

RESPONSE RATES DECLINE – IT’S TIME FOR ACTION

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Introduction

The problem with declining response rates is well documented on both sides of the Atlantic. Where response rates are published these can, almost without exception, be shown to have declined over the last thirty years. Whatever method of data collection used, survey practitioners report that they have to work harder and spend more money to achieve balanced samples. It is arguably *the* most important issue facing market and media research today.

Papers on response rates presented at past Symposia have examined reasons for non-response with the focus on the representation and accuracy of the data. What has been given second billing, however, is the potentially crippling rising cost that accompanies declining response. Inevitably, this extra cost gets passed on to the client until a point eventually when they will not be able to pay. We should not shy away from stating that for a number of clients today, the cost and speed of the research is deemed more important than the quality.

“...what the client wants is...a quick and dirty answer...”

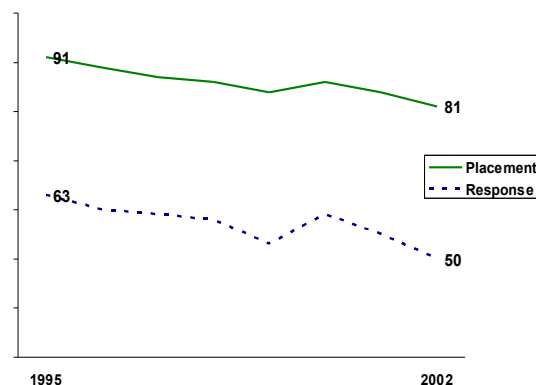
Sir Martin Sorrell (2000)

Background

The recommended method for TGI worldwide is for interviewer placement and collection of questionnaires. For historical and financial reasons the methodology in GB is different. BMRB’s omnibus survey is the placement vehicle. At the end of the interview respondents are asked if they would like to take part in the TGI. Those who agree are sent the questionnaire in the mail, together with a return envelope and a £5 (\$9) cash incentive. If the questionnaire is not returned, four reminders are sent at weekly intervals. Returned questionnaires are accepted until one month after the end of each quarterly fieldwork period. It is apparent that incentives are ‘wasted’ on respondents who do not return the questionnaire.

The collection of readership data is an integral part of the TGI survey and the use of a self-completion methodology places special demands on respondents. Ten years ago at the Berlin Symposium, Richard Silman, then at BMRB, discussed what methods were employed on TGI to benefit response [1]. Whilst he identified some positive factors for the survey, the panacea remained elusive, as it did for everyone else. Over the next few years on TGI, and on all market research surveys, response rates continued to fall and costs continued to rise.

GB TGI placement & response trends (%)



There are several points to note here.

- Usable returns are only received from just over half of those who were sent a questionnaire.
- Although the proportion of non-returns has remained fairly consistent over time, there is evidence that it is slowly increasing. In absolute terms, this is a not inconsiderable number.

- Of those questionnaires returned, about 20% are rejected if they fail certain completeness criteria. One could immediately increase response rates by relaxing quality standards on the level of questionnaire completion, but clearly this would not be appropriate.
- In 1999, the incentive increased from £3 to £5 resulting in a short term boost to response rates.

In the summer of 2002 a decision was made - it was time for action.

Response Rate Improvement Programme

A small working party within BMRB was set up to address the issue and a programme of experimentation was devised. The programme was designed around the GB recruitment method. Not all experiments will be relevant to countries where the questionnaire is placed using alternative methodologies.

Factors contributing to response and non-response have been well documented. Groves and Couper [2], for example, divided these factors into 'out of researcher control', such as social environment and respondent characteristics, and 'under researcher control', such as survey design and interviewer attributes. Clearly, it was the latter that was to be the focus for the TGI programme.

An obvious answer to the response rate problem might be to pay respondents more and reduce the length of the questionnaire. This is not quite as straightforward as it might appear. Questions arise as to how large the incentive should be, how it should be delivered and how long the questionnaire should be.

The historical evidence is that when the level of the incentive is increased the response rate improves for a while but the gradual downward drift soon resumes (see earlier chart). Although the decline in response can go hand-in-hand with increases in the questionnaire length, the relationship between questionnaire length and response rate has not been established.

