

# IN SEARCH OF A RESPONDENT

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## **Introduction**

The most recent National Readership Study or NRS as it is popularly referred to in India has just been completed. The response rate achieved has been a staggering 92%. This is a remarkable improvement over the NRS done in 1990 when 30% non-response was experienced. The most obvious reason for the increased response is the methodological changes in sampling that has been incorporated since 1990. These changes relate to the substitution of those households, which were originally chosen randomly for the study but could not be located. This paper examines the impact of this substitution policy (to improve the response rate) on the composition of the sample and measurement of readership. More importantly, it attempts to identify other environmental or societal reasons for refusal of a chosen individual to respond to a NRS interview. To do this, the paper examined the profile of non-responders in NRS'99, conducted group discussions amongst NRS non-responders and interviewers to develop hypothesis. Finally the paper discusses results of two small studies conducted to identify discriminating psychographic characteristics of non respondents and also the impact of an incentive offer of an altruistic credit (certain sum donated on their behalf to charity).

## **The NRS in India**

NRS is one of the largest commercial market research studies done in India. The 1999 version involved interviewing over 110,000 adults (aged 15 years and over) in 818 urban centres of various sizes and from different geographical territories to measure the readership of 457 publications in 13 languages apart from English and Hindi – the national language. Additionally NRS'99 had a capsule to cover rural India where three out every four Indians live but readership is at a premium. The rural capsule covers over 2000 villages where about 62,000 adults are spoken to gauge their readership habits among other things.

Needless to say conducting the NRS in India involved operations that are gigantic in proportion and the top three research companies of India put their combined might together to tackle the challenges it poses. It is in the context of the size of the NRS that an issue like response rate needs to be appreciated. Apart from all the research ramifications of response rate, it has major implications on the commercial parameters of the study – the time taken to publish the result and the cost involved in conducting the study.

## **The NRS Methodology**

Before examining the issue of response rate, it will be worthwhile to briefly review the methodology followed for NRS this year. India as per the last census (1991) has 3697 urban areas. NRS in 1999 went to 825 of them. The Socio-Cultural Regions (SCRs) were used as the primary stratum for sampling (there are 70 SCRs, after eliminating areas not covered by the NRS). In each SCR, all towns having a population of 100,000 and above as well as all other towns, which publish a newspaper or a periodical of interest to NRS, were selected automatically. Of the rest a pre determined number of towns within a SCR were chosen using the PPS method (i.e. Probability proportional to the population size of each town).

The selection of respondents followed a three-step procedure. In the first – cluster heads or starting addresses of fieldwork were chosen randomly from the electoral rolls. Depending on the class of town a cluster of 3 to 8 households were again randomly chosen from the electoral rolls around the first chosen address. Thus all the households to be interviewed stayed in addresses chosen from the electoral rolls.

Substitution was allowed only at the household level. If the selected address was not locatable, then an address previous or next to the chosen address was utilised. In the selected household an interview to ascertain the details of the members and the usage of various products and services in the household were ascertained from the householder or any adult aged 15 years and above.

Post which the respondent for the readership questionnaire was chosen randomly from the list of members aged 15 years and above. Three separate visits were made to interview the selected respondent. The respondent was declared a casualty only after that but was not substituted in the sample even after that.

### Response Rate - 1999 vs Earlier

Following this methodology of choosing the respondents NRS 1999 in India managed to interview 92% of the originally chosen respondents. This rate of response represents a significant improvement over the success in interviewing the chosen respondents in 1990.

**Table 1 : Response Rate – 1990 vs 1999**

1990	1999
70%	92 %

**Table 2 : Substitution Policy – 1990 vs 1999**

Substitution	1990	1999
Household	Not Allowed	Allowed
Individual	Not Allowed	Not Allowed

Indeed the increase in success rate in 1999 can be directly attributable to the substantial relaxation in the rigour of selection of the household (the stringency of selection of the individual member within a household and lack of permissibility of his/her substitution has remained unchanged between 1990 and 1999). Clearly thus it raises the question whether the relaxation has contaminated the sample and, therefore, affected the readership.

### Effect of Household Substitution

In the next section of the paper we discuss the rationale of this change in the household substitution policy and its effect on the profile of the people interviewed.

