEW .....</b>	<b>7</b>
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
<b>3 METHODOLOGY .....</b>	<b>39</b>
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
<b>4 RESULTS .....</b>	<b>47</b>
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

<b>5</b>	<b>DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS</b> .....	<b>74</b>
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
<b>6</b>	<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	<b>90</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	<b>98</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	<b>99</b>
	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