CAN WE BALANCE INTRUSIVENESS WITH THE NEEDS OF READERSHIP MEASUREMENT?

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1.0 Introduction

Response rates are often identified as one of the most critical issues in readership research. The greatest fear is that those who do not respond to our questionnaires may be quite different from those who take the time to answer the surveys – whether by telephone, door-to-door, mail, or through other means. Ignoring response rates, and the potential bias by not being able to include the views of those who do not wish to take part in a particular survey, could lead to serious errors in the conclusions reached about the readership of selected publications.

Unfortunately the issue is compounded by the fact that response rates are declining. There is evidence presented by both CASRO in the US and CAMRO and PMRS in Canada that response rates have been steadily declining over the past 10 to 15 years. When looking at continuous tracking studies, PMRS noted in 1997 that response rates (defined as co-operative contacts as a proportion of total eligible numbers) had declined by approximately 14% over a period of four years. Over the same time period, refusal rates (defined as refusals as a proportion of total asked) increased steadily by 7%. In the United States, Walker reported to CMOR that refusal rates had increased from 53% in 1992 to 58% in 1995 (a change of 5%).

It is interesting to note that in the review and analysis of response rates by PMRS from more than 400 projects, two were specifically excluded – PMB (the principal magazine readership study in Canada) and NADbank (the newspaper readership study). The two were excluded because they "set response rate objectives". The PMRS study noted that "as of 1994 these studies had managed to hold refusal rates steady but the amount of effort required increased in terms of number of callbacks, incentives, and training.

With the increase in the volume of telemarketing, and fund raising solicitations, and the increasing penetration of answering machines and other similar call screening technologies, there would appear to be little hope in sight that this trend will change. Unfortunately, this is in an environment where respondents say they understand the value of the research (and would take part) – they just don't want to be sold something, pressured to donate funds, to be called at inconvenient times, or harassed.

In a study conducted by the market research industry in Canada in 1995, 38% of respondents said *"they found it very or fairly annoying to take part in a survey"*. Comparable figures for those who found it annoying to be "contacted for selling products or services" was 82% and for "collecting money" 61%. Respondents agreed (83%) that "research surveys give people an opportunity to provide feedback to manufacturers and other organizations about the services they provide. On a similar note, 78% agreed that "the survey research industry serves a useful purpose".

This clearly demonstrates that people are willing to participate in survey research provided that one does not insult their intelligence nor harass them. Yet in media research we do exactly that. In order to maintain response rate targets, we looked to increasing the number of calls. This was primarily aimed at those who were not at home – those who travelled more, spent more time at restaurants, those who spent more time out with friends. There was every reason to believe that the readership habits of these people did in fact differ substantially from those we were able to reach in the first two or three calls. There is every reason to believe that a person who is "not at home", or "busy" may be different from the person who takes part in a survey. But, is the person who refuses to take part in a survey different in demographics or habits from the balance of the population?

We even went so far as to conclude that perhaps where one interviewer was unable to gain the cooperation of a respondent, another with a different approach or more experience could succeed. We proceeded to add the requirement that, unless the household and/ or respondent refused more than once, they still represented a possible interview. We then stretched that requirement to three refusals … and in some cases to four.

We stand at the crossroads. Governments in many countries are now intervening in the industry. Initially we were caught in the web of "privacy". The scope of "privacy" tended to encompass data and information about an individual – about their household. Now, as government agencies look more closely at the industry, the definition is changing to encompass "harassment". Surprisingly perhaps, it is only in the past two years that senior government officials (including both elected and the civil service) have acknowledged that there is a difference between survey research, and telemarketing and fund raising solicitation.

Do we really need this many calls to a respondent or household that has already refused to participate on more than one occasion? Are those who initially refuse so different? Do we need a different set of rules? Are there other means we can introduce to increase cooperation and, initially stabilize, then move to improve response rates?

In San Francisco, we argued strongly that the effort in readership surveys be defined by "effort" and not by response rates. In that paper, we recommended that the number of attempts at any household should be limited to seven and no more than two refusals. This was based on the finding that after seven calls, the measurement of readership of 69 publications did not differ by more than 0.1% and that no element of the demographic profile differed by more than 0.3%.