The programme was designed to explore the following survey design areas:

- Offer an increased reward (on completion)
- Offer non-cash alternatives
- Offer an increased incentive (upfront)
- Reduce questionnaire length
- Improve the reminder process
- Personalise the questionnaire
- Improve respondent understanding of the task
- Motivate the interviewers
- Personal collection of the questionnaires
- Introduce a mixed methodology

Since 2002, some of the above have been tested, some are in progress and others were deemed not viable. Results from some of those that have already been tested are summarised below.

Alternative Monetary Incentives

"The trouble, Mr Goldwyn, is that you are only interested in art and I am only interested in money."

George Bernard Shaw to Sam Goldwyn (1937)

People increasingly attribute a monetary value to their time for research. Selfishness, rather than altruism, prevails in the 21st Century.

The response rate trend illustrated earlier indicates that almost half the total incentive payment goes to respondents who do not complete the questionnaire. An alternative way of distributing the incentive budget might be to pay £10 as a reward when the questionnaire is returned rather than pay a £5 incentive upfront. Afterall, what does £5 (\$9) buy you nowadays? The merits of conditional and unconditional payment have been discussed at recent Symposia, for example Hildago and Peacock [3], and it appeared that TGI were boldly going to go against perceived wisdom. But our sleeves were rolled up and we were embarking on a programme to try anything and everything – afterall, something now had to be done.

£10 on completion

Between 2002 and 2005, paying an increased amount on completion of the survey was tested on three different occasions with slight variations on sample structure for each. The underlying results, however, were the same. Here we summarise the results of the third and most recent test.

For the whole of February 2005 a reward of £10 on completion was offered to all respondents on TGI.

	Jan 05 (control) (5,823) %	Feb 05 (test) (6,775) %	Mar 05 (control) (5,104) %
Attempted	100	100	100
Accepted	72	76	70
Returned	47	40	44
Usable	35	31	35

The offer of the £10 on return increased the acceptance rate from 72% to 76%. Excitement, however, turned to dismay for respondents when the 110 page questionnaire arrived through their letterboxes. Consequently, the return rate dropped leading to an overall usable response rate of 31% versus 35% for the month. On return to the £5 upfront incentive in March, the response rate reverted to the January level. Analysis of sub-demographics yields similar downward trends with exceptions occurring with those in lower socio-economic groups.

The incentive cost per usable questionnaire for January was £10.29, February £10 and March £10.03. On initial inspection, the increased payment on completion appears to be a more cost effective option but results in a much poorer response rate. In fact, a subsequent analysis shows that, with the increased printing and despatch costs that accompany a poorer response rate, the £10 on completion reward is more costly than £5 upfront. Perhaps TGI should have taken heed of previously published research. Undeterred, we are testing £15 on completion, and maybe £20 too, later in 2005.

Vouchers

As stated earlier, a perhaps obvious step would be to increase the current 'upfront' incentive. The headline concern with doubling the incentive was that it would immediately add £1/4 million to the survey cost; a figure to induce a chronic eyebrow twitch in any Finance Director. Another concern was that over 50% of the money spent on incentives was 'wasted' through non-response. This raised the idea of whether non-cash incentives can be provided with a high perceived value but which can be delivered within the same overall budget.

In April 2004, TGI embarked on a large-scale test to offer 'vouchers to the value of £50' rather than £5 cash. Each respondent received five vouchers – three common to all respondents and two that varied according to age group. These vouchers included primarily '2 for 1' deals, such as ten-pin bowling or curry meal vouchers, and were supplemented by a series of prize draws.

In order to test the best method of delivering the incentive, respondents were split into two groups: those who received the vouchers upfront and those who were sent them once they had returned the questionnaire. A third control group were to receive the standard £5 cash incentive. Respondents were eligible to be entered in the prize draws if they returned a completed questionnaire.

It had been intended to continue the scheme for six months but within a couple of weeks the test was quickly discovered to have failed. The acceptance rate was more or less the same, but it appeared that response was only running at about two-thirds the level that had been achieved using cash incentives. As a result, the experiment was abandoned and a recovery measure was introduced for the remainder of the fieldwork quarter with the offer of £10 cash upfront. The results were interesting but disappointing.