As mentioned earlier, each address used for the interview is selected randomly from electoral rolls (NRS'95 being an exception to this rule – where only 'cluster-heads' were selected from electoral rolls). The investigator is required to locate the address, list all adults in that household and select one person by KISH method. While the investigator is also provided with the list of voters in that household, it is not imperative for him to actually locate the voter. As long as the address is located, he can go ahead with the interview with a randomly selected member in that household.

This relaxation is provided from the point of view that:

- while the target group for the study was any adult 15 years of age or older, the age eligibility criterion for voters in India is 18 years
- Even for the 18 years+ segment, the voter list may not be comprehensive as the new voters, who have recently attained the voting age are not listed.
- Further, with a rapid growth in urban areas, the development of new dwellings is not always in a neat and systematic way. Addresses some times are non-specific and extremely difficult to find. This invariably leads to a very large proportion of addresses not being found
- To boost the success rate, we also allow the interviewer to proceed with the interview if the selected voter is located but not the specific address. This is a possibility, as there may be some error in writing down the address and instead of "23-B, Mahatma Gandhi Road" the address could be read by the interviewer as "238, Mahatma Gandhi Road"
- Lastly, when the addresses are copied from the electoral rolls, as a precautionary measure the previous and the following address is also selected. The interviewer is allowed to do the previous/following address if the original address is not locatable.

Indeed the eventual success in locating the randomly chosen starting addresses from the electoral rolls in NRS 1999 – bears testimony to the extent of the problem existing in urban India

	%
• Address located	66
• Listed member located in the neighbourhood	5
• Next/previous address located	14
• None of the above	15

In NRS '99, thus they located 66% of the addresses handed over to the interviewers. In fact in some cities the strike rate goes down to as small a figure as 35%.

In NRS'90, no substitution of addresses was allowed – if none of the 3 addresses (original, next or previous) are locatable; it was considered as a “household casualty” (as seen in the 15% of the cases above). However, in NRS'99 the interviewers were allowed to go to an address, which was the “closest” to the selected address.

The question really is whether this is contaminating the sample and distorting the findings. To understand this, we have tried to examine the profiles of two types of households:

1. When the address was located or at least the voter was found in a nearby address or where the original address was not located but the previous/following address was located.
2. Where only a “close by” address could be located.

In the table below, the composition of these two samples has been examined in terms of SEC of the households.

**Table 4: Profile Of The Sample By Address Location Method**

	A1/A2	B1/B2	C	D	E1/E2
<b>Original/Previous/ Following Address</b>	12	20	22	22	25
<b>Closest address</b>	11	19	24	22	24

The following table examines the education level of the Chief Wage earners in the two categories of address location defined earlier.

**Table 5 : Education of the Chief wage earner by address location method**

	Illiterate	Below SSC	SSC but not a graduate	Graduate and above
<b>Original/Previous/ Following Address</b>	13	35	31	21
<b>Closest</b>	12	34	33	20

And lastly given below is the readership profile of the respondents in the two categories.

**Table 6 : Readership by Address Location Method**

%

	Any Daily	Any Magazine	Any Publication
<b>Original/Previous/ Following Address</b>	42	28	50
<b>Closest</b>	44	27	50

It is apparent that no great or substantive differences exist between the SEC levels of the three categories. The share of SEC seldom varies by more than a percent or two. Similarly, education levels of the Chief Wage Earner of households chosen through the two methods do not vary significantly. And also the reach of publications is nearly the same in the two groups.

Evidently, even when some discretion is given to the interviewers to select the closest address, there does not seem to be any significant distortion in the sample – as one would have suspected.

The end sum is quite conclusive – on a sample of 1,10,000, only 65% of the randomly chosen addresses could be located. Thus not allowing the freedom to the interviewers to choose alternate addresses would have resulted in a decrease of 35% sample size for the same research cost.

On the other hand, the households included through the relaxed address location method do not significantly alter the composition of the sample. The household substitution policy followed in NRS'99 is thus both design wise acceptable and commercially efficient.

**Individual Casualty**

The second aspect of methodology, which impinges on the response rate, is the rule pertaining to the selection and pursuit of the individual who has been bestowed the honour of answering the readership questionnaire.

In NRS 1999 once an individual is selected he is relentlessly pursued. Attempts are made to contact him over at least 3 days and times. If even all this effort fails to result in an interview, the chase is terminated and the selected respondent termed as an “individual casualty”. This was the method followed in NRS 1990 as well. This essentially means that the improvement in response rate from 70% to 92% between the two studies (1990 & 1997) has been solely due to the household substitution and not individual substitution.

