

DOES "I'M NOT SELLING ANYTHING" INCREASE RESPONSE RATES IN TELEPHONE SURVEYS?

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ABSTRACT

The need to worry about response rates comes from the historic decline of telephone survey participation. If one is attempting to reverse this trend the logical focus is the introduction to the interview because it is at this point that most refusals occur. There is a "common wisdom" in some research circles that respondents' negative attitudes toward the increase in telemarketing have resulted in higher refusal rates. Thus, the aim was to test whether including "I'm not selling anything" in the introduction reduces refusals and increases response rate.

It was predicted that response rates would be the lowest for an introduction without statements about selling or university affiliation, and would increase with the use of one of the factors, and would increase further for the use of both factors together. Experiences with and attitudes toward telemarketing were also assessed.

Based on telephone interviews with a RDD sample of 655 in the Seattle metropolitan area: 1) The hypothesis was not supported; "I'm not selling anything" did not significantly affect response rates. Only the introduction with the university reference significantly increased response rates; and, 2) those in the condition with no legitimization had a significantly more favorable attitude toward telemarketing.

While the use of "I'm not selling anything" did not significantly increase response rates, it also did not decrease them. So it should not necessarily be dropped from the introduction. Perhaps a better written introduction that more clearly differentiates a survey from telemarketing would be successful.

Overview of the Problem

The need to worry about response rates comes from the historic decline of telephone survey participation (Steeh, 1981). If the trend continues, it threatens the ability to conduct representative survey research. And if one is attempting to reverse this trend, the logical focus is the introduction to the interview because it is at this point that most refusals occur (Oksenberg & Cannell, 1988; Groves & Lyberg, 1988; Sykes & Hoinville, 1985).

While the introduction may be the place to focus, the lament arising from social scientists is, "except for

[three reports before 1980] the literature on telephone surveys is not very helpful in providing guidelines for conducting an introductory message that will be likely to produce a favorable decision to participate." (Frey, 1989, p. 126). Cannell (1985) also laments that non-response problems are the least understood areas of telephone interviews, suggesting that, "We need to think about the kinds of research that might help us all in the survey business to improve response rates. I am convinced it is going to become, if it is not already, a real threat to the use of survey research." (p.77)

Factors that Increase Response Rates

Researchers have examined a number of factors that relate to variations in response rates. Some of these are beyond the control of the researcher--factors within the respondent, such as age, education and urban or rural residence. Other factors can be manipulated by the researcher, such as ensuring the voice quality and experience of the interviewer (Groves and Lyberg, 1988).

Even with these efforts, the ability to construct an introductory message remains vital because, as noted above, most refusals take place before the first question. So the focus of this study is in that area.

Efforts to construct a good introduction have been made over the last two decades. Dillman's (1978) guidelines provide a start; he suggests legitimizing the study, informing respondents how they were selected, about the length of the interview, and sending an advance letter.

Some efforts to increase response rates have also produced no significant results, such as giving the respondent complete descriptions of the organization conducting the project and the purpose of the survey (Dillman, et al., 1976).

Theoretical Basis of Response

The processes involved in survey participation can be viewed as a special case of "social exchange" (Dillman, 1978). The theory of social exchange, primarily developed by Homans (1961), Blau (1964), and Thibaut and Kelley (1959), suggests that the actions of individuals are motivated by the return these actions are expected to bring from others. Under the tenants of social exchange theory, people are assumed to engage in activities because of the rewards they gain. All activities performed incur costs, and people attempt to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs. With this in mind there are three means to maximize survey response: 1) minimize the cost of

responding; 2) maximize the reward for responding; and 3) establish trust that rewards will be delivered (Dillman, 1978).

Time is the most common cost of survey respondents. A questionnaire that looks or sounds formidable may be rejected by respondents because of anticipated costs. Indicating that an interview will be short, and making questionnaires clear and concise, may provide a means of perceived time cost reduction (Dillman, 1978). Cost is also high when physical or mental effort is required, and when embarrassment or anxiety accompany action (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Complex questions and unclear directions are likely to confuse respondents, creating feelings of anxiety and increasing costs. In addition, questions perceived by respondents as being extremely personal may contribute to increased cost through increased perceptions of risk by respondents (Dillman, 1978).