	Jan-Mar 04 (17,095) %	Apr 04 (6,881) %	May 04 (4,790) %	May/Jun 04 (6,178) %
<i>Incentive</i>	<i>£5 cash upfront (control)</i>	<i>Vouchers upfront</i>	<i>Vouchers on completion</i>	<i>£10 cash upfront</i>
Attempted	100	100	100	100
Accepted	73	72	70	76
Returned	48	36	38	53
Usable	38	26	31	43

As suspected, placement and response improved with £10 cash upfront, but at a considerable cost. The happy medium between minimum survey costs and maximum response rates is difficult to reach, if at all possible.

The Questionnaire

Questionnaire length

Logically there must be a relationship between response rate and questionnaire length. This suggests that an obvious solution to the response rate problem is to reduce the length of the questionnaire. The converse implication is that further additions would act to reduce the response rate further. This could only be tested in a 'live' situation using a reasonably large sample. An experiment was mounted using half the sample from the first week in October 2003.

About thirty pages (c.25%) were removed to create a questionnaire of around 80 pages (this varied slightly depending on the version). Pages were selected for removal on the basis that they would not leave behind 'orphaned' questions on surrounding pages. This was solely to simplify the task of questionnaire production. No attempt was made to identify sections of the questionnaire that might be more or less important and there was no suggestion that the categories that were removed would be candidates for exclusion if the questionnaire length was reduced. Indeed, it was generally agreed that, for commercial reasons, it would not be possible to make deletions on this scale.

The results for the test week were compared with the first week of the previous quarter (and the month as a whole). The conclusion was that the shorter questionnaire had no impact on response rate.

	Control Week (2,011) %	Test Week (1,005) %
Attempted	100	100
Accepted	76	74
Returned	52	52
Usable	42	41

The implication of this is that the questionnaire would have to be reduced in length by many more than thirty pages to have a positive effect on response rate. This would not be a commercially-viable option for TGI.

The reminder process

Four reminders are sent if the questionnaire is not returned. The first goes out one to two weeks after placement, the others follow at weekly intervals. The first three are quite 'gentle' and urge the respondent to send back the questionnaire. The fourth is more direct and asks for the return of the £5 incentive if the recipient does not wish to participate.

The hypothesis was put forward that this process is too lengthy and the reminders do not have sufficient impact. An experiment was conducted for one week in March 2003 where the second and third reminders were not used. Instead the fourth (more direct) reminder was despatched one week after the first reminder. The response rate for the test week was 41% compared with 47% for the preceding month of February as a whole.

It was concluded that using fewer more direct reminders did not have a positive impact on the response rate. It is possible that other variations to the number, frequency or wording of reminders might have an impact but it was not felt that this would be a useful avenue for further experimentation.

Other Methods of Data Collection

In the last five years or so in the United States, web questionnaires have overtaken paper questionnaires for self-completion surveys. There is a need to offer more flexibility for the respondent, allowing them to participate when and how it is most convenient to them. There is also a need to design the survey that maximises the appeal to respondents and so maximises response.

It therefore seemed logical to design a programme for testing electronic data collection for TGI. The method to be employed was the Internet. With cost savings on printing, posting and scanning questionnaires, this seemed an attractive proposition. However, some barriers immediately arose.

The TGI questionnaire is over 100 pages long and, on average, takes about three hours to complete. These go against the convention for designing online surveys. Furthermore, on-screen layout, delivery method and impact on the data provided some interesting challenges to say the least.

In September 2004, BMRB tested around 40% of the GB TGI questionnaire using an existing Internet panel. 175 product categories across 9 sectors mainly within the fmcdg sector were measured. £4 electronic voucher incentives were employed, which were standard for the panel being used. Two versions of the questionnaire were tested with 100 respondents for each; one version replicated the current paper questionnaire design (V1) and the other restructured the questions with additional routing (V2). The objective was to assess whether there were any significant differences between the data collected from the online

survey and the existing main paper survey.

Absolute differences between each of the two online questionnaire versions and the existing paper survey were calculated for each category; these were then summed and averaged within each sector. This gave an indication of the difference in penetration of each category within a sector. There will of course be a range of differences within each sector.