Once a person has twice said "no" to participating in a survey, surely we should not continue to harass them to take part.

In this paper, we continue to build on the experience from San Francisco using one wave of an on-going study of newspaper readership in the province of Quebec. Each wave of the study is based on the completion of 6,400 telephone interviews. The specifications of the study call for an overall response rate of 60% from a fixed frame sample. There are a number of criteria that can be applied to remove a household from further attempts – the one usually applied is the achievement of four refusals. This is too stringent and certainly qualifies as harassment.

The need for an interim report demonstrated that where the results did differ slightly it was more an effect of time of year rather than response rate.

2.0 Newspaper Readership – A Further Example

At the time this paper was prepared, PMB (Print Measurement Bureau) had commissioned two waves of a newspaper readership measurement study covering seven markets in the province of Quebec. The first study was based on the completion of 6,400 telephone interviews with an average response rate of 60%. In two of the major markets (Montreal and Quebec City), the telephone interview principally covers readership and demographics. The interview is approximately 15 minutes in length and is followed by an invitation to complete a more detailed survey mailed to their household. In the other five markets, the telephone interview covers not only readership and demographics but also the use of a limited set of products and services. This interview is approximately 20 to 25 minutes in length.

Interviews in Montreal are conducted in English or French. Interviews in the other markets are conducted in French. For the 1994/95 study, the interviews in the Ottawa/ Hull area were conducted only in French. In the 1996/97 study one English language newspaper was added to the study and the sample size in the market was increased to 1,100. For several reasons, it was necessary to accelerate the interviewing in this market and deliver a minimum number of interviews for the preparation of an interim report prior to the normal completion of the study.

The interviewing in most markets takes place over a period of approximately 40 weeks (ten months) – mid September through to June of the following year. For this study, it was necessary to prepare a report for the Ottawa/ Hull area in February (only 20 weeks into the study).

One of the newspapers had undergone major changes. As a result, it was important to obtain a measure of the impact of the changes as soon as possible. Even though the release of the sample was accelerated, there was still insufficient time to achieve the target response rate (60%) by the time the first release of data was required. However subsequent analyses undertaken once the entire study was completed revealed that the readership measurements did not change after even the first five to six weeks of interviewing.

The unweighted readership data for eight newspapers (represented by weekday, Saturday, and Sunday issues) measured in the market are presented in the following table. The data is presented for the first wave of sample released.

Readership Measurement
(Sample – Wave 1)

Week	No. of Interviews	Response Rate	Newspaper A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	#	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1	113	13.7	23	35	19	23	35	26	8	12
2	167	20.2	20	34	16	20	39	28	11	13
3	193	23.4	18	35	16	18	40	27	11	13
4	228	27.6	18	37	17	18	41	28	11	14
5	270	32.7	18	36	17	17	43	28	12	14
6	297	36.0	17	36	18	17	42	27	13	15
7	314	38.0	17	36	18	17	43	27	13	15
8	328	39.7	16	35	17	16	42	27	13	16
9	331	40.0	17	35	18	17	42	27	13	15
10	335	40.6	17	35	17	17	42	27	13	15
11	335	40.6	17	35	17	17	42	27	13	15
12	337	40.8	17	35	18	17	42	26	13	15
13	339	41.0	17	35	18	17	42	26	13	16
14	339	41.0	17	35	18	17	42	26	13	16
15	340	41.2	16	36	18	17	42	26	13	16
16	340	41.2	16	36	18	17	42	26	13	16
17	350	42.4	16	36	18	16	42	27	13	16
18	358	43.3	16	36	18	16	42	27	13	16
19	365	44.2	16	36	18	16	42	27	14	17
20	387	46.9	17	36	19	17	42	28	14	18
43	487	59.0	15	37	20	16	43	29	15	17

By the end of the interviewing process (week 43), a total of 487 interviews had been completed from the wave 1 sample. The overall response rate was 59.0% (with a 35% refusal rate in Ottawa and 25% in Hull). Incidentally, by that time, all of these respondents and/ or households had refused at least four times to take part in the survey. By the end of the complete interviewing process (three sample waves and 43 weeks of interviewing), a total of 1,283 interviews had been completed in this market across all waves with the following results (unweighted).

