

THE NON-SOLICITATION STATEMENT: A METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION FOR SURVEY INTRODUCTIONS

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Researchers who use telephone surveys are bound by the respondent's willingness to complete the survey. Potential respondents are becoming increasingly suspicious of hidden marketing agendas lurking behind the polling firm's call. The "hidden sales call" problem has received less research attention than one might expect. Groves, Cialdini, and Cooper (1992, p. 476) have demonstrated that specific techniques of increasing survey participation are not common in the relevant literature. They subsequently argue that survey compliance will increase if the interviewer identifies the survey's sponsor as "having legitimate authority to collect the information (e.g., government or educational institutions), but that this effect will be reversed if the sponsor is not seen as having such status (e.g., certain commercial organizations)" (Groves, Cialdini, and Cooper, 1992, p. 483). This study tests the hypothesis that an introductory non-solicitation statement, which specifically states that the pollster is not selling any product or service, increases the response rate of those directly contacted for the survey.

The importance of such a study has been established by several sources. Groves (1979) claimed that research should focus on the effects of establishing trust in the early stages of the survey interview. O'Neil (1979) decried the lack of data specifically designed to increase telephone survey response rates. Steeh (1981) found that refusal rates had markedly increased since the 1950s. One potential cause of greater refusal rates is the practice of disguising sales calls as public opinion surveys. Many researchers have been concerned that such tactics may shrink the pool of potential respondents through alienation, suspicion, or even legislation (See Arnold, 1964; Schwartz, 1963; Schwartz, 1964). Baxter (1964) noted that the misrepresentation of survey research by salespeople constituted a long term threat to the continued use and reliability of public opinion surveys. Biel (1967) reported that 60

percent of respondents surveyed had been subjected to the disguised sales approach at least once with 52 percent twice or more. Allen and Colfax (1968) examined respondents' attitudes toward disguised and legitimate surveys in four different cities, finding that suspicion of sales calls was high. Rugg (1971) reported the results of a nationwide inquiry into survey abuse by the American Association for Public Opinion Research, noting that 51 percent of interviewers reported experiencing refusals because the respondent suspected a hidden marketing agenda. Additionally, recent Harris study (1991) indicated that 55 percent of the public believes sales calls are a nuisance and 27 percent believe they are an invasion of privacy.

Despite the potential importance of this problem, the majority of studies of response rates have focused more heavily on interviewer or respondent characteristics instead of techniques. Pomeroy (1963) claimed that low response rates were mostly the fault of poorly-trained interviewers. Schwartz (1964), however, claimed that those who chose not to respond to a survey were driven by personality factors. Dohrenwend and Dohrenwend (1968) concluded that refusals were driven by factors influenced by both interviewer and respondent. Subsequent research efforts attempted to explain what motivates a nonrespondent's refusal to be interviewed. O'Neil (1979) examined nonresponse bias in telephone surveys by attempting to determine the characteristics of people who refuse to participate, finding that some bias may exist since refusals tended to originate in households with lower socioeconomic status. Schneider and Rogers (1990) have examined nonrespondent characteristics by manipulating the survey medium.

While there are many studies designed to guide mail survey techniques (e.g., Fox, Crask, and Kim, 1988), research examining telephone survey techniques is less abundant. Hartmann, Isaacson, and Jurgell (1968) argued that response rates could be influenced by survey content since some questions might offend respondents. And, Groves and Mathiowetz (1984)

studied the effects of computer assisted telephone interviewing on the survey process, finding little effect on response rates when compared to traditional methods. Perhaps the experiments that come closest to investigating response rates as a function of survey technique were conducted by Dillman, Gallegos and Frey (1976). Their studies were based on the assumption that the introductory remarks of the interviewer are the most important factor in influencing refusal rates, since most refusals take place immediately after the introduction. In two experiments, Dillman et al. found that telephone interview refusal rates were not affected by certain introductory remarks made by the interviewer. A third experiment indicated that introductory letters significantly lowered refusal rates. The manipulation of introductory remarks involved blind approaches, rewards, and social utility. Non-solicitation statements were never manipulated.¹

Method

The Survey

This analysis of the effect of the non-solicitation statement was conducted as part of a professional survey conducted by a research institute for a major Southern university. The objective of the survey was to determine adult Alabama residents' perceptions of the University and higher education in general. The survey was conducted from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. on the dates of June 7-11 and June 14-16 in 1992. The survey required about 12 minutes to complete. The survey's sampling frame was purchased from a leading professional sampling organization; 2,203 phone numbers, generated by random digit dialing, were used in the survey. The survey method included three call-backs for each phone number and the "next-birthday" method was used to determine the respondent within each home. The survey's director personally monitored the calling room and callers each night of the survey.

The Study Design

The survey callers were all upper-level undergraduates, all of whom had previously worked as callers for the polling firm and all of whom had academic experience in survey methods. All callers also received a one-hour training session about the telephone survey prior to the implementation of the survey. While the content of the survey introduction was discussed in the training session, the exact copy and the non-solicitation

statement was not included. The callers were randomly assigned to two groups, one in which the survey introduction included the non-solicitation statement and the other in which the statement was not included. The "non-solicitation statement" group comprised 10 callers, and the "without statement" group comprised nine callers. Each caller was given his or her own questionnaire, which was distributed and collected each evening. Question answers were coded on a separate coding sheet. The "non-solicitation statement" group made a total of 1,074 calls while the other group made 1,129 calls. A follow-up questionnaire and debriefing with the callers about the study indicated that none of the callers were aware of the manipulation in the survey introduction.