Researchers typically offer limited rewards and even these rewards are likely to be intangible. Respondents may consider it rewarding to be regarded positively by another person, for example (Thibaut and Kelley, 1959). Explaining to a respondent that they are part of a carefully selected sample and that their response is needed if the study is to be successful may be a way of encouraging response (Dillman, 1978). Telephone interviewers can also communicate positive regard for participants through direct statements and voice tone. Blau (1964) and Homans (1961) suggest that "consulting" others is a means of rewarding them while gaining information. Asking questions concerning respondents' attitudes and feelings may reward them in this manner. If the act of responding to an interviewer's questions is rewarding, the process itself may provide the motivation to complete an interview (Dillman, 1978).

An essential element of social exchange involves the trust created between an interviewer and a respondent. In this instance, participants must trust that an appropriate reward will be provided for compliant behavior. Unfortunately, it is difficult to ensure an appropriate return for compliant behavior in an interview situation. This is particularly true in telephone interviews, where few rewards are available for researchers to offer respondents. Here, factors such as calling long distance or calling from a university may be important because they legitimize a project and contribute to the trust developed between an interviewer and a respondent.

As an additional note, response to telephone interviews take advantage of widely accepted norms of telephone behavior. Such norms generally inhibit people from terminating telephone conversations because they involve direct interaction with another individual. Social exchange considerations may become more important as social norms become less important in telephone interview situations. It is also possible that telemarketers have contributed to the development of a new norm involving the termination of telephone conversations.

Impact of Telemarketing

There is a "common wisdom" in some research circles that respondents' negative attitudes toward the increase in telemarketing have resulted in higher refusal rates. This might be produced by the anger respondents have after being duped into participating in a "survey" that was really a sales pitch--anger will reduce compliance (Groves, et al., 1992). But very little research has assessed the specific impact of telemarketing on response rates. The only study found was conducted in the United Kingdom by Collins, et al. (1988), where eight percent of refusers cited avoidance of unsolicited calls, primarily from direct selling, as the basis for their noncooperation in telephone surveys.

One of the authors (Reagan) has operated a market research firm for a decade. During that time the "common wisdom" in the field has been that researchers need to differentiate themselves from telemarketers by assuring respondents that they are not soliciting sales. So a common practice is to include "I'm not selling anything" in the introduction. Virtually all the texts and guides on survey introductions ignore this issue. A text by Wimmer and Dominick (1991)--also market researchers--includes a sample introduction with the phrase "We're not trying to sell anything, and this is not a contest or promotion," (p. 116), but they fail to explain why that phrase is used.

The primary aim of this study is to test the "common wisdom." That is, under a controlled study examine whether including "I'm not selling anything" in the introduction reduces refusals and increases response rates.

Given the convenient fact that this study was conducted at a university, and university affiliation helps increase response rates by legitimizing the study (Dillman, 1978; Everett & Everett, 1989), and that a reference to calling long distance can also be made in the introduction, these factors can be included in the introduction to assess whether there might be an interaction between these and the primary factor.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

If telemarketing reduces cooperation and legitimization increases credibility and cooperation, then one ought to be able to test an introduction that uses these factors. It can be hypothesized that:

H1: Refusal rates will be the highest for an introduction without statements about selling or university affiliation, and will decrease with the use of one of the factors, and will decrease further for the use of both factors together. (The opposite will occur for response rates, i.e., response rates will be lowest for the first condition.)

In addition, respondents' attitudes toward telemarketing needs to be assessed expecting that if telemarketing and other solicitations reduce cooperation, those who respond in the conditions where the intro-

duction says "I'm not selling anything" ought to have harsher opinions of telemarketing.

RQ1: What are respondents' experiences with and attitudes toward telemarketing?

RQ2: Do the experiences and attitudes vary by introduction condition?