Moreover, the level of this casualty seems quite low and, therefore, its potential to significantly influence the findings is limited. Additionally, though small, the non response skew was corrected by appropriate weighting of the data to the representative profile as generated through the household compositions derived from the listing of all members in the households contacted for eventual selection of one through the KISH method.

**The Core Issue**

The argument that has been put forward against substitution of a randomly chosen individual who could not be interviewed with another one has been the risk associated with interviewer freedom in substitution. The counter argument offered has been that the effect even then will be no more than 8%.

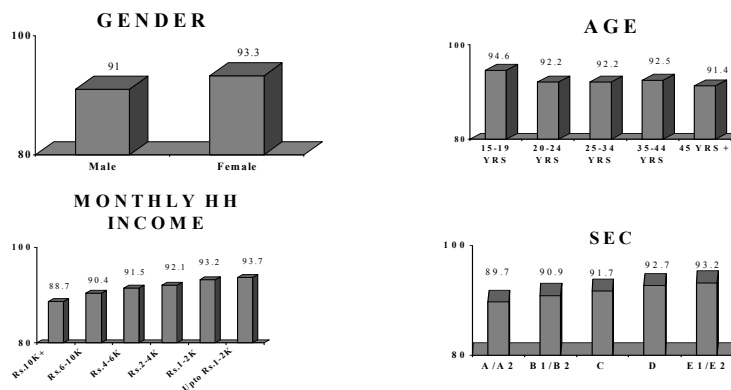
Yet 8% of 110,000, the sample size of NRS'99, is a large number – higher than the sample size of many national studies in India. Conversely the resources involved in contacting this near 9000 households in the study, is in a sense wasted. It thus merits examination whether any alternative (to allowing substitution in the hands of the interviewer) exists to lower the non response rate even further.

It is from this perspective that we examined the task of persuading this minority of non responders to respond. In a way, the researcher’s task is similar to what the marketing fraternity (our clients) faces. And thus what we attempt is practising what we preach.

## Target Group

In its classical model, marketing needs to, before anything else, define for itself who the target group is for the task in hand. The next section of this paper thus examines the response levels in NRS 99 by demographic segments, to define the target group for any corrective action that can be contemplated to bring down the non response rate.

**DIAGRAM - I  
RESPONSE RATE BY DEMOGRAPHICS**



It is evident that the response rate has an expected skew. It is lower amongst people belonging to higher SEC, in the segment of older respondents and amongst males. Yet these demographics are not the descriptors of our target group. The response rate is near equal (89 to 93%) in the different demographic segments; but in India, as in many other countries, there are more poor people than rich ones, more uneducated people than the educated elite. Thus, of 100 non-responders in NRS, there will be more people from the lower echelons than the top ones. A simple case of their having a much larger base. Indeed the hard to get respondents as a group in India has the same socio-economic character as the total population – a pyramid with a large base. It is them that we need to persuade to give us an interview.

In any demographic group, out of every 10 only one does not respond. It stands to reason that the explanation for non response will have little to do with the demographic character (for, then the other nine should also have been affected). The argument that they are busy, they are more out of home thus less available for interview or they have more options with the way they spend their time is also obviously not valid for such a socially diverse target group. This prompted us to look for reasons of non response that are societal or even psychographic.

## The Enquiry

It is in these areas that hypotheses regarding reasons of non-response needed to be developed and tested. To develop the hypotheses, two focus group discussions were conducted (one each in Delhi and Mumbai) among the interviewers who faced the onslaught of the non-response. One group discussion was also conducted among the selected individuals who had refused the NRS interview (the efforts involved were extraordinary to get these people who even refused an interview to land up for a group discussion).

The following table describes the interviewers' views on the differences that they see between those who co-operate and give the interview and those who do not.

