

INCREASING THE LENGTH OF ASSIGNMENT - THE EFFECT ON NRS RESPONSE RATES

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Synopsis

There is a general concern over falling response rates on the British NRS. A number of experiments have been undertaken in the past to find ways of increasing the response rate. However, improvements are constrained by the fact that the NRS reporting cycle is monthly and that all fieldwork for a given month has to be completed by the end of that month.

The current assignment length (which consists of 21 addresses) is one week. If necessary, the assignment can be re-issued (that is, sent out to be worked again) although because of the monthly reporting cycle of NRS, fieldwork for a given month must be completed within the fieldwork month.

A test to improve response rates by increasing the assignment length to ten weeks was conducted in the last quarter of 1998 in 70 sampling points. The test incorporated new field monitoring procedures and included advance phone calls and letters to respondents.

The test was a success in that it raised response rates considerably but not in the way we had intended. This paper presents the method, results, and discusses the findings with a view to adopting such procedures on the British NRS.

Background

As a result of the falling response rates on the British NRS a number of experiments have been undertaken in the past to find ways of increasing the response rate. A summary of this work was reported at the 1997 Worldwide Readership Symposium in Vancouver by Erhard Meier¹. In his paper, Erhard Meier highlighted the possibility of an experiment to test the effect of lengthening the assignment that was under discussion at the time. This test is described in this paper.

Objective

The objective of this test was to establish whether extending the assignment period, combined with new field procedures, could improve response rate and if so, by how much and in what way.

Method

Prior to the main test, a small scale pilot of five sampling points was conducted to test the practicalities of the new field procedures. Following this pilot, a number of refinements were made to the original design for the main test.

An important part of the test was the fieldwork monitoring unit, set up especially for this test. This unit was responsible for keeping in contact with all the interviewers, ensuring interviewers worked on agreed days, discussing progress, advising on call times and also motivating. Although this unit had more day to day contact with interviewers than on the standard NRS, particularly regarding days and times they would be working, interviewers, with their 'on the ground' knowledge and experience, were still allowed a degree of freedom over when best to call and what approach to take.

70 sampling points across Great Britain were taken from the main NRS sample (July-December 1998). The points were skewed towards areas with expected poor response rates using a geo-demographics analysis system, ACORN.

Each assignment was scheduled to last 10 weeks, split into three stages:

Stage 1

At the initial stage, interviewers could work 28 hours and were instructed to work on specific days within the two week field period. They could also work on other days within this period, but only after consultation with the fieldwork monitoring unit. Interviewers were asked to give details about the non-productive addresses, e.g. "respondent works in day time"; "family away on holiday for seven days", etc. This was in order to give as much information for the next two stages..

¹ Erhard Meier - "NRS Response Rates: Experiments and Investigations".

Stage 2

After the initial stage, all paper work (detailing contact results) was returned to the office in order to calculate a response rate. Points which achieved a response rate of less than 70% and/or that had five or more unproductive addresses/persons where a contact interview/main interview had not been achieved were automatically re-issued, (that is, sent out to be worked again).

Prior to points being re-issued to the field interviewers, the second stage of the test came into play. In Stage 2, lasting three weeks, all unproductive addresses/persons from the first stage were attempted to be contacted from the office in order to gain co-operation to take part. Contact was initially tried via the telephone. If the telephone contact was unsuccessful, a letter was mailed, several versions of which were available depending on the outcome of the initial stage. The letter was used to inform the household/person that an interviewer would be calling in the near future.

It should be noted that some households/persons were not contacted by telephone or letter prior to re-issue where, on judgement, it was felt this would not be beneficial, for example in cases of very strong refusals. This judgement was based on discussions between the fieldwork monitoring unit and the first stage interviewer.

Stage 3

Stage 3 of the test, the re-issue stage, was scheduled to last five weeks, during which time face-to-face contact was again attempted with all unproductive addresses/persons. Interviewers could only work up to 10 hours and their call times were agreed in advance by the monitoring unit.

The monitoring unit discussed the information gathered at the first two stages with the re-issue interviewer in order to make their time more productive. For example, there was little point in the interviewer making calls on a household in the day time if it had been established that the respondent was a full time worker.