Method

An experiment was conducted to test the hypothesis and answer the research questions. In the experiment, telephone interviews were conducted with a random sample of participants (18 years or older) in the Seattle metropolitan area. The sample was drawn systematically using the Seattle metropolitan area white pages. Telephone numbers were selected according to a predetermined sampling interval following a random start. Two randomly selected digits were placed in the last two digit spaces of each telephone number to ensure coverage of unlisted numbers. Interviews were conducted from 6:30 to 9:30 p.m., Sunday, November 7, to Thursday, November 11, 1993. A total of 1,248 contacts were made after at least two attempts for each working number, and there were 655 completed interviews. The overall response rate for the survey was 52.5% when using Frey's (1989) "self-serving" response rate which excludes elements in the sample that are not eligible or reachable.

Interviewers were undergraduate students enrolled in principles of research and principles of public relations classes at Washington State University. Interviewers participated in a training session and conducted practice interviews before participating in the survey. A total of 33 male and 50 female interviewers were stratified by sex and randomly assigned to one of four conditions containing different introductions.

The first introduction briefly informed respondents of the purpose of the survey: "Hello, I'm _____. We're doing a study of attitudes toward telemarketing in the Seattle area, and I have a few questions for someone over 18 years of age." The second introduction was exactly like the first introduction but included the line, "I'm calling long distance from Washington State University." The third introduction was exactly like the first introduction but included the line, "I'm not selling anything" The fourth introduction was exactly like the first introduction, but included the lines, "I'm calling long distance from Washington state University. I'm not selling anything."

Following the introduction, respondents were asked if they had ever received a telephone call from someone trying to sell them something or solicit a donation. Respondents who answered yes were asked how often they had received such a call in the last week. All respondents indicated whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with a series of statements reflecting differing opinions concerning telephone solicitations. (A list of statements is

in Table 2.) Scale items were worded both positively and negatively to avoid response bias. Respondents were then asked if they had any additional comments concerning telephone solicitations and demographic data was collected including age, education, income, race or ethnic background, and sex.

Results

The total sample was comprised of 58.8% females and 41.2% males with a median age of 39. The majority of respondents had completed at least some college, with 39.6% completing a bachelor's degree and 21.8% completing some graduate work. Compared to census and other market data, the reported income for the sample slightly over-represented households with annual incomes over \$30,000. Whites comprised 84.4% of the sample, Asians comprised 6.7% of the sample, and African Americans comprised 5.3% of the sample.

Approximately 95% of respondents reported receiving a telephone call from someone trying to sell them something or solicit a donation. The median number of solicitation calls respondents had received in the past week was one, with 45.1% of respondents having received no solicitation calls.

Table 1: Response Rates

	<u>Condition</u>				N
	A	B	C	D	
Male Interviewers:					
Completed	58	65	70	67	260
Response rate	45.0%	57.0%	46.7%	56.8%	50.9%
N (completed+refused)	129	114	150	118	511
Female interviewers:					
Completed	95	103	104	93	395
Response rate	52.2%	58.9%	48.6%	56.0%	53.6%
N (completed+refused)	182	175	214	166	737
Total: *					
Completed	153	168	174	160	655
Response rate	49.2%	58.1%	47.8%	56.3%	52.5%
N (completed+refused)	311	289	364	284	1248

* Chi-square = 9.89, df = 3, p < .02, C = .089

CONDITIONS:

A = nothing added

B = "I'm calling long distance from Washington State University"

C = "I'm not selling anything"

D = Combination of "B" and "C"

Hypothesis 1 predicted that response rates would be the lowest for an introduction without statements about selling or university affiliation and would increase with use of one of the factors and increase further with the use of both of the factors. Table 1 contains the response rate for each introduction. Since the results did not turn out according to the hypothesis, a two-tailed chi-square was used which was statistically significant (chi-square = 9.89, df = 3, $p < .02$, $C = .089$). The introduction without additional statements had a significantly lower response rate (47.8%) as did the introduction containing only "I'm not selling anything" (46.7%). Conversely, response rates were higher for the introductions containing statements concerning university affiliation only (58.1%) and for introductions containing statements concerning both university affiliation and informing respondents that nothing is being sold (56.3%). As an additional note, response rates for male and female interviewers were not significantly different.

Research question 1 addressed respondents' experiences with and attitudes toward telemarketing. As shown in Table 3, responses to a series of scaled items ($\alpha = .78$) were compared using a one-way ANOVA. The results indicate that respondents with less than a high school education, respondents with annual household incomes of \$15,000 or less, and minority respondents had significantly more favorable attitudes toward telemarketers.