Readership Measurement
(All waves)

Wave	No. of Interviews	Response Rate	Newspaper A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
	#	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
One	487	59.0	15	37	20	16	43	29	15	17
All	1,283	57.0	17	34	19	18	41	26	14	15

The overall response rate in this market (Ottawa/ Hull combined) was 57%. It should be noted that, while the readership measurement varied by 1% to 3% between wave one and the total of all waves, there is ample evidence that the readership was more affected by the timing of the interview rather than by the stage in the callback process.

We believe that this is again firm evidence for the consideration of a limit on the number of times a respondent, or household, is called upon to refuse before they are finally left alone. We would strongly urge the readership research community to accept that two refusals be a limit.

There is no issue to continued calling to those numbers that are "busy" or where there is "no answer". This is a realistic approach to increasing response rates given the available budget in terms of both time and money.

3.0 Impact of Incentives

If we are to limit the number of refusals in the survey process, what other means are possible to encourage participation in survey research. We pay respondents to attend focus groups; we often include an incentive in mail surveys; and we pay people to take part in a personal interview process – whether door-to-door, mall, or pre-recruitment. Yet we rarely pay for telephone interviews, except under unusual circumstances – such as trying to generate higher response rates. For the past few years, we have been experimenting with offering monetary incentives to take part in telephone surveys if the respondent has already refused on at least one occasion. Following is one example.

Earlier, this year, we were asked to undertake a study of newspaper readership in a major metropolitan market in Canada. Every effort was requested by the client to achieve as high a response rate as possible. On the other hand, there was not sufficient time to complete repeated callbacks or to implement all of the processes required to overcome repeated refusals. Where three to four months may have been required to achieve a 60% response rate target, in fact only four to five weeks were actually available. As the study neared the required reporting date, response rates still languished in the low 20's.

A decision was made to offer a monetary incentive to those who had initially refused the interview. These people were contacted again and offered $10 to complete a 15 minute telephone interview. If they required, the money would be forwarded to them in advance and the interviewer would arrange to callback in a few days to complete the interview (once it was likely that the person had received the incentive). In some cases, people agreed to do the interview at the time the incentive was offered and trusted that the money would be forwarded to them. Incidentally it was interesting to note that some people who had refused initially agreed at this stage to take part in the survey but did not want the incentive!

The final sample size in the study was 600 interviews. Of these, 24% were completed with people who agreed to take the incentive. One of the concerns of the client was that the readership patterns of these people could be different from those who did not require an incentive to complete the survey. The results show that there may be some foundation to this concern.

For some newspapers the differences are statistically significant. While not statistically significant for other newspapers, or specific editions of some newspapers, the readership of **every** newspaper (and **every** edition) measured in the market was lower among those who received an incentive. The results are presented in the following table.

Newspaper Readership by Incentive Level

	Received Incentive?	
	No	**Yes**
Base:	*455*	*145*
Newspaper "A"	38.1	37.2
Newspaper "B"	55.8	51.2
Newspaper "C"	57.4	51.7
Newspaper "D"	22.1	13.0
Newspaper "E"	37.6	30.9
Newspaper "F"	21.3	17.2
Newspaper "G"	16.5	11.9
Newspaper "H"	22.6	19.8
Newspaper "I"	13.5	6.6
Newspaper "J"	11.5	11.1
Newspaper "K"	21.1	18.2
Newspaper "L"	10.4	9.0

It was interesting to note that *a priori*, people made assumptions about the type of people who would initially refuse to do an interview then agree once they were offered a monetary incentive. Higher income and more educated were some of the characteristics assigned to these individuals. In fact, this is not the case. Following is a comparison of the demographic profile of the two groups.

