

Robert J Schreiber
Time Inc.
New York, USA

Clark Schiller
Time Inc.
New York, USA

5.6 Effects of interviewer 'bias' on readership claims

BACKGROUND

Studies of the last few years have shown major magazine readership methods to be sensitive to changes in procedure and, in a few cases, to be sensitive to interviewer interpretation.

This study was designed to detect any significant role certain forms of interviewer bias had on respondents' readership claims. The two forms of bias tested were: interviewer reading habits and attitudes toward a magazine; and knowledge of a magazine's circulation level.

DESIGN*

The test magazines in this study were *Time* and *Newsweek*; *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal* served as controls.

Prior to interviewer briefing, 155 interviewers were given a questionnaire in the guise of a pre-test for a later study. It sought information on interviewers' readership of *Time* and *Newsweek*, along with similar data on other 'pairs,' eg Pepsi Cola and Coca Cola.

Following, the interviewers were informed that the results of the study would involve comparing respondents' reported behaviour with known sales. All interviewers were told the number of gasoline (petrol) service stations operated by two large US companies, Texaco and Exxon. Next, they were told, depending upon the group to which they had been randomly assigned: Group A: about the circulation sizes of *Time* and *Newsweek*, Group B: about the circulation sizes of *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies' Home Journal*.

To avoid training bias, each briefing of the interviewers was given by a pre-recorded tape. The scripts for these tapes are given in the Appendix.

At this point, the interviewers were briefed about the telephone readership study to be done. From a central location, each interviewer conducted approximately 25 interviews which included a filter question, a recency question, and frequency question for the two test, two control, and six other magazines.

**Field work was carried out by Audits & Surveys, Inc., and Richard Lysaker, President, was an active participant in the design and analysis.*

On any given day of the week, exactly or almost exactly identical the number of interviewers were used and interviews obtained for the two groups. In addition, each test group interviewer was randomly paired with a control group interviewer. One made calls from the top half of a randomly selected page of a telephone directory while the other did the same from the bottom half.

The sample was drawn from the top 20 markets in the US and was controlled by sex. Exactly 49.9% of the respondents were males in each group.

RESULT

Table 1 shows the proportions of people passing the filter under the two briefing conditions for each of the magazines. Note that there is little difference in the *Time* and *Newsweek* figures from one briefing condition to the other. There is slightly more difference for *Good Housekeeping/Ladies' Home Journal*, but some of the differences in the figures for the other six magazines are roughly as large. It appears, then, that the briefing had little effect on the number of respondents passing the filter question.

Table 2 shows similar data for which magazine the interviewers' claimed readership.

On the right side of the table are the data for interviewers *not* briefed about *Time* and *Newsweek*. Among *Time*-reading interviewers, the filter claims elicited by them favoured *Time* over *Newsweek* by 11.1% (58.0:52.2). Among the *Newsweek* reading interviewers, the comparable figure was 6.7%

One would expect the briefing on the two test magazines would tend to *heighten* the *Time/Newsweek* ratio, since the truth had been given as 50%. Among *Time*-reading interviewers, that 'advantage' was reduced from 11.1% to 10%, and for *Newsweek*-reading interviewers, it was increased from 6.7% to 10.5%. In addition to the inconsistency, the size of the changes was very small.

Table 3 shows the readership claims in the last publication interval. Among the interviewers not briefed about the test magazines, there were 33.3% more claims for *Time* than *Newsweek*. One would expect that increment to increase with briefing — it did not. It decreased to 24.7%.

5.6 Effects of interviewer 'bias' on readership claims

TABLE 1
Passing filter question by briefing condition

	BRIEFING SUBJECTS	
	<i>Time/Newsweek</i> %	<i>Good Housekeeping</i> <i>Ladies Home Journal</i> %
Time	57.2	58.2
Newsweek	52.0	51.8
Good Housekeeping	40.5	38.4
Ladies Home Journal	28.4	27.1
McCall's	28.7	28.1
Penthouse	19.4	20.4
People	47.2	46.5
Playboy	28.3	28.3
Reader's Digest	54.0	53.8
Sports Illustrated	34.9	37.2

TABLE 2
Passing filter question by briefing condition
and magazine read by interviewer

	BRIEFING SUBJECTS			
	<i>Time/Newsweek</i>		<i>Good Housekeeping/ Ladies Home Journal</i>	
	Time	Newsweek	Time	Newsweek
% passing filter for				
Total	57.2	52.0	58.2	51.8
Interviewer reads <i>Time</i>	57.1	51.9	58.0	52.2
Interviewer reads <i>Newsweek</i>	60.0	54.3	57.1	53.5

TABLE 3
Readership in publication interval

	BRIEFING SUBJECTS	
	<i>Time/Newsweek</i> %	<i>Good Housekeeping/ Ladies Home Journal</i> %
Time	24.2	25.2
Newsweek	19.4	18.9
Good Housekeeping	23.1	21.2
Ladies Home Journal	14.4	13.1
McCall's	13.6	14.5
Penthouse	8.5	9.5
People	16.7	16.7
Playboy	15.0	15.0
Reader's Digest	33.1	35.2
Sports Illustrated	14.1	14.8

5.6 Effects of interviewer 'bias' on readership claims

TABLE 4
Readership by briefing condition and magazine read by interviewer

Readership of	BRIEFING SUBJECT			
	<i>Time/Newsweek</i>		<i>Good Housekeeping/ Ladies Home Journal</i>	
	Time	Newsweek	Time	Newsweek
Total	24.2	19.4	25.2	18.9
Interviewer reads <i>Time</i>	24.1	18.3	24.4	18.0
Interviewer reads <i>Newsweek</i>	25.5	20.3	23.1	19.2

Table 4 presents conflicting data, once again. Briefing for *Time*-reading interviewers decreased, slightly, the preponderance of *Time* readership claims they elicit. For *Newsweek*-reading interviewers, the advantage of *Time* is increased.

CONCLUSIONS

The data collected in this study do not support the hypotheses set out initially. Interviewer reading habits and knowledge of circulation levels did not affect readership claims in a significant manner. However, in retrospect, it may well be that tightly controlled central location telephone interviewing presents a situation which minimizes interviewer bias. Accordingly, the conclusions arrived in this experiment may not be applicable to face-to-face personal interviews and locally executed telephone studies.

APPENDIX

Briefing instructions

GROUP A

By the way, when this study is conducted we will be interested in comparing people's answers to these kinds of questions with actual sales figures.

For example, many more people go to service

stations carrying the Texaco name than the Exxon name because Texaco has 16,300 stations and Exxon has 13,700. We will relate these figures to what people give as their favourite brand of gas.

For another example, *Time* Magazine sells 50% more copies than *Newsweek*. *Time* sells about 4½ million copies every week while *Newsweek* sells only about 3 million. Here again, we will be looking at the relationship between those numbers and the magazines named as favourites.

Let's now proceed with the briefing for the study that you are here for.

GROUP B

By the way, when this study is conducted we will be interested in comparing people's answers to these kinds of questions with actual sales figures.

For example, many more people go to service stations carrying the Texaco name than the Exxon name because Texaco has 16,300 stations and Exxon has 13,700. We will relate these figures to what people give as their favourite brand of gas.

For another example, *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies Home Journal* sell about the same number of copies. Every month they each sell about 5 million magazines. Here again, we will be looking at the relationship between those numbers and the magazines named as favourites.

Let's now proceed with the briefing for the study that you are here for.