

Case article Survey Fatigue?.....or is it ennui, or even abuse?

Date May 2009

Published By Dr. Sandy Ochojna

Dr Sandy Ochojna is an independent survey research advisor. Between 1986 and 2008 he was the Manchester-based director of several well-known international market research companies; for the ten years prior to that he was Passenger Manager at Strathclyde Passenger Transport Executive in Glasgow. From time to time he feels compelled to set down his thoughts on topical survey issues.

We are moving deeper and deeper into the realms of evidence-based policy and decision making. For many, particularly in the public sector, such 'evidence' is amassed via survey research. But very often public sector survey buyers worry that they might be 'achieving' disappointing response rates because of what they term 'survey fatigue'. This can be a major concern, not because poor rates of response or participation reflect badly on the commissioner, but because such rates can influence the results themselves.

In a word, there is little point in implementing a complex sampling regime designed to produce a representative (or controlled) sample if the subsequent fieldwork sees a good part of the frame discarded through non-response. It is for this reason that high response rates are vital; this is why, whenever time permits, good postal surveys involve three mail-outs (the initial plus two reminders), why telephone surveys have multiple call-backs, and why pre-selected random surveys demand several call-backs. Such procedures seek to produce the most representative sample by trying to reflect the composition of the original sampling frame. In all, it is not the size of the response rate that is the key factor but its resultant impact on the quality of the sample achieved, ie its representativeness.

So up crops the problem of 'survey fatigue'. But what does that term actually imply? And let's be picky here..... while 'fatigue' suggests **tiredness**, at having to do (even more) surveys, perhaps the more appropriate word is 'ennui', which points to the **boredom** of having to do (even more) surveys. The difference is that respondents may well be happy to struggle on with

surveys which they feel might mean something and lead to some improvement, but they are no longer content to participate in surveys which are seen to be sterile, tedious, irrelevant or badly presented.

And whose fault is that? Clearly it does not lie with respondents or non-respondents, but rather it lies with survey commissioners and practitioners. Because surveys now can be so easy and quick to deliver, especially by telephone and the internet, they are being commissioned increasingly on the basis of speedy turn-around. All well and good, but while we can carry out fieldwork, and even have it quality-assured at breakneck speed, can we design the surveys themselves in the same ever-diminishing timescales? Are the sampling regimes appropriate, are the questions relevant and interesting, is the context explained adequately? Probably not. And at the other extreme, when we conduct expensive and time-consuming in-home surveys, the pressures of cost can lead to commissioners piling in more and more questions, and setting out tracking questions simply to get 'value for money'.

Such pressures are compounded further by the needs of our evidence-based culture. More and more surveys are setting out to measure abstruse and esoteric social and psychological indicators and indices...on quality of life, social cohesion, happiness....some respondents may not understand them, and others may well see them to be intrusive and too personal.

Hence it could be that the real problem may lie not with respondents but with surveys themselves. Possibly even, the issue is one of survey 'abuse'.

Survey abuse; how to avoid it.

To recap, putting survey design to one side, the problem may relate not so much to survey frequency (fatigue) but rather to **relevance (ennui)**.

Notwithstanding, there is much that can be done to address the problem of survey frequency, and at the same time such measures offer enhanced value for money. It is gratifying to note how commissioners are now starting to develop annual survey programmes; and their efforts in this regard, especially in large and dispersed organisations, should not be underestimated. Such programmes pull together all an organisation's survey requirements for the forthcoming period and schedules them in that way which minimises the actual number of surveys required by

- ensuring topics are **addressed only once** and that different sections of the organisation are not asking the same questions at different times
- seeking to develop questionnaires which '**bundle together**' **related topics** so that the relevant background questions can be 'shared' and respondents can tune in to a specific set of issues.

Such a process offers the additional benefit that with pre-planning the opportunities for meaningful cross-analysis are that much greater.

Promoting relevance

...or from the respondents' point of view 'What's in it for me?'. If all survey designers asked this of their questionnaires many might feel chastened....especially if they found that they failed on either of the following key tests. These tests do not refer to the standard crucial aims of ensuring that questionnaires are simple, unambiguous, unbiased, jargon-free etc. Rather they are directed at

- a) respondent connection
- b) respondent competence

a) With respect to **connection** (what's in this for me?), if the issues are indeed relevant and presented clearly, then the battle is half won. But sometimes the battle is still lost because the questioning follows the agenda of the commissioner rather than that of the respondent. The questions must always allow **all points of view to be canvassed** even if that means taking refuge in a series of open-ended questions and/or accepting multi-coded responses. Commissioners have been known to ask for certain answer options to be removed from a draft questionnaire because 'we cannot offer that solution' or 'we do not want to raise expectations'. This is wrong; how can we expect respondents to participate if their preferences appear to be being overlooked....for whatever reason?

So, the questionnaire must be open and honest as well as setting out very clearly what the commissioner is going to do with the results. These statements should concentrate on those actions which affect the respondent directly. And that means talking about how things might affect him or her; it does not mean telling them how the data will be used to track change and policy effectiveness, or benchmark performance against others, or justify more investment in the years ahead. While these can be extremely important and powerful reasons for the commissioner they are rarely ascribed a similar importance by respondents

b) Considering **competence**, far too many commissioners forget that simply because a topic is of extreme interest to them it does not follow automatically that it will stimulate a similar level of interest amongst respondents. While a commissioner may well have 20 highly 'important' questions to ask about, say, the state of pavements around bus stops, the average bus user might 'tolerate' probably no more than 4 or 5 before he or she gives up. A non-bus-user might not even get that far! That is, we have to take care to avoid asking questions which are simply too detailed, and perhaps as a consequence respondents cannot really answer.

This problem of (in)competence can also encourage survey abuse in that increasingly surveys are being directed at topics and issues on which the public or the target universe cannot reasonably be expected to hold informed and meaningful opinions. For people to hold worthwhile opinions on, say, going to war, embracing coal-fired or nuclear power, supporting major traffic restraint measures, or assessing the adequacy of the provision of various local health services, demands that they have access to all relevant information (not always possible, especially in military issues) and that they have the capacity and willingness to differentiate between personal, societal and inter-generational aspects and trade-offs. These are big asks..... and maybe, just maybe, that is what we elect MPs and councillors to do.

Get real; respect the respondent and maximise response rates

The answer to survey abuse is very simple. At every stage in the development of a survey programme, and the design of a specific survey, **put the respondent first**. Remember, while there can be up to three parties in any survey exercise - the commissioner, the agency, and the respondent – the respondent is the most important yet the least involved, concerned or interested. Putting the respondent first will help overcome the barriers of poor connection and implied competence and so encourage participation and maximise response rates.

We hear so much about customer care in every aspect of business and service provision, so let's think about promoting respondent respect in ours. If we do, then we can only improve response rates and so strengthen the representativeness, hence the value, of surveys.

Survey fatigue is not a fact of life that we should learn to live with; it is something we have created and so it is something we can and must resolve.

Sandy Ochojna

www.thesurveydoctor.co.uk

May 2009

thesurveydoctor.co.uk