

**Key Words: Telephone Survey; Introduction; Respondent; Cooperation; Response Rate**

**Introduction**

Telephone survey introductions are a key component in gaining cooperation. What survey researchers tell potential respondents varies between and within organizations and projects.

Potential respondents must be given sufficient information in the introduction to convince them to participate. Yet we know little about what combination of information works best for the widest range of respondents. Introductions often include information such as: what the study is about; who is conducting it; who is the sponsor; why is it important; and reasons why the respondent should participate. Information provided in introductions varies between surveys. There has been little research on which combination of types of information may be most successful. This paper studies the use of alternative introductions to systematically vary type of components of a survey introduction in a field experiment to see which variation produces the best response rate.

At the end of each survey the respondent was asked the main reason they participated in the study. When attempting to convert refusals, alternative introductions were used to study for differences in the refusal conversion rate. There was also a comparison of reasons for willingness to participate with a similar study that was conducted five years ago and a recent national survey in which the respondent was asked for the main reason for participation in the survey.

Following a brief discussion of the literature is a description of the methodology of this experiment and the research that led to this design. This will be followed by the results and a discussion.

**Literature**

Although introductions are a key component of surveys, the available literature is limited. The relationship between respondent statements during the introduction and the content and quality of information provided by them during the interview are found to be associated (Couper, 1997). Reported data show that survey introductions are not homogeneous (Sobal, 1997). When introductions disclosed more information, the

research findings are mixed. Different studies found that refusals to participate in surveys were more frequent (Blumberg et al., 1974 and Kearney, et al., 1983), less frequent (Hauck and Cox, 1974), and about the same (Leuptow et al., 1977; Singer, 1978; and Sobal, 1982).

The goal of an effective introduction appears to not only provide minimum information, but the right kind of information – eliciting cooperation of the potential respondent and, secondarily, enhancing rapport during the interview.

**Methodology**

First, as part of ongoing research in survey participation, several years ago we started asking the following question at the end of a survey:

“Finally, people agree to begin answering a survey for different reasons. What was the main reason you agreed to begin this survey?” A list of reasons was collected. The objective was to learn the main reasons that respondents participate in surveys and which of these could be incorporated into introductions. For example, in a recent study, the top five responses to this question were:

| Reason                      | Frequency (n=679) |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|
| Letter sent in advance      | 19.6%             |
| To be helpful               | 14.3%             |
| I was bored                 | 12.4%             |
| University study/sponsor    | 9.0%              |
| Interviewer was polite/nice | 8.8%              |

**Focus Group Discussion**

The second stage of our project involving a focus group discussion was organized around responses to the participation question. The focus group discussion was conducted with 11 participants. The objective was to obtain reactions about what motivates respondents to participate and what causes people to refuse participation in a survey. In particular, how they react to the first things they hear when asked to be interviewed in a survey.

Items identified as preferences in introductions included: the objectives of the survey, length of the

survey, sponsor's name, how the data is being recorded (Is respondent being taped?), and an explanation of how the data will be used. Many of the reasons fall into two general categories addressing respondent reservations; or providing information about the worth of the survey.

Negative reactions were likely for topics that were of little interest to the respondent, pushy interviewers, insufficient information, length of survey, asking personal questions early in the interview, such as size of household.

Clear identification of a credible sponsor was identified as an advantage in gaining respondent cooperation. Further, monetary and non-monetary incentives were identified as being a reason for agreeing to participate in a survey.

### **Alternate Introductions**

Based on information from the focus group discussion, two alternative introductions were drafted for the experiment. The two introductions were randomly assigned to potential respondents. The strategy of the first introduction (objections) was to anticipate and, hopefully, forestall respondent objection to participation. The second introduction (saliency) focused on positive reasons based on the importance of the survey to participate.

#### **Introduction I - Objections**

Hello, I'm \_\_\_\_\_, calling from the University of Maryland. We're doing a study about some current issues. We're not selling anything. This will not take much of your time. Please be assured that all your answers are confidential. For this study, I need to speak with the adult in your household who is 18 or older and who will have the next birthday.

#### **Introduction II - Saliency**

Hello, I'm \_\_\_\_\_, calling from the University of Maryland. We're doing a study with other state agencies about some important issues facing Maryland, such as welfare reform, public schools, and crime. For this study, I need to speak with the adult in your household who is 18 or older and who will have the next birthday.

It was essential that interviewers read the introduction verbatim and at a medium-slow pace. A random half of all respondents got the "Objections" introduction and the other half got the "Saliency" introduction. While the "Objections" introduction will allow interviewer to inform respondents that the interview will only take a few minutes, that there is no selling involved and that all their responses will be confidential. It focuses on addressing reasons that respondents may refuse participation.

The second introduction, involving "Saliency," does not refer to the briefness of the survey or the fact that there is no selling nor is there any reassurance regarding response confidentiality. Instead, the "saliency" introduction emphasizes the sponsors as the University of Maryland and other state agencies along with some details about some topics that are addressed in the survey and their importance to the state.

#### **Tailoring during the Introduction to Gain Cooperation**

After the verbatim reading of the randomly assigned introduction, the interviewer was provided with the flexibility to use appropriate tailoring techniques to gain the respondent's cooperation to participate in the survey. A tailoring form was provided to interviewers that had to be filled for all completed interviews.

The tailoring form included additional information that the interviewer might provide to a potential respondent, based on the respondent's reaction to the introduction, respondent's questions, or the interviewer's judgement. The provided categories included:

- "I'm not selling anything/This is not a sales call."
- "Length of survey"
- "Confidentiality/Legitimacy"
- "Importance of study"
- "Topics in survey"
- "Sponsor names"
- "Something else"

Other tailoring strategies could also be used, and the interviewers were to write down which ones they were.

## Results

American Sociological Review, 66(3): 348-61.

### Reasons for participation

|                               |             |             |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| To be helpful                 | 18%         | 180         |
| Curiosity/Sounded interesting | 12%         | 121         |
| Persistence of interviewer    | 11.2%       | 113         |
| UMD sponsor                   | 10.6%       | 106         |
| Had time                      | 8.7%        | 87          |
| Want to give opinion          | 8%          | 80          |
| Interviewer polite/nice       | 6.3%        | 63          |
| Letter                        | 6%          | 59          |
| Don't know                    | 5.6%        | 56          |
| Other                         | 5.4%        | 55          |
| Topic                         | 3.3%        | 33          |
| No selling                    | 1.9%        | 19          |
| Like doing surveys            | 1.8%        | 18          |
| Bored                         | 1.2%        | 12          |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                  | <b>100%</b> | <b>1002</b> |

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|                         | Objections | Saliency |
|-------------------------|------------|----------|
| <b>Completes</b>        | 529        | 473      |
| <b>Cooperation Rate</b> | 66.5%      | 69.2%    |

## References

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