Overall Results

The NRS response rate consists of two separate stages:

- a **contact stage** where addresses are called upon in order to gather household information and therefore determine the individual(s) to be interviewed
- a **selected person stage** where the individual(s) selected are contacted to be interviewed

The response rate of the test was substantially higher at 65.7% compared with 60.7% during NRS July-December 1998. It should be noted that the test results were weighted to be nationally representative in order to be comparable with the main NRS.

Table 1 below shows that improvements were seen at both the contact and selected person stages.

Table 1 – Response Rate Stages

	Test	NRS July-December 1998
Final contact response rate	92.9%	90.4%
Final selected person rate	70.6%	67.1%
Final response rate	65.7%	60.7%

As can be seen from Table 2, there was a small improvement in the response rate before re-issue (Stage 3 of the test) when compared to the current NRS. However, a significant improvement can be seen at the re-issue stage. This will be discussed in more detail later in this paper.

Table 2 – Response Rates before and after re-issue

	Test	NRS July-December 1998
Response rate before re-issue	60.3%	59.2%
Re-issue addition	5.4%	1.5%
Final response rate	65.7%	60.7%

Level of Re-issues

So what were the characteristics of the test re-issue procedures which made such a difference compared to standard NRS procedures? Firstly, and most importantly, a substantially higher proportion of points were re-issued in the test: 81% compared to 22%.

One of the reasons for this increased proportion of re-issues was because the rules used for the re-issuing of points in the test were more stringent than the NRS. In the current NRS, up to 50% of points could be re-issued. However, as fieldwork must be completed within the given fieldwork month it is often not possible to work these points because the field period closes. There are also practical difficulties in booking interviewers at short notice as there is only a finite number of interviewers who are qualified to work on the NRS.

In contrast for the test, there was a longer period of time available for re-issues and special resources were made available to maximise the success of the test. The question is whether such procedures could be maintained in the long term on the main survey.

It should be noted that in the test, a different interviewer was used in just over half the points that were re-issued. This is similar to the NRS.

Calls and Interviews per point

Looking at the results in more detail in Table 3, it can be seen that the results, in terms of number of calls and achieved interviews at the average point, were fairly similar at the first and re-issue stage between the test and the current NRS.

On average, approximately two extra interviews were achieved at the re-issue stage in both the test and the current NRS.

Table 3 – Average Calls and Interviews per point

	Test	NRS July-December 1998
First stage (before re-issue)		
Calls per point	101.7	100.5
Calls per achieved interview	7.2	7.3
Interviews per point	14.1	13.8
Re-issue stage		
Calls per re-issued point	27.7	33.2
Calls per achieved interview	15.7	16.8
Interviews per re-issued point	1.8	2.0
Total		
Calls per point	124.3	107.8
Calls per achieved interview	8.0	7.6
Interviews per point	15.6	14.2

Non-Response Analysis

The levels of refusals and no replies of the contact and the selected person stage for the test are shown in Tables 4 and 5 respectively.

We can see that the proportion of 'no replies' at the contact stage was somewhat reduced following the re-issue stage while the refusal rate remained constant.

Table 4 – Non-Response Analysis – Contact Stage

	Test – Total
Eligible households	1,414
First stage (before re-issue)	
Refusals	3%
No Reply	11%
Overall (after re-issue)	
Refusals	3%
No Reply	9%

At the selected person stage, all levels of non-contact were reduced after the re-issue stage apart from ‘no replies’. This may be explained because the increase in response at the contact stage produced a larger pool of potential respondents who were not then converted to an interview.

Table 5 – Non-Response Analysis – Selected Person Stage

	Test
All possibles	1,334
First stage (before re-issue)	
No Reply	7%
Away / Out	7%
Refusals / Busy Temporarily	17%
Other	3%
Overall (after re-issue)	
No Reply	9%
Away / Out	4%
Refusals / Busy Temporarily	16%
Other	2%

Although the non-contacts were reduced at both the contact and selected person stages, the levels were not as low as we had hoped them to be. Although the re-issue period was spread over five weeks, interviewers could only work up to ten hours. It is possible that, given more time, the non-contact level could be reduced further. However, we were conscious of balancing response with cost efficiency in the possible future context of adopting such procedures onto the full-scale NRS.

The Telephone and Letter Stages

Following the initial stage and prior to re-issue, the plan was that all non-productive households would be contacted.