CO-OPERATE	REFUSE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledgeable about MR</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not know about MR. Mistake us for salesman</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kind and "sweet natured"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selfish and "hard"</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have free time</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Busy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intelligent/knowledgeable - eager to give/show their knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't feel their opinion is worth anything</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expect MR to benefit them through better products and service</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do not know how this will help them</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inquisitive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introverted</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Educated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not educated</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open-minded</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secretive</li> </ul>

These however in no way explain why even amongst the educated urban Indians for example, most respond to the NRS questionnaire and a minority do not. The group discussion among the minority of refusers in Delhi helped us to focus further on the issue and that led us to a couple of distinct hypothesis to explain non response. These were

- a. The well-known variable of attitude to market research affects willingness to respond to an interview.
- b. In India, literacy being highly correlated with affluence, is a social discriminator. Readership is considered the proof of real literacy, and thus a matter of social privilege and status. So any study that proposes to interview someone on his/her readership can well be perceived as threatening by some. Could it be possible that a sense of insecurity and fear of being proven as an ignoramus prevents certain people from readily agreeing to an interview? The interviewer for the NRS approaches the household with a proclamation that he is doing the National Readership Study. The fact that I seldom get myself to look at the daily newspaper could generate a fear of exposure of lack of readership thus real literacy and lowering of social status. In India, lack of living space often means that interviews are done in the presence of other family members. That could further compound the problem and result in a refusal. Consequently, we hypothesised that those who are less knowledgeable about things happening in a larger than personal orbit (state/country/world), or are less confident about their knowledge on those are more prone to avoid a readership interview.

These hypotheses were tested through a small experimental study

**Study One**

The experiment was conducted in Delhi. A sample of 75 individuals who had refused to give an NRS interview were interviewed on the following parameters -

- a. Attitude to market research
- b. Knowledge of topics relating to current affairs
- c. Self confidence

Additionally, a sample of 75 from the general population in Delhi, matched demographically with the sample of those refused the NRS interview were also interviewed to provide a benchmark.

The results of the study were as follows -

**a. Attitude to Market Research**

Both the panels - the panel of NRS non respondents and the demographically matched panel of general population were asked to indicate their agreement with various statements reflecting attitude towards Market Research. Some dwelt on the perception of utility of giving Market Research interviews :

I feel nice when people ask me my views about various things

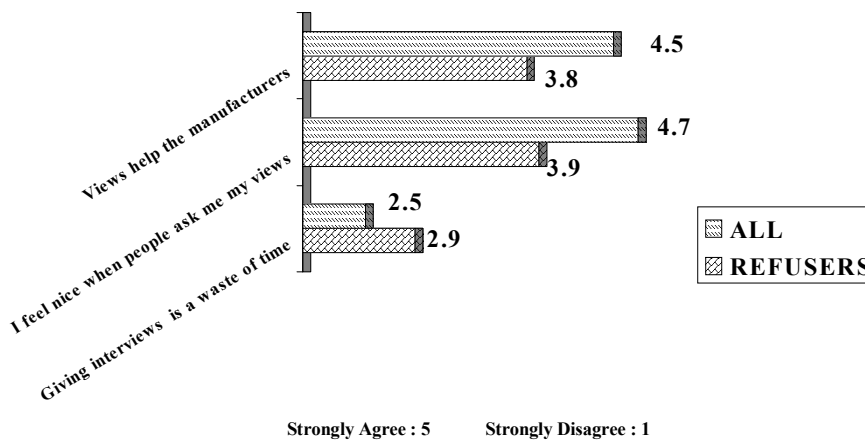
Views of people like me help the manufacturers to improve their products and services

Giving interviews to market survey people is a waste of time

The result of the study is at the very least reassuring for those of us who earn their daily bread from the discipline. Utility of Market Research is well acknowledged. Interestingly however, the refusers tend to be significantly more skeptical than the general population.

**DIAGRAM II :  
USEFULNESS OF MARKET RESEARCH**

MEAN AGREEMENT SCORE



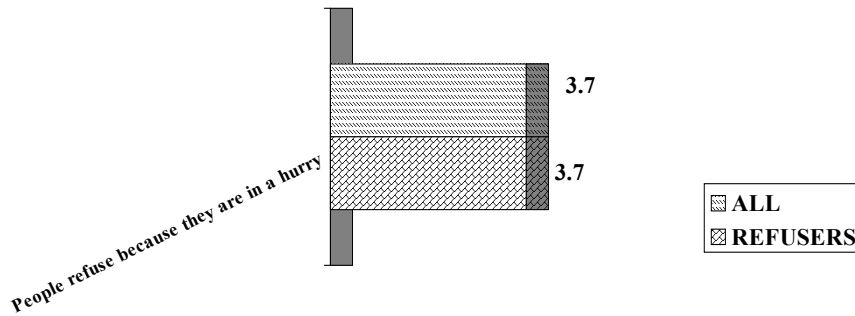
It is often argued that people are too busy to spare time for a market research interview. Some of the statements used reflected such an attitude

People refuse giving market research interviews because they are in a hurry to go somewhere

People refuse giving market research interviews because people do not wish to waste their time

**DIAGRAM III :  
NO TIME TO SPARE**

MEAN AGREEMENT SCORE



Strongly Agree : 5      Strongly Disagree : 1

Yes, lack of time is expectedly a critical deterrent to the market research interviewers' success in obtaining respondent cooperation. Interestingly however the sentiment does not discriminate the refusers from the general population.