The survey introduction, which was read verbatim by all of the callers, comprised the following statement, which includes the manipulated non-solicitation statement noted in bold print:

Hello, my name is _____, and I'm calling from the *Polling Firm's Name* here in Alabama. We are conducting a survey about colleges and universities in Alabama. **We are not selling any product or service.** Your telephone number was randomly generated by a computer for this interview. Is this _____? (*Verify telephone number*). How many people 18 years old or older live at this address (*code answer*). Are you and your family residents of the state of Alabama? (*If no, terminate interview*). To insure that we have a random sample, I need to speak with the person 18 or older at this household who will have the next birthday. (*if person on line, ask to begin survey; if not wait for correct respondent and repeat statement below*) Would you mind doing the survey; it should take about 12 minutes.

If new person on line read:

Hello, my name is _____, and I'm calling from the *Polling Firm's Name* here in Alabama. We are conducting a survey about colleges and universities in Alabama. **We are not selling any product or service.** Your telephone number was randomly generated by a computer for this interview. Would you mind doing the survey; it should take about 12 minutes.

Following the survey, the final call for each phone number was coded for the following variables: the

identification number for the phone number; the night the call was made; the caller's identification number; and the final disposition of the call. A summary of the final disposition of the calls after three call backs, when appropriate, is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Disposition of Calls

<u>Disposition of Call</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Completed	544	24.7
Refused	661	30.0
Terminated by Respondent	93	4.2
Call Back	26	1.2
Busy	37	1.7
Answering Machine	98	4.4
No Answer	270	12.3
Disconnected Service	317	14.4
Business/Government	77	3.5
Respondent Incapable	35	1.6
<u>Respondent Not Eligible</u>	<u>45</u>	<u>2.0</u>
Total	2203	100.0

The survey's completion rate was 25 percent. The response rate, based on a conservative method including the categories of Call Back, Busy, Answering Machine and No Answer in the valid sample was 46 percent. A less conservative response rate -- excluding Busy, Answering Machine and No Answer from the valid sample -- was 70 percent.

Test of Hypothesis

This study tests the hypothesis that an introductory non-solicitation statement, which specifically states that the pollster is not selling any product or service, increases the response rate of those directly contacted for the survey. The effect of the manipulation of the non-solicitation statement on the respondent's completion of the survey is examined by a crosstabulation of the independent variable of Solicitation Statement (without or with non-solicitation statement) by the dependent variable of Disposition of Call (completed or not completed). The Disposition of Call variable is limited to only those directly contacted by the caller. The determination of those directly contacted is made by two methods: one in which the Call Backs are included and another in which they are not. The first analysis examines the effect of the manipulation on "live"

contacts, that is the caller literally spoke with a possible respondent. In this analysis the valid sample comprises the following disposition categories: Completed, Refused, Terminated by Respondent, and Call Back. The call disposition categories of Busy, Answering Machine and No Answer are excluded from this analysis because the respondent was not directly contacted by the caller. The second analysis is similar to the first, however the call disposition category of Call Back is also excluded from the valid sample. This examination is based on the a less conservative judgment that the Call Back category is comprised of individuals who actually could not complete the survey at that time and were not in actuality refusals who used the call back as an excuse to refuse the survey.

Results

The analyses support the hypothesis that the inclusion of the non-solicitation statement in the survey's introduction significantly increases -- though moderately -- the response rate of those directly contacted for the survey. Table 2, which includes the Call Backs in the valid sample, indicates that the inclusion of the non-solicitation statement significantly increases the response rate in the "with statement" group compared to the "without statement" group by 6 percent.

Table 2. The Relationship of Solicitation Statement and Disposition of Call with Completed, Refused, Terminated by Respondent and Call Back Comprising Valid Sample.

	<u>Without Statement</u> <u>(n=649)</u>	<u>With Statement</u> <u>(n=675)</u>
Completed	38	44
<u>Not Completed</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>56</u>

$\chi^2 (1, N=1324)=4.58; p=.0323$

Table 3. The Relationship of Solicitation Statement and Disposition of Call with Completed, Refused, and Terminated by Respondent Comprising Valid Sample.

	<u>Without Statement</u> <u>(n=638)</u>	<u>With Statement</u> <u>(n=660)</u>
Completed	39	45
<u>Not Completed</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>55</u>

$\chi^2 (1, N=1298)=5.01; p=.025$

When the Call Backs are removed from the valid sample (Table 3), the response rate for the "with statement" group still significantly increases by 6 percent compared to the "without statement" group, though the response rate is 1 percent higher (44% vs. 45%).²

The public's suspicion of the pollster's intent and the frequency of their negative experiences with disguised sales approaches is a documented problem that will probably worsen in this age of data bases and telemarketing. Our experiences tend to support the notion that most people, while suspicious of the hidden sales call, are generally fairly willing to help the cause of science and the American tradition of measuring the pulse of the public. Researchers need to specifically examine the public's fear of hidden marketing agenda and future research needs to examine this study's specific hypothesis more fully. This study may indicate the findings of a very regional effect in that the survey's population comprises adult Alabama residents; a replication of the study with a national sample should be pursued. Also, future research should examine and contrast variations of the specific language of the non-solicitation statement. This study suggests that pollsters can help their own cause by including these simple words in the survey introduction -- "we are not selling any product or service." While the benefit may only be modestly significant, the price is certainly right.

Notes

1. While we believe it is important to give a full discussion of the literature about the study's hypothesis, it should be noted that the study's conceptualization was also driven by our experiences listening to callers repeatedly say "No sir," or "No mam -- we ain't selling nothin'." While this expression may reflect the regional nature of the authors' polling experiences, we believe the problem defies regional bias.

2. Both of these results were the same when the relationship was examined by controlling for the gender of the caller and the number of nights the caller worked on the survey.

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