MANAGING NON-RESPONSE - WHO REALLY MATTERS

Katherine Page, Ipsos-RSL Media

Synopsis

Since January 1999 the British National Readership Survey (NRS) has asked interviewers to code whether each respondent was willing, had some reservations or was difficult to interview. This addition follows general investigative work into response rates conducted in Great Britain by the Market Research Society's Research Development Foundation.

The findings on willingness are examined in relation to demographics and readership estimates and compared to similar analysis by the number of interviewer call-backs required to achieve an interview.

This comparison leads to some practical conclusions as to what sort of response rate strategies are likely to be most helpful in minimising rather than aggravating potential bias in the readership estimates.

Introduction

Over the years, much effort and money has been put into stemming the long-term decline in response rates to the National Readership Survey (NRS) in Great Britain. There have been many experiments trying out alternative ways of improving response rates, most of them reported at these Symposia.

In recent years we have maintained a fairly steady overall average response rate of just over 60%. This overall average, however, hides increasing problems with certain forms of non-response and differences by region. In particular, the overall response rate in London is only two-thirds of that obtained elsewhere. Although levels of both refusal and non-contact are higher in London than elsewhere in the country, it is non-contact which is most exaggerated. Non-contact in London is nearly double that elsewhere, while refusals are about one third higher.

These problems are not surprising given an increasingly pressurised urban lifestyle. Other issues are also relevant, such as: safety; an increase in entry-phones; an increase in single person households; and particularly poor response in heavily ethnic areas. These issues are largely outside the control of NRS Ltd and Ipsos-RSL, their research contractor. Indeed, data recently released by the Office of National Statistics suggests a similar pattern of decline in overall national response rates to the large scale government surveys to that experienced by the NRS in the last ten years.[1]

Nevertheless, the average overall response rate in London in particular gives clients and contractor alike cause for uneasiness. Part of the problem is, of course, that we have no way of quantifying just how uneasy we should be. How much does it matter in terms of the readership estimates produced, both in terms of the overall number of readers and, more important, the relative positions of the 306 titles measured? Do some forms of non-response have greater implications for the readership estimates than others?

Given that the factors contributing to a downturn in response rates are almost entirely outside our influence, there is a limit to how far the existing methodology can be modified to take account of these realities. Instead, it is more likely that the survey will have to adapt, in particular, to the difficulty of accessing respondents face-to-face at home in urban areas. Significant change to the methodology is likely to involve disruption to the currency and considerable expense.

Before rushing headlong into such change, it is worth considering how best to direct resources. To this end we consider:

- whether certain forms of non-response have greater implications for readership bias than others
- if so, how best we should target our efforts to maintain/improve response rates
- alternatively, whether targeting our efforts or, indeed, striving too hard for response may do more harm than good

Willingness to be interviewed

It is well-known that there are two main forms of non-response, refusal and non-contact, and that these are linked to the demographics of age and socio-economic status.

The UK's Research Development Foundation (RDF) produced a detailed review of "Public Co-operation in Market Research" in 1996 [2] , which included an extensive world-wide literature review. This review concluded that:

> "Age and social grade (or equivalent measures in other countries) have consistently been found to be related to non-response, although the factors involved operate in different directions. For example, those in the younger age groups are more likely to be non-contacts while older individuals are more likely to refuse. Similarly, individuals in the higher socio-economic groups are more difficult to find but, once contacted, are more likely to participate. These factors interact such that younger more affluent individuals are the most difficult to find."

Analysis of the sample profile by the number of calls necessary to achieve an interview, demonstrates how different the demographics of those interviewed at later calls are from the early calls in terms of social grade, working status, and terminal education age. Not surprisingly, a higher proportion of interviews conducted at later calls tend to be with respondents who are working, in higher socio-economic classifications, etc. Many past papers have considered these differences and, furthermore, to what extent they justify the expense of numerous call-backs. Vorster and Lester, for instance, concluded in Salzburg that there were readership differences in the final calls, which may have some relative importance title by title, but that these differences were very small after weighting [3]. In San Francisco, Ivor Thompson suggested limiting the number of calls to seven, as after that differences levelled off[4].

Alongside the issue of contact is that of the potential willingness of the respondent to take part. Relevant factors include:

- fears about security/confidentiality
- attitudes to market research generally, including a lack of awareness
- past experiences of market research
- attitudes to the survey content
- length of interview
- how convenient it is at that moment

On one hand, a particular pre-disposition is associated with refusal, along with a correlation to age, as described in the earlier quote from the RDF report.

On the other hand, the 'situational' element is highly relevant, i.e. potential respondents may make a quick decision whether or not to participate based on their circumstances and availability at that time, rather than on any particular pre-disposition against market research. So availability is implicated in both non-contact and refusals.

The RDF conducted several practical investigations into respondent willingness, one of which was to ask interviewers working on the Office of National Statistics' pre-selected Omnibus Survey to classify respondents according to how easy or difficult it was to persuade them to be interviewed. Interviewers classified respondents into one of three categories as follows:

- Willing to take part - happy to be interviewed and gave impression they generally took part in surveys.
- Have some reservations - willing to be interviewed but not immediately willing to take part and expressed some reservations
- Difficult to interview - had definite reservations about being interviewed and needed considerable persuasion.

After cross-analysis with the respondent's own perception of willingness and past participation in market research, the RDF report concluded that "this classification, albeit subjective, proved to be a useful discriminator."

In order to enhance the range of tools available to analyse non-response to the British National Readership Survey, and specifically the implications for readership, a replica of these interviewer codes has been included on the NRS since January 1999.