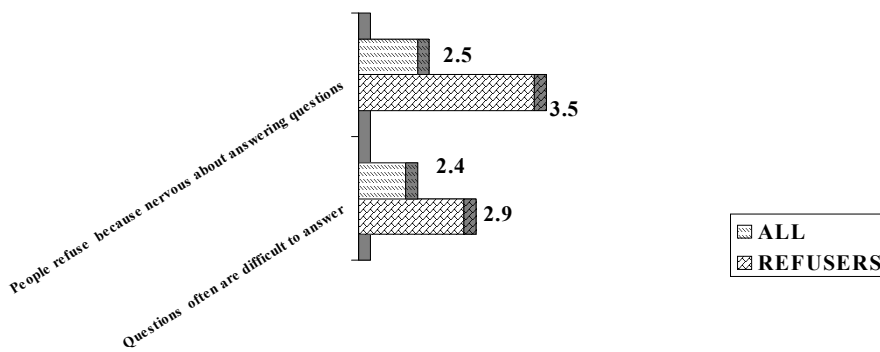
There were other statements which expressed a perception of threat that Market Research interviews can pose :

Questions asked in a survey often are difficult to answer

People refuse giving market research interviews because many people feel nervous about whether they will be able to answer the questions properly

**DIAGRAM IV :  
SCARED**

MEAN AGREEMENT SCORE



Strongly Agree : 5      Strongly Disagree : 1



The threat perception in the general population is low - confirming the market researchers' undoubted skill in crafting a questionnaire. Yet, the refusers are less charmed. Indeed, 62% of the refusers interviewed confirmed their nervousness with a market research interviews (Mean agreement score – 3.5).

On the whole thus, the refusers do differ appreciably from the general population in their attitude to market research. The most vivid among the differences are in their perceived utility of market research and their perception of threat from it.

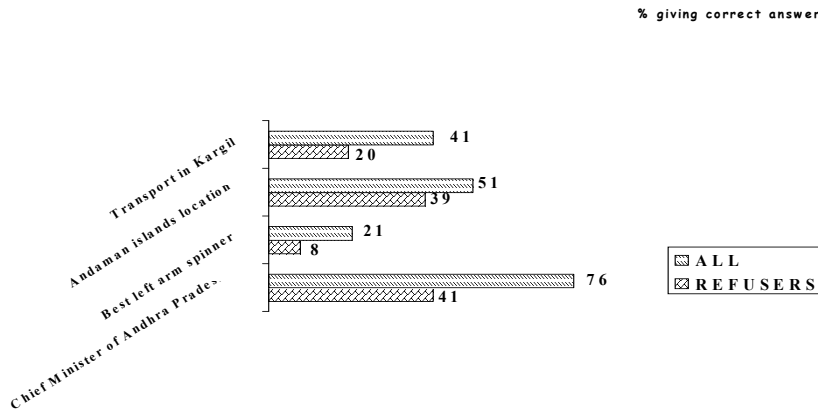
**b. Knowledge**

A hypothesis that emerged from our group discussion with the refusers was that they are less 'newsprone' and less knowledgeable about happenings in any orbit that extends beyond their immediate personal territory. This hypothesis was tested by asking respondents in both the panels of our experimental study a few simple questions of knowledge –

- a. Who is the Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh (a state in India) ?
- b. In which sea are the Andaman islands (part of India) located ?
- c. Who is the best ever left arm spinner of India ?
- d. Which mode of transport is used by the Indian Army to carry supplies to the heights in Kashmir ?

For each question multiple answers were provided to the respondents to choose from. Obviously only one answer was correct and undoubtedly so. The question about the left arm spinner was prone to subjectivity. The answers provided had only one left arm spinner – the rest bowls or bowled with their right arm.