Newspaper Readership by Incentive Level

	Received Incentive?	
	No	**Yes**
Base:	*455*	*145*
Gender		
Male	47.5	48.5
Female	52.5	51.5
Age		
18 to 24	11.9	13.8
25 to 34	26.1	15.2
35 to 49	28.6	39.6
50 to 64	17.4	19.3
65 or over	15.0	12.1
Household Income		
Under $30,000	7.2	7.6
$30,000 to $49,999	17.2	22.3
$50,000 to $74,999	18.2	20.7
$75,000 +	32.4	29.6
Education		
Less than high school	8.0	10.6
High school	23.8	25.1
Some post secondary	34.6	31.7
University graduate	32.5	32.6

It is interesting to note that the greatest differences are with the 25 to 49 age group and those with household income between $30,000 and $49,999. It is interesting that this is the demographic profile of those who do **not** generally match the demographic profile of the newspapers that showed a significant decline in readership among those receiving an incentive.

At the conclusion of this particular study, a suggestion was made (albeit tongue-in-cheek), that perhaps increasing response rates through the offering of incentives is not a good strategy for print readership measurement

4.0 Government Trends in Canada

Finally, the author is the current President of the Canadian Survey Research Council, the industry body representing survey research to government legislative groups. Several of these groups are now turning their attention from topics such as fraudulent telemarketing to issues of privacy. To these legislators, privacy includes calling at inconvenient times and continued calling, or harassment. Having represented the survey research industry before several parliamentary committees, looking to introduce more stringent controls over survey research, it is difficult to respond to direct queries of whether, in my opinion, calling someone even a second time after an initial refusal does not constitute harassment.

There is no doubt that we will face the risk of government intervention in Canada, and probably also in the United States, if the industry does not take steps itself to protect the public from these practices. To my knowledge, readership measurement studies are the only ones that place such stringent requirements on response rates and, by inference, repeated callbacks. I do not think this will be perceived as a defensible position before the legislative bodies, or perhaps even before our own industry associations.

On the other hand, government would look favourably to any group that demonstrated alternatives to reaching their target audience in a less intrusive manner.

5.0 Conclusions

In my more than 20 years experience in the survey research field, readership surveys are one of the very few where the attainment of a minimum response rate is a critical design element (and refusals are an important element of that equation). Almost all clients in other fields look to the attainment of a specific number of interviews without regard to the response rate. The approach is best typified by the instruction *"get me 500 interviews as quickly as possible"*. One of the arguments for the setting of stringent response rates for readership research is the amount of money at stake in the decision process. However, we could argue that other studies have just at much at risk based on the results. New product launches requiring investments of $50 million to $100 million may ride on the results of 500 or 1,000 interviews (and without any regard to response rate).

It is perhaps interesting to note that in its industry standards, CAMRO (Canadian Association of Marketing Research Organizations) does not have any requirement for minimum response rates – just that the response rate must be communicated to the client either as part of the final report or in separate correspondence. PMRS (Professional Marketing Research Society) has no minimum standards; however, a formal sub-committee has been meeting for more than five years to monitor response rates and offer suggestions for improvement. For most studies, "speed is of the essence". It almost a *"full speed ahead and damn the torpedoes"* mentality.

We need a compromise. "Intrusiveness" needs to become part of the equation. Can we balance the stringent needs of readership measurement with need to be less intrusive? We firmly believe the answer is **"yes"**. We have the evidence that respondents are positively inclined towards survey research – that, for the most part, they understand and accept the need.

As in San Francisco, we would urge the adoption of criteria based on "level of effort" rather than a response rate target. In our on-going quest, we would urge consideration of a policy based on,

- ✓ continued calling to numbers that are "busy" or for which there is "no answer" to the extent of the budget (whether measured by time, money, or both); and,
- ✓ maximum of two refusals at any household (whether household, respondent, or a combination).

Research suppliers should be encouraged to look at other alternatives for gaining the cooperation of respondents including advertising and payment for the respondent's time. However, there should be some caution. We need to know more about the impact of incentives on response rates. Are we changing the profile of the respondent? While we have presented the results of only one study here, anecdotal evidence from other suppliers in the Canadian marketplace indicates that the results are uniform across other studies.

Finally, it should be incumbent on the research supplier to demonstrate that, to the best of their efforts, the profile of non-respondents does not differ significantly from that of respondents.