	Pilot Questionnaire V1 Absolute Difference (%)	Pilot Questionnaire V2 Absolute Difference (%)
SECTOR 1	6.8	6.1
SECTOR 2	7.1	7.8
SECTOR 3	6.4	20.4
SECTOR 4	9.5	6.8
SECTOR 5	7.7	5.8
SECTOR 6	22.4	8.1
SECTOR 7	4.9	2.4
SECTOR 8	13.2	8.5
SECTOR 9	11.5	7.6

For example, the average difference between the V2 online pilot questionnaire and the current paper questionnaire (filtered on those who use the Internet 5+ hours a month) for the penetration of a category within Sector 1 (Food) was 6.1%.

For 7 of the 9 sectors measured, data from one questionnaire version yielded lower differences than the other. This suggests that the 'filtered' approach (V2) is the better methodology. Seasonal or sampling effects, for example, ice-cream consumption and pet ownership, can explain some of the larger differences.

Response rates were slightly higher for both versions than for those recorded on the paper survey by a few percentage points; however, some respondents found the survey quite long and repetitive. However, we are cautious that an Internet panel was used, which is not necessarily how we would proceed if we were to introduce this methodology on the main survey. Nevertheless, we considered this pilot a success as we met our objectives. Other benefits this methodology could bring include the facility to offer personalised questionnaires. A shorter and more relevant questionnaire should improve response and the overall sample profile.

The Future

The questionnaire

In September 2005, BMRB will test the whole TGI survey online. The questionnaire will be split into three discrete parts and respondents will be made aware of this and that they will be rewarded only if they complete all three. This reward will be £20 cash.

We have opted for V2 from the 2004 test that is, the version with the 'filtered' or 'gate questions' approach. The readership section required particular consideration. These questions are crucial to TGI as the data are weighted to match reference data from the GB National Readership Survey. Ideas including replicating the NRS Extended Media List approach were considered. We finally concluded that the method used should replicate the current paper questions as for the foreseeable future the data collection will continue to include the paper methodology as well and it was important for the method used to be as similar as possible.

Recruitment

The plan is to recruit 500 respondents, half coming from an online panel operated by Lightspeed. The other half will be recruited using BMRB's Access Omnibus which is the current recruitment vehicle for TGI. We expect a 30% dropout between tranches.

If this exercise is considered a success, both in data quality and financially, then it is likely that during 2006 TGI will launch a mixed methodology for its data collection. We will continue to use BMRB's Access Omnibus to recruit. Individuals agreeing to participate in TGI will be offered the option of either completing the survey on-line or using paper and pen.

Costs

In addition to finding ways to combat the perpetual declining response rates one of the reasons for investigating alternative data collection methods is costs. Throughout this paper we have highlighted the ever increasing cost of incentives. There are other costs associated with the declining response such as the need to recruit more respondents to deliver the required sample size for the project. Therefore, the costs of printing and posting questionnaires have also continued to rise.

It is very early in the process to calculate the cost /cost savings especially as the plan is to continue with the paper method as well as on-line. Obviously, as the number for on-line completion increases the need to print and post the paper version will decrease. There will also be other additional cost associated with setting up and running a dual system. However, early indicators are that there will be savings from printing and postal costs. Our objective is that these savings will fund the cost of the increased incentives – the on-line version at £20 and the inevitable increase from £5 for the other respondents.

Conclusion

With the majority of the experiments undertaken not having a significant positive influence on response rates, coupled with the findings echoing some of those that have been published elsewhere, one asks the question on what this paper adds to the response rate debate.

We have shown that employing a wide range of techniques on a large continuous survey has not found the answer. Although there may be some benefits for certain demographic sub-groups, the overall response rate and survey cost were still on the move in the wrong direction. We are wary that as media researchers, despite our exalted aspirations for high quality research, a number of clients paying for the research are not necessarily concerned with response rates – they are more concerned with costs and actionable results.

After three years of intensive and hopeful experimentation it would be understandable to feel downbeat and defeatist. However, with constant financial pressure, we have to find a solution that manages cost if not stabilises response rates. TGI hopes to have found a solution with the mixed methodology.

Acknowledgement:

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References

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