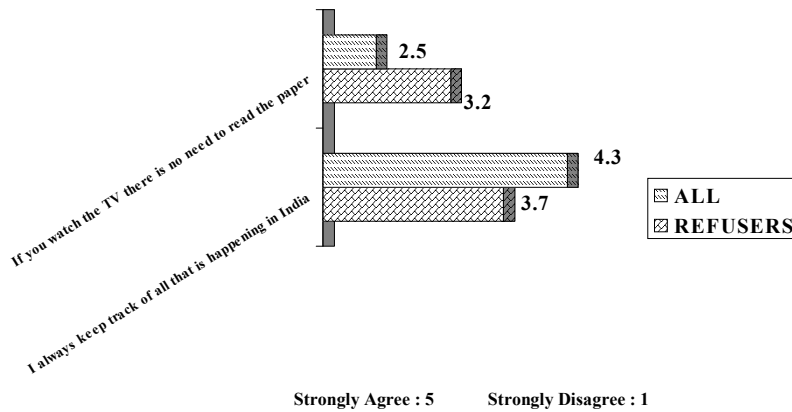
**DIAGRAM V :  
KNOWLEDGE**



In each case, far fewer numbers of refusers came up with the right answer compared to the general population. This tends to confirm the hypothesis that those who are less knowledgeable and newsprone – tend to avoid a market research interview.

In addition to this the ‘newsproneness’ of the two populations was tested by asking them to agree or disagree with two statements:

**DIAGRAM VI :  
NEED TO KNOW**



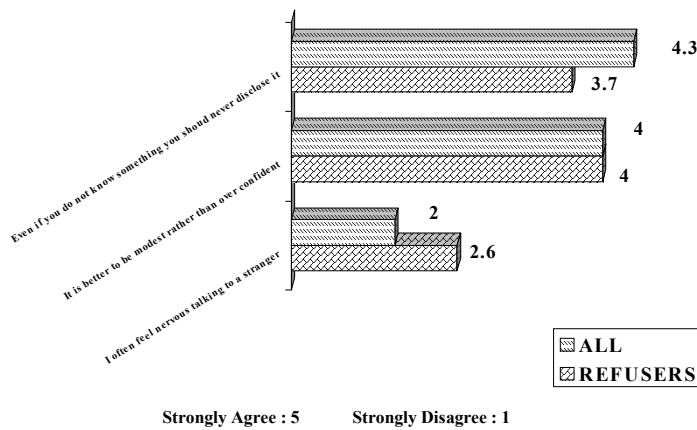
In general, the newsproneness is high but it is distinctly below par for the refusers.

**a. Confidence**

Finally, the area that was probed dealt with self confidence of the two population – refusers and the general population. The statements used were :

- I feel a lot more comfortable with people I know
- I often feel nervous talking to a stranger
- It is better to be modest rather than over confident
- Even if you do not know something you should never disclose it

**DIAGRAM VII :  
CONFIDENCE**



Both groups of respondents – refusers and the general population equally agree that modesty is a virtue. But the similarity ends there. The refusers come through as less sure about how to deal with their ignorance and perhaps more relevant is the finding that more of the refusers admit feeling nervous about meeting a stranger. Our emissaries, the ubiquitous market research investigator, is seldom the neighbourhood boy of our respondents.

#### **b. Discriminators**

In sum, the group of refusers (those who did not agree to give an interview during NRS'99) we interviewed in Delhi appear to have a few distinctive characteristics when we compare them to the general population of the same city

- a. They are more sceptical about the usefulness of Market Research
- b. They feel threatened by a market research interview
- c. They know less and feel the need to know less as well
- d. They are a less confident lot
- e. And perhaps a little more shy about dealing with the world unknown

**It is this description of the target group that should inspire the design of remedial action from the study managers to reduce the response rate in NRS (indeed possibly in any market research study). The conventional wisdom that the 'Hard to Get' respondent is busy, seldom at home upwardly mobile person is perhaps mythical. The need thus is more for softer confidence building stimuli and less for aggressive time snatching approaches. One such approach examined in our investigation was the incentive of altruistic credit.**

#### **Incentives**

Lastly, the prudence and feasibility of offering incentives to the respondents to reduce non response rate has been examined in this paper.

