

LOSS OF READERS AT SCREENING STAGE

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"Without doubt, use of any filter question brings some danger of removing from further consideration people who, if examined more closely, would be shown to be readers"

Michael Brown : Dear Reader¹

Synopsis

The loss of readers at screening stage of the conventional readership questionnaire is a subject that has received attention from researchers over the years. However, while the existence of this effect has not been in doubt, the evidence has been less clear as to the degree because the studies addressing the issue have been based on small or unrepresentative samples.

A PMB study conducted in 1994 was designed to evaluate alternative screening cards, using a nationally representative sample. The same study also yielded valuable new information on the degree of readership loss, both on average and also by publication type and by demographic characteristics.

Analysing these new results in conjunction with an earlier Canadian study, and in conjunction with studies conducted in USA, UK, and Germany, leads to interesting conclusions about the impact of this source of bias in magazine readership measurement.

The Canadian Study - Background

Measuring the proportion of readers lost through screening was used as the criterion for selecting an alternate screening method to replace the current Canadian screening card. The current screening card was felt to be unnecessarily cumbersome and, by showing covers, could influence people to respond in terms of specific issues.

Current PMB Screening Process - Actual covers

Currently, PMB shows two past magazine covers, pasted onto a large black card. Actual covers are used to help the respondent correctly identify the publication. Two covers are shown to avoid the implication that we are asking about a single issue. In addition to the covers, a label is affixed to the card explaining the frequency and distribution method of the publication. A conventional screening question is used: "any issue in the past 6 to 8 months". Respondents are given a 3-point sort board, those answering "yes" or "not sure" are regarded as screening in and proceed to the actual readership questions.

New screening card - Description and Criteria for adoption

A playing-card size card with a black and white logo was tested against the current black card described above. The new card would be adopted (A) if it performed better than the old one by screening out fewer legitimate readers, or (B) if it performed on par with the old card.

Methodology

Two matched samples of 1000 respondents, were taken through the screening and readership procedure, with one critical difference: **the readership questions were asked regardless of the outcome of the screening question.** The current black card was used for one of the samples of 1000, the new logo card was used for the other. The Through-the-book readership question technique was used for the readership questions in each case.

Ideally the full list of publications currently under study would have been used. However, practical considerations required a limit be placed on the number of publications. A systematic rotation was established within each of six sub-cells within language (English and French) and then applied in parallel across both matched cells. In this way, 32 English language publications were shown, each appearing in half the sub-cells, for a maximum of 16 publications per cell. Likewise 28 French language publications were shown, each appearing in half of the French sub-cells, for a maximum of 14 publications per cell.

¹ Dear Reader - Michael Brown

Terminology - Lost readers - as % of readers

The term "lost" readers refers to those readers who would normally not have been included in the readership score because they were screened out. This is most usefully shown as a % of the readership. But that raises a question : — as a % of the unscreened readership , or as a % of the screened readers? In the published literature usage varies and is not always clear. In this document, I have attempted to ensure consistency and the denominator is **unscreened readers** (*ie. including the lost readers*).

Main Results - No advantage for the Proposed Logo Card

- 1 Readership research is full of cases where exhaustive study has found virtually no difference between screening techniques. These results were consistent with that pattern. The proposed logo card, and the current black card with covers, produced very similar levels of "lost" readers. However, the new card had a slightly higher proportion (9%).

	Lost Readers
Current Canadian Black card with covers	8%
Proposed Logo card	9%

- 2 By frequency of publication there were differences that, although not statistically significant, were sufficient to suggest the possibility that the monthly/weekly relationships might be affected:

	Weekly	Monthly	Other
Current Canadian Black card with covers	6%	7%	10%
Proposed Logo card	5%	10%	11%

As to the choice of screening card, the conclusion was that the new card showed no benefit, and some degree of risk in terms of changed relationships. In view of these factors, the proposal to change screening card was discontinued.

New Findings - Differences by publication

The study included most PMB measured publications. It was conducted on a large and representative sample allowing us to look at different classes of publication.

We found significant differences by editorial, ranging from 4% for newsweeklies to 17% for shelter publications. These differences are much larger than the differences between cards that were shown above. (This table reads, out of all readers of newsweeklies, 4% would have been screened out.)

% Loss by editorial

Newsweekly	4%
TV weeklies	7%
General Interest	4%
Women's	9%
Special Interest	11%
Business	14%
Shelter	17%
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Average	8%

Leaving out the middle group (General Interest, Women's and Special Interest), the % loss for the business and shelter magazines is significantly higher (at 95% confidence) than the % loss for the newsweeklies and TV weeklies.

Differences by demographic

Overall, there were higher proportions of lost readers among males, among younger adults, and among people with lower incomes. (This table reads: out of all male readers, 11% were readers who would have been screened out)

Lost readers - by demographic (Average across all publications)			
Male	11%	Female	7%
Age			
18-34	12%	35 +	7%
Income			
<\$50M	11%	\$50M+	7%

The level of lost readers is less severe among demographic groups that are more closely associated with the target audience.

- For women's magazines, the incidence of lost readers is 6% among women, vs. 16% among men.
- Shelter and Business publications were the groups with the highest incidence of lost readers. But for these groups too, the incidence of lost readers was higher among demographic categories who would not likely be the target audience, (males for shelter magazines, lower income for business publications).

