

THE MAIL-OUT QUESTIONNAIRE AS AN EFFICIENT MEANS OF DATA COLLECTION**Alex S Freedman, Northeastern Oklahoma University****PROBLEMS OF COST**

The need for efficient, reliable and economical means of data collection became mandatory in a period of escalating costs. Some question the feasibility of relying on such methodology. Nevertheless, it is obvious to any who have entered into such an endeavor in recent times that some studies presently designed for interview-respondent situations will have to be deferred or abandoned due to mounting costs. Although the costs of mail and other forms of communication are also on the rise, such costs are smaller and more manageable than motor fuel, vehicle maintenance, motels, meals, and salaries for reliable and trained interviewers. It is therefore profitable to place the mail-out questionnaire in proper perspective.

It may be that under such economic pressures, new alternative methods may be expected to develop in order to stimulate rather than retard sociological data collection. Perhaps, "ethno-methodology" or other unobtrusive measures now in developmental stages may prove worthy of consideration in the future. By the same token, it may be that many research workers will have to settle for secondary source materials as opportunities for gathering primary data become more restrictive. Certainly, United States census materials, publicly recorded vital statistics, and bulletins of other federal agencies may be examined more closely in the future. The FBI Crime Reports are useful and relatively timely. But such data does not always fit one's research design, and it may have only supplemental value. The tradition in contemporary sociological research places the emphasis on "original" data as opposed to "institutional" data.

QUESTIONNAIRE ADVANTAGES

When one evaluates the advantages of the mail-out questionnaire, the first realization may well be that by such use it is possible to widen the distribution of the sample. One is not confined to the local area, or even to the home country. Many possibilities for comparison exist here. Second, there is no need for field staff. This is clearly the single

most important consideration. But this points to the much greater responsibility of the designer and administrator of the research project. Third, there is a low cost per questionnaire. Substituting postage for personnel is the obvious cost advantage. In the United States, 5 or 6 first class postage stamps can be bought for the cost of a gallon of fuel. The mail service will deliver the materials with minimum cost of time and money.

Other considerations concerning this technique include the fact that greater confidentiality is possible. This should satisfy skeptics who exclaim that the interview situation has a built-in bias which cannot be resolved. There is still the possibility of bias in the research design or the makeup of the questionnaire, but this is true for any type of data collection, and is not peculiar to the mail-out questionnaire.

The time factor requires definition by the researcher. It is advisable to specify a time for returning the instrument, to avoid the effects of procrastination. The questionnaire is much more convenient for certain difficult research targets, such as medical personnel, politicians, and other professionals. The time factor is very flexible with the mail-out questionnaire, as compared to the interview schedule.

DISADVANTAGES

The researcher must come to grips with the disadvantages inherent in this form of data collection. That which is most difficult to rationalize is the bias which arises through non-response. It is problematic to talk in terms of a 70 percent response when the actual return is less than 50 percent. This is often social reality, in contrast to the theoretical ideal. For mail-out questionnaires, that problem cannot be solved by altering the form of questions or the approach to the respondent. A dogged effort of followup attempts is required to increase the overall response rate.

Combined with lack of control over responses to the questionnaire is the difficulty of interpreting the reasons for many of the recipients to ignore the questionnaire. It may be regarded as "junk mail" and it may lose out in the competition with more demanding letters, such as periodic bills, and personal

communications. Whatever the reasons, the absence of data is not data.

As non-responses increase in proportion to the mail-out, and weaken the data collection effort, this may serve to drive up the cost of the survey. It is never clear as to why some recipients reply and some do not. As one class of case, the questionnaire survey method is closed to functional illiterates and to non-readers. Thus, one's ability to probe more deeply into a particular research problem may be severely limited. Some research workers consider the mail-out survey as the slowest method of data collection.

MAXIMIZING RESPONSE

While the direct interview method is the most positive in terms of response, it is also the most expensive. The telephone interview is more convenient but lacks the flexibility of the face-to-face interview. With the mail-out questionnaire, the best procedure is to maximize the return rate. One method is to send follow-up letters to non-respondents, perhaps after a period of one or two months. The cover letter for the second questionnaire may assume that the first one was lost or mislaid. It should stress that cooperation is still desired and important.

It may be advisable to go as high as four mail-outs to non-response addresses. If a response rate is only 20-30 percent, it signifies that what was intended as a probability sample is clearly a non-probability sample. Non-respondents may be significantly different from respondents, in unknown ways. This imposes a heavy bias on the data. As follow-up activities increase the return rate, the element of bias is reduced. And it might be worth the effort to reduce bias further by reaching the non-respondents through personal or telephone interview.

In maximizing the return rate on mailed questionnaires, it may be necessary to experiment. Brevity should be stressed in the original research design, to minimize the effort required of the respondent. The entire research project can benefit by sending out advance or

pilot questionnaires in a pretest, and by giving it to friends and colleagues for response, criticism and suggestions. Other considerations include time of the month or season of the year. Finally, the telephone is a convenient and effective follow-up resource if the information desired of the respondent is not too complex.

CONCLUSION

For an expenditure of about \$30 one may contact 100 respondents by mail. The corresponding cost for reaching an equal number of respondents in personal face-to-face interviews would be about \$300. Such considerations are of real importance in a period of increasing costs and declining support by research funding agencies. It is hoped that these suggestions may help some of us to continue the research effort and the exercise of our sociological imaginations.

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