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INCREASING DATA COLLECTED IN READERSHIP SURVEYS

This paper discusses extending the marketing and classification data provided by readership surveys, to increase their relevance for advertising planning.

Traditionally data collection techniques were in watertight compartments. In quantitative research one either used personally administered face-to-face interviews, or telephone interviews, or postal self-completion questionnaires.

In due course this rigid demarcation started to be eroded under two main influences:

- (1) The diary panel operation which employed an interviewer to place the diary and collect classificatory information in a face-to-face interview.
- (2) The ultra-long self-completion questionnaire, or self-completion book, which is placed by an interviewer, who, as with the diary, collects some information at the time of placement.

In both these types of exercise the data collection is predominantly self-completion, supplemented by a small amount of interviewer-collected classification data.

The appearance of electronic methods of data collection – television audience meters and viewdata (personal VDUs) – again require the augmentation of personal interviews to collect some classification data.

In this paper we are talking about a different area of mixed data collection, where the main method – personal face-to-face interviewing – is supplemented by a self-completion questionnaire supervised by the interviewer.

We discuss the operational considerations affecting mixed data collection, and RSL's experiences with the technique on the Pan European Survey. We then report on mixed data collection on the British National Readership Survey.

In the summer of 1986 Research Services Ltd were commissioned to conduct a pilot study to develop the fourth in the series of Pan European Surveys. The PES*, is a media and marketing survey representing some five million high status professionals and executives throughout Western Europe.

One of the areas this pilot tested was the use of a supervised self-completion questionnaire. The background issues that led us to test this were as follows.

First whilst the PES already provided extensive marketing data covering travel, occupation, demographics, personal and household characteristics, there was a need to increase this by covering more product categories, and more and improved data on existing categories that were well geared to advertising value.

Secondly, there was a need to increase the publications measured, specifically adding in-flight

*Of which Nigel Jacklin is project director.

publications, and in the main survey providing extra qualitative readership measures.

Against this we needed to keep the interview length within the existing time, to maintain a high level of response rate, both in total and by country, and work within the existing budget.

Initially we considered three options to achieve these objectives.

Option 1 was to leave a self-completion questionnaire with respondents and ask them to return it by post. This, however, was likely to result in an unacceptably low level of response to the self-completion section.

As the interviewers are working in the area over a period of two or more weeks this led us to consider option 2, that the interviewers return to collect the completed questionnaire. This was still likely to lead to some problems in response, and would also mean extending the fieldwork period to allow for recalls.

This led to a third option, that is to ask the respondent to fill in the self-completion questionnaire in the interviewer's presence. In terms of cost, providing it took in the order of 10-15 minutes to fill in the questionnaire, this method would be as cost-effective as returning to collect it. We anticipated that it would allow a higher level of response to that part of the questionnaire. It had the added benefit of the interviewer's presence to clarify problem questions.

We therefore decided to go ahead with a pre-pilot in the UK, completing the readership section and part of the marketing data using the established personal interview method, with the interview being completed using the new supervised self-completion section. This pre-pilot was followed by a full scale pilot (which

was also tested a number of other areas), consisting of 462 interviews in five European countries.

The supervised self-completion method proved successful in four of the five pilot countries, with 97% of all respondents completing the self-completion section.

In the fifth country response was low (75%); however this was attributed to problems other than the introduction of the self-completion section, principally a late start in fieldwork leading to administrative problems.

The pilot also highlighted other areas, namely:

- (1) Respondents were able to complete this section at their own pace. This did, however, lead to a greater variation in interview time.
- (2) In a small number of cases, where the respondent was busy, the interviewer was able to leave the questionnaire with the respondent returning on another occasion to collect it.
- (3) The length of interview, in terms of time, was maintained.
- (4) There was no problem with literacy and ease of completion due to the status of the PES group.

On this basis Research Services Ltd and the survey guarantors incorporated the self-completion section into the main PES 4 study, the results of which were released in September 1988. The interview followed the same format as the pilot, with the exception that response to a battery of attitude statements was collected for publications read in the average issue or previous period. The interviewer was able to transfer the relevant titles onto this section whilst the respondent completed the main self-completion questionnaire.

From the pilot and main study our experience of this technique can be summarised as follows:

Amount of data collected

We were able to increase the amount of marketing data collected by one sixth. We included further qualitative measures as well as collecting recency of reading of in-flight publications – a total increase in data provided of about one fifth.

Response rate

The response rate to the survey overall was comparable with PES 3. The response rate at the interview stage (as opposed to the eligibility screening stage) was higher, 67% vs 65%, in part due to increased call backs.

96% of all respondents completed the self-completion section. This did however vary by country, France being lowest at 90%.

Response to individual questions within the self-completion questionnaire varied, generally falling between 90% and 100%. When response fell below 95% it is likely that non-respondents do not fall into the markets measured, ie rather than ticking 'no' or 'none' they tick nothing at all.

Questionnaire design

The success of the self-completion method, as with postal data collection, critically depends on clarity and quality of questionnaire design.

The self-completion materials, were prepared centrally by Research Services Ltd, in each language, following a common format. A copy of the questionnaire used in Great Britain is included in the back of the survey report.

DEVELOPMENT WORK ON THE NRS

At the beginning of this decade JICNARS set up a series of study groups, one of which was the Special Interests Study Group (chaired by Michael Ryan). The brief was to look at all those question areas on the NRS that were not about media exposure.

On the matter of what to do with these special interest questions the brief was fairly open. But on one point it was specific: response rates were under pressure and in part that could be related to interview length.