The NRS in India does not offer any incentives to the respondent. The only thing the respondent can look forward to is the sense of relief that he will feel on the completion of a long interview and departure of the interviewer. The market research activity, in general, in India operates without respondent incentives. The exception to this are qualitative research, continuous research like panels or in hall research - where participants are given a small/token gift for their co-operation.

Given the reasonably high success rate that we have, it seems unwarranted to use incentives on a large scale. Additionally given the extremely low budget, under which the agencies operate, it will be difficult to afford more than a pin to offer to the respondent. A cash incentive (particularly if it is small) can offend sensibilities rather than increase participation.

We were on the look out of an incentive, which persuades the respondent to give us the time without really having to pay him anything (because what he will like we could not afford, and what we could afford, he would not like). We decided to tug at the respondent's heart by telling him that if he was to give us the time for the interview we will donate a certain small amount in his name to a charity. An experiment was designed to test this idea.

In this experiment, we attempted to interview 200 respondents (who had earlier refused the interview) in Delhi. We used relatively more persuasive and senior interviewers/supervisors to extract the interview from them.

Names and addresses of such people (i.e. selected individuals who refused the interview) were taken from the NRS 99 questionnaires. These were spread over 10 areas of the city and randomly allocated over two groups of 100 each.

With one group of 100 (Group A), the usual convincing methods (... information is useful to publications/ manufacturers etc.) was used at the introduction stage.

The other group of 100 (Group B) were told that :

By giving us an interview they will actually be doing a humanitarian act. If they give us an interview, we will donate Rs.100 on their behalf to Mother Teresa's charity.

At the end of this, we knew how many we could contact (in each group A/B) and how many we could persuade to give the interview.

The response was as follows :

	Group A	Group B
<b>Sample size</b>	100	100
<b>Completed interviews</b>	32	30
<b>Again refused</b>	40	43
<b>Out of station</b>	04	05
<b>Shifted</b>	05	03
<b>Not available for the next few days</b>	10	12
<b>Appointment for later</b>	09	07

From the above table it is clear that the success rate achieved through both the approaches is identical. Altruistic credit does not act any more powerfully than the usual persuasive tactics. Nor does use of more persuasive field investigators.

Secondly, the refusal rate in this experiment was 40% - much higher than the NRS level of 8%. It confirms that refusal is not a random event. It is not a function only of the specific moment when the approach for the interview was made. The refusers are indeed harder nuts to crack.

**Conclusions**

A number of design changes have been made in India to boost the response rate. One of the changes was that in case the interviewer could not locate an assigned address, he was given the liberty to do the interview in the same neighbourhood at a nearby address. This improved the response rate substantially, as location of poorly written and often incomplete addresses from electoral rolls posed a serious problem. This paper compared the profile and the reading habits of the two groups (i.e. those who were interviewed at the given address vs. those who the interviewer selected in the same neighbourhood) and found no evidence of contamination of the profile or influence on readership figures.

The second element of non-response is at the individual level - where the randomly chosen individual is not available or refuses the interview. These 'hard to get' individuals average at around 8% at the national level. While the figure per se is small, with a sample of 110,000, it does amount to a large loss in interviewing opportunity of 9000. It thus merits to examine whether anything could bring down this response rate any further.

To do this we first need to define the target profile of this 'hard to get' group. While the response rate has an expected negative skew against the rich and those in the higher SEC, given the higher target bases of the lower income consumers, on the whole the socio-economic character of the 'hard to get respondents' is not vastly different from the total population.

Qualitative research was conducted in this target group as well as the interviewers who face the brunt of the refusals. Based on this it was hypothesised that possibly:

- the 'refusers' have a poorer attitude to market research in general
- as 'reading' has high prestige, the 'refusers' feel the insecurity of exposure or being seen as an ignoramus as they feel that they do not read much

An experimental study, indeed validated these hypotheses. The refusers tend to be more skeptical than the general profile, and feel more insecure and nervous. Not only that they seem less knowledgeable and interested in current affairs. They are also a less confident lot and are more shy about dealing with the world unknown.

This, therefore, suggests that the approach to get a higher response needs to be softer and non aggressive. While several such approaches could be attempted, one such approach tried in this study was to appeal to the altruistic instinct of the respondent - by telling him that in giving the interview he also performs a good deed. While this specific approach did not seem to result in a significantly higher success rate than the conventional approaches, the findings of our investigations suggest that further efforts directed at improving the response rate should be in this general direction of softer and non aggressive approaches.