Of the 679 non-productive households, 573 were selected for telephone contact. It should be noted that all non-productive addresses were sent to be re-issued, although some addresses were not contacted at the telephone stage where it was judged not to be beneficial, as described earlier.

In only 294 of the 573 households selected for telephone contact was a phone number obtained. This was either from the interviewer gathering this information at the initial stage or the phone number being ‘looked up’ through the national telephone network. This proportion may seem low but without a named individual, as happened in many cases, it is very difficult to obtain a match of address to telephone number.

On average, just under two calls per household were made. In only 22% of households contacted (or 9% of all non-productive households) was a positive reply to gain an interview achieved. In the majority of cases this was a general agreement that an interviewer could call at the household. In only a very few cases was a fixed appointment made, although the telephone interviewers were advised against making fixed appointments if possible to give the re-issue interviewer more flexibility.

Although it cannot be proved, it is possible that those households where we obtained a positive response would have been receptive to a re-issue interview anyway, without the advance telephone call.

If no positive response was achieved at the telephone stage, a letter was mailed to potential respondents/households. This occurred in three quarters of non-productive households. No quantifiable effect on the re-issue response rate could be observed.

Although the telephone/postal follow up stage did produce positive responses, the level of contribution was fairly small. Overall, this stage was not felt to have made a discernible difference to the final response rates.

The Fieldwork Monitoring Unit

On average, nine phone calls per point were made by the fieldwork monitoring unit to the interviewers.

Before starting work on the initial assignment, interviewers were instructed to contact the unit to confirm on which days they would be working. After each day's work, interviewers called the unit to discuss progress.

After the first stage and the telephone stage, the intention was that the unit would provide re-issue interviewers with advice for the re-issue stage, e.g. "call in the evening between 7 and 8pm". In practice, there was only limited advice that this unit could provide to the interviewers. The majority of interviewers who worked on the test (and the NRS) are experienced at pre-selected address work. In assessing the first stage call patterns we found that interviewers were varying calls by day and time of day as we would have hoped. As we had limiting success at the second stage (in only 9% of non-productive households was a positive reply to gain an interview achieved) there little advice that could be passed on to the interviewers.

We believe that the communication between the interviewers and the unit was important for the successful completion of the test in terms of maintaining motivation levels and control over the whole field process. All interviewers who worked on the test worked on the standard NRS at the same time. A concern was that interviewers would work to the same pattern as they did on the NRS. A key role of the unit was to ensure that interviewers made best use of the increased time made available. This could only be achieved through regular communication. This was especially true at the re-issue stage which was spread over five weeks. It was important for a central contact to monitor when interviewers were working.

Conclusions

The test method described in this paper raised response rates substantially when compared to the current NRS.

The improvements in the response rates were largely achieved through a very high proportion of points being re-issued rather than through higher strike rates compared to the current NRS.

This was somewhat disappointing. We had hypothesised that by increasing the assignment length we could increase the additional interviews at the point level, particularly in areas with low response. Although there was no reason to believe that the proportion of refusals would be substantially reduced it was hoped that a sizeable proportion of people who were 'not available' during the shorter time period would be converted. With a much longer time frame for respondents to be interviewed, a family, for example, away on holiday would now have a greater chance of being contacted.

The fieldwork monitoring unit was felt to be an important factor in the test: the regular communication with interviewers brought benefits in increased motivation of interviewers and control over the whole field process. However, a quantifiable effect in terms of more productive use of interviewers' time was not observed on the basis of the test.

The telephone/postal follow up stage was not felt to have made a discernible difference to the final response rates.

The Future

On the basis of the test findings, Ipsos-RSL's recommendations to NRS Ltd were to retain the fieldwork monitoring unit but not use the telephone/postal follow up stage which did not prove productive. This was important as it would reduce the overall length of assignment so the reporting schedule would not have to be dramatically altered. (A potential drawback of implementing the full test procedures was that data would be released approximately two months later than normal.)

At present the cost of implementing these additional procedures is felt to be too great to adopt onto the full survey. Adopting the procedures on a smaller level, say London and the South East of England, has been considered but this would not be likely to produce adequate response improvements that could be guaranteed to justify the additional costs.

Ipsos-RSL together with NRS Ltd continue to look at ways of improving response rates to maintain the quality of the survey.