We could recommend any change in the special interest questions provided it did not increase interview length and/or lower response rate.

We examined the existing questionnaire and the data which it produced, we made comparisons between NRS and TGI, and we talked to media owners and media planners; as a result we decided that there was very little scope for cutting down on extra special interest areas, and some demand for extending their scope into 'advanced demographics' and product interest areas.

It was Pym Cornish who suggested to the Special Interests Study Group that the way to collect more data in less time was to include a supervised self-completion section in the NRS interview.

While we regarded the idea as attractive, it raised a number of questions:

(1) Would respondents accept the task of a self-completion section?

(2) How would interviewers react?

(3) What proportion of informants would complete the self-completion section?

(4) How well would they complete it?

(5) Would the data be comparable to equivalent data collected by personal interview?

(6) What would happen to response rate?

(7) Would readership figures be affected?

There were also operational questions like:

(8) What questions should be transferred to or included in the self-completion section?

(9) What was the ideal length of the self-completion section?

The Study Group quickly and unanimously decided that we did not wish to transfer any questions about readership to the self-completion section, nor did we consider the possibility of incorporating any additional publication measurements like time spent reading or provenance.

What did go on the self-completion section were:

(1) Car ownership

(2) Travel and holidays

(3) Ownership of consumer durables

(4) Education

(5) Personal finance

(6) Smoking

(7) Drinking

(8) Expenditure on leisure interests

(9) Anticipated household changes.

The first five of these are expanded versions of existing special interest question areas. Numbers (6) – (9) are new areas not previously included on the NRS.

In making this selection we were influenced by judgmental views about those question areas which are more quickly and easily dealt with by self-completion than by structured personal interview.

As an example, lists of consumer durables are more quickly answered by self-completion. On the other hand we took the view that TV viewing data, with their complex matrix of questions and answers, are more easily collected by interviewer-administered questioning.

In order to satisfy ourselves on the feasibility of a self-completion section we have set in motion no fewer than five pilot studies, the fifth of which is only just completed and not yet reported on.

This may seem an excessive amount of pre-testing, and it is certainly more than we had originally envisaged, but as you will see we were carried inexorably forward from one pilot to the next.

The first pre-pilot was a small affair of a dozen interviews carried out with problem respondents – the old and the extremely down-market. If there were to be difficulties anywhere we would find them here. This passed off satisfactorily and we proceeded to a larger pre-pilot to get a better idea of how the technique would work in the field.

This second pre-pilot was also satisfactory and we were now able to tick off some of our crucial questions.

Both interviewers and respondents liked it. Seen from the respondent's point of view the total interview seemed to take slightly longer, but the interviewer was able to use the time in which the informant worked on the self-completion section to do her administrative chores like putting the EML cards in order. As a result from the interviewer's point of view the new technique took up no more time.

The self-completion questionnaire worked, producing similar data to personal interview questions where comparisons were possible. There was no evidence to suggest that the refusal rate was going to be substantially higher nor that the readership findings would be significantly affected. On the other hand the sample had been too small to give us any confidence on these points.

The next stage was the pilot proper, conducted in July 1987. The intention was that this would answer our questions beyond doubt and we would either be able to incorporate the self-completion section from January 1988, or abandon the whole idea.

In the event the findings confirmed the plus points that we already knew; interviewer goodwill, respondent cooperation, satisfactory interview timings. There was a slightly lower response, but the real shock was the readership figures.

In comparison with the NRS data for similar areas at the same period, gross readership for all titles was lower, and readership of women's weeklies was seriously down.

Since the self-completion section is handed to the informant only after the interviewer has administered the readership questions, you may wonder why we should have anticipated a problem, and even more, why we should have encountered one.

Clearly an informant's reactions to the readership questions cannot be influenced by subsequent parts of the interview of which he or she knows nothing. If there is an effect it can only come about because of the interviewer's perception of her task and the way to tackle it.

Despite this setback we decided not to abandon self-completion but to try again. We hypothesised that the findings of the pilot were attributable to its experimental nature; that interviewers felt that the object of the exercise had been to test out self-completion and that the readership questions were relatively unimportant; and that as a result they had not administered them with their usual thoroughness.

The only way to test this hypothesis was to carry out a further experiment, this time on the ongoing NRS. Accordingly the January 1988 NRS sample was split into two matched halves. The control sample was subjected to the normal NRS personal interview and the test sample received a version of the personal interview plus self-completion section. This differed from the July 1987 version in a few details because we wished to make the control and test samples compatible, so that the two sets of data could be added together in the event of the findings being reasonably well matched.

Of course, one benefit of the on-the-survey split sample experimentation is that it is relatively cheap in out-of-pocket expenses. The real cost is that one takes the risk that one might have to discard half the sample.

In the event, we did not need to do that, but the findings of the experiment were deemed inconclusive. The response rate for the test sample was four percentage points lower than that for the control. Gross-all-titles average issue readership was very similar for test and control, but some individual publication groups differed substantially between the two halves.

However, these differences in no way mirrored the pattern shown by the July 1987 pilot.

We felt that we did not yet have strong enough evidence to recommend to JICNARS that the change be made, but on the other hand the development looked far too promising to discard. So we decided on a further experiment using three months, July – September 1988, instead of one month.

We made one change in the experiment. Whereas for both the July 1987 and January 1988 pilots, interviewers were briefed postally, for the July – September pilot interviewer briefing was done personally.

We are now awaiting the results. If they are satisfactory, a self-completion section will form part of the NRS from April 1989.