Shelter Publications Lost readers - by demographic			
Male	25%	Female	12%
Age			
18-34 years	24	35 +	15%
Income			
<\$50M	19	\$50M+	14%

Business Publications Lost readers - by demographic			
Male	14%	Female	14%
Age			
18-34	21	35-54	11%
Income			
<\$50M	20	\$50M+	11%

Mitigating Factor

The PMB study, like the other international studies reviewed in this paper, may actually exaggerate the results by the very act of re-asking readership questions to people who have just claimed never to read the publication. They could be inducing a level of false answers which serve to confuse the issue by exaggerating the level of lost readers. It is possible that the first answer at the screening stage was the more correct one in some cases.

However, while such an effect is possible, there is no evidence that the differential by publication is amplified in this manner.

Putting The New Canadian Results In Context

There are four other studies referred to in previous Readership Symposia dealing with this subject. They are listed in the Appendix. What is interesting is that linking the results of this Canadian study with those earlier studies one can infer more general results than can be done looking at any one study on its own.

1 The Overall average % lost readers.

The average 8% lost readership is in line with the findings of the other studies. Including this study, 4 out of 5 of the studies have shown average lost readership figures between 7 and 13%. The exception was the Allensbach study with 4% - this lower figure may be related to the screening interval as discussed below.

Commentary : Bearing in mind that these results may have been exaggerated by the research techniques, it is fair to conclude that this is, overall, a relatively modest problem. And just as well, because there is not much that can be done about it. Removing the screening step is not a solution because of the impact on costs, on respondent fatigue and other factors. The absence of the a screening question would cause unexpected effects on the readership results. Such a case has been documented in the Italian readership survey (declines of 15-20% found in the 1976-76 survey when the screen was dropped)².

2 Impact of Screening Interval

A priori, one would expect that the length of the screening interval would have an effect on the number of lost readers. The historical studies are by no means conclusive, but they are not inconsistent with that common sense view. Three studies with a screen interval of 6-8 months produced between 7 and 12% lost readers. The study with the longest screen interval, 12 months, had the lowest number of lost readers.

	Lost Reader %	Screen Interval
Belson	9-13%	3 months
Lysaker	12	6-7 months
PMB	8	6-8 months
Vorster	7-11%	6 months
Allensbach	4	12 months

Sources - see Appendix

3 Effect of Readership Methodology

Hans Vorster's paper presented at the International Readership Symposium in Salzburg (1987) provides the clearest indication on the possibility of differences by readership method. It is one of the few reported studies that has ever included both RR and TTB on the same sample. (It was not a full through the book, but a used a model to estimate TTB results - specific issue readership asked using cover & contents & 1 article).

The TTB results in Hans Vorster's study are quite close to the findings found in our more recent Canadian study. This lends credence to the supposition that, despite sample limitations, the results in Hans Vorster's study are a good indicator of the levels of lost readers.

	Average	Range
TTB	11%	5 - 25 %
RR	7%	3 - 23 %

If Hans Vorster's Recent Reading results can also be generalized, then it is reasonable to conclude that the level of lost readers in RR is somewhat lower than TTB, but the range is similar.

4 Differential between magazines

The new Canadian study gives solid evidence that there is substantial difference in the proportion of lost readers by class of publication, ranging from 4% to 17% by class of publication.

The Hans Vorster study, as noted above, produced similar results (from 5-25% for TTB and 3-23% for RR). The differential appears to be relatively independent of the readership methodology. The somewhat lower figures for RR are partly attributable to the fact that a similar absolute number of lost readers is proportioned to a larger reader base.

Commentary : *How important is the differential between publications ?* It has been noted that there are factors which could mitigate the importance of these results. The differences are less marked among those who might be in the target audience. Also, the differences might have been exaggerated by the technique used to find the number of lost readers. In combination, it can be argued that the impact on publications is relatively unimportant, and is really only one of several biases that can effect readership levels.

However, for some magazines, that may not be a satisfactory answer. If, at the extreme, some publications were really suffering 25% loss of readers (quoting a figure from the Vorster study), then this might represent a serious issue for the publications so affected. It would influence their audiences, their position in cost ranking, their revenue and their business.

Conclusions

- 1 Loss of readers due to the survey process is unavoidable with the current readership technologies. The study provided conclusive evidence regarding the magnitude of that readership loss. The average was 8% across all publications, and was relatively unaffected by the very different screening cards used.
- 2 The study showed substantially different levels of lost readers for different publications, and provides confirmation of the ranges shown in earlier small scale studies for both TTB and RR. The degree of difference (ranging from 4% to 17% by class of magazine) may or may not be commercially significant.
- 3 In Canada, consideration of a simple solution such as extending the screening interval to 12 months would be an appropriate next step. There is a possibility of some reduction in the level of lost readers, and if that were indeed the case, publishers and advertisers alike would benefit from more precise readership data.

Appendix
Proportion Of Lost Readers - Review Of Historical Information

<i>Author & Source</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Publications</i>	<i>% Loss</i>	<i>Readership Method</i>	<i>Screen Interval</i>	<i>Study Description</i>
Bill Belson New Orleans p134	1962	Weekly magazines Monthly magazines	13% 9%	RR	3 month	1362 adults London Intensive Reinterview
Tennstädt & Hansen New Orleans p117	1979	2 House & Garden publications	4%	TTB	12 month	Allensbach Germany
Dick Lysaker New Orleans p211	1979	6 monthly magazines	12%	TTB	6 or 7 months	USA Lab test 208 interviews
Hans Vorster Salzberg #12	1984	11 magazines	7% ³ 11%	RR Modified TTB= cover/contents/ 1 article	6 months	600 magazine readers English Canada

³ These figures are percentaged as base of all readers including screened out readers