Table 2: List of Attitude Scale Items

phone solicitors make you angry
it's an invasion of privacy
they call at inconvenient times
they waste your time
they are intrusive
the people on the phone are pleasant
they are friendly
they are professional
you'll listen to them
you usually hang up
they are unethical
they sometimes have bargains

Research question 2 asked if the experiences and attitudes of respondents vary by introduction condition. As shown in Table 3, the results of post-hoc analysis indicated that respondents in the non-legitimizing condition had significantly more favorable attitudes toward telemarketers than respondents in the other conditions.

The results of responses to an open-ended question seeking additional information from respondents provided additional depth to these findings. Respondents called telephone solicitations "annoying" and suggested that the practice "should be illegal." A

majority of respondents described telemarketers in negative terms such as "pushy," "annoying," "inconvenient," and "bothersome." A smaller number of respondents described telemarketers in more sympathetic terms suggesting that they are "just doing their jobs" or that they "felt sorry" for people who were calling.

Table 3: Scale by Demographics and Condition

Average Scale Score		
Education:		
Less than high school	37.5	
High school graduate	33.2	
Some college	34.8	
Bachelor's degree	32.6	
Graduate work +	31.9	
Income:		
\$0-\$15,000	36.3	
\$15,001-\$30,000	33.6	
\$30,001-\$50,000	33.0	
Over \$50,000	32.0	
Race:		
White	32.8	
Black/African-American	36.6	
Asian	34.8	
Hispanic	34.3	
Amerind/Native American	36.1	
Condition "A" *		34.5
Condition "B" *		32.7
Condition "C" *		32.5
Condition "D" *		32.7

All above significant at $p < .05$; "Age" and "Sex" not significant

* CONDITIONS:

- A=nothing added
- B="I'm calling long distance from Washington State University"
- C="I'm not selling anything"
- D=Combination of "B" and "C"

Conclusions

There is no support at this time for the use of "I'm not selling anything" in an introduction. It did not significantly increase or decrease response rates. At the same time, it did not hurt response rate. So it cannot be recommended that the phrase be deleted from an introduction, either. This finding is inconclusive on its own. It could be that an introduction that

more clearly differentiates survey research from telemarketing will more successfully increase response rates. On the other hand, respondents may react negatively to most unanticipated and unwanted phone interruptions regardless of the introduction used.

It is instructive to note that the median number of phone solicitations received by respondents was one, yet respondents expressed hostility and frustration toward telemarketers. Thus, a brief negative experience can translate into a strong negative opinion.

Contrary to some previous research (such as Everett & Everett, 1989), a significant difference was not found between male and female interviewers in response rates under any of the conditions.

The fact that responders in the non-legitimizing condition had a more favorable attitude toward telemarketers indicates that they may be more compliant people. This supports some theoretical notions suggested by Dillman (1978) to explain response to surveys. Trust is more easily established with respondents who have a more favorable attitude toward telemarketers. It should be noted that the potential for bias exists in surveys containing a significant number of compliant respondents.

It is also important to note the role of statements that legitimize the study in increasing response rates. In this instance, university affiliation and calling long distance combined to provide an important boost to low response rates. This finding is consistent with findings by other researchers indicating that legitimizing the study is an important means of increasing the trust established between a researcher and a respondent, and helps to increase response rates (Dillman, 1978; Everett and Everett, 1989).

Future research should continue to examine introductions that may help differentiate legitimate surveys from telemarketing. An alternate introduction is one use by Robinson Research of Spokane, Washington (Jones, 1994). They say, "I want to assure you that we are not selling or soliciting." This and other wording deserves examination.

Future research should also examine the differences between more compliant and less compliant respondents. Researchers need to understand whether there are differences between these groups and the ways in which survey responses may be biased.

Finally, future research needs to examine the notion of "norms of telephone behavior." Is there a new norm developing where receivers are becoming more likely to refuse all except expected communications. The potential for technological developments such as "caller id" that add to the ability to filter calls from unknown numbers may further erode responses to surveys. Since minorities are more likely to respond in this study, it is important to examine whether this indicates different subcultural norms or other differences, and whether this will lead to surveys that will be "unrepresentative" because of different norms for different subcultures.

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