As can be seen from the table below, the results from the NRS sample were of a similar order to those obtained by the ONS Omnibus, although the somewhat lower proportion of respondents classified as reluctant or difficult may reflect the difference in overall response rate, which is around 10 percentage points higher for the government survey than the NRS.

Table 1: Interviewer Coding of Respondent Willingness to be Interviewed

	ONS Omnibus	**NRS Jan-Jun 99**
Unweighted sample size	1,930	18,210
Estimated universe ('000s)	-	46,500
	%	**%**
Willing	68	74
Reluctant	25	20
Difficult	7	6

The demographic profiles of the various classifications show, as expected, a marked skew by age with the over 55s much more reluctant to take part and no doubt related skews by social grade and sex. Those who are younger, working and educated to the age of 19 or over are more likely to be willing to participate. Although the ONS uses slightly different demographic classifications, making direct comparison difficult, the overall picture appears very similar.

Table 2: Profile of NRS population by willingness to be interviewed

	Total	Willing	Reluctant	Difficult
Unweighted sample size	18,210	13,351	3,728	1,131
Estimated universe	46,500	34,513	9,375	2,613
Age				
15-24	14.9	17.1	9.3	6.3
25-34	18.5	19.8	15.6	12.9
35-44	18.1	18.9	16.9	12.7
45-54	16.3	16.4	16.4	14.0
55-64	12.6	11.7	14.9	15.7
65+	19.5	16.1	26.9	38.3
Sex				
Male	48.7	49.1	48.8	43.2
Female	51.3	50.9	51.2	56.8
Social Grade				
A	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.6
B	18.8	19.7	17.1	13.2
C1	27.4	28.1	26.4	23.0
C2	21.9	22.3	21.3	19.6
D	17.7	17.4	18.6	18.6
E	11.3	9.7	13.9	23.0
Working Status				
Full/part-time	53.7	56.3	48.9	35.5
Retired	18.0	16.0	23.2	26.6
Other	28.3	27.7	27.9	37.7
Terminal Education Age				
19+	15.7	16.5	14.3	9.9

These demographic skews work in the opposite direction to those associated with interviews achieved at later calls.

We cross-analysed willingness to be interviewed by the number of calls taken to achieve the interview. It was possible to add the final category on the scale of willingness, a refusal to participate altogether, to the analysis. The following tables are therefore based on the estimated total sample it would have been possible to achieve with a 100% response rate. This mythical figure was 15,547 interviews, of which we actually achieved 9,039 or 58% in the period shown.

Table 3: Willingness of respondent cross-analysed by number of calls

	Willingness of respondent				
Number of calls	**Willing**	**Reluctant**	**Difficult**	**Refusal**	**Total**
1-2 calls	3,670	951	284	2,195	7,100
3-4 calls	1,740	509	177	484	2,910
5+ calls	959	387	146	225	1,717
Re-issue	139	59	18	38	254
Non-contact	?	?	?	?	3,566

Base: NRS Jan-Mar 99.
Estimated total sample possible: 15,547
Achieved sample: 9,039

The interviews not achieved in this period are split almost evenly between refusals (18.9% of the total sample possible) and non-contact (22.9%). The majority of refusals come quickly, including a small proportion of refusals to give even the contact information which enables the interviewer to identify the selected person/s.

To help understand the relationship between willingness and number of calls, the following table expresses the same figures where willingness is a row percentage based on the total number of interviews achieved at 1-2 calls, 3-4 calls, 5+ calls and re-issue respectively.

Table 5: Willingness of respondent cross-analysed by number of calls (row percentages)

	Willingness of respondent				
Number of calls	**Willing**	**Reluctant**	**Difficult**	**Refusal**	**Total**
1-2 calls	51.7	13.4	4.0	30.9	100
3-4 calls	59.8	17.5	6.1	16.6	100
5+ calls	55.9	22.5	8.5	13.1	100
Reissue	54.7	23.2	7.1	15.0	100
Non-contact	?	?	?	?	100

Over half the potential sample classified at each stage of call-backs are in fact willing to participate. This proportion is rather higher at 3-4 calls than later at 5+ calls or re-issue and, there is some indication that although the bulk of reluctant/difficult respondents are interviewed early on, the proportion of reluctant/difficult respondents rises at later stages of call-back. Nevertheless, on the basis of the above it might not be unreasonable to expect around half of those not contacted to be willing to participate.

Readership estimates

At first glance the reluctant/ difficult respondents appear to read less, not surprisingly given that we have seen that they are skewed towards the older, less educated demographic groups.

Table 6: Readership Patterns by Willingness to be Interviewed (Indices)

	Total	**Willing**	**Reluctant**	**Difficult**
Unweighted sample	18,210	13,351	3,728	1,131
Est. universe (0000's)	46,500	34,513	9,375	2,613
Net quality daily newspapers	100	104	96	70
Net midmarket daily newspapers	100	100	104	83
Net popular daily newspapers	100	105	88	77
Net daily Sunday newspapers	100	104	92	79
Net general weekly magazines	100	109	80	57
Net general monthly magazines	100	110	80	47
Net women's weekly magazines	100	107	84	69
Net women's monthly magazines	100	110	78	51

Base NRS Jan-Jun 99

This is potentially misleading, however, on two counts. First of all, we would have to eliminate the demographic skew to understand whether these respondents were reading less primarily because of their demographics, or whether the difference was due in some way to being 'difficult' and might be extrapolated to refusers. After all, differing response by the main demographics (though not terminal education age or working status) is 'corrected' when the sample is weighted.

The second consideration renders such analysis and its impact on effective sample sizes superfluous, however. Unfortunately, the lower estimates may not be so much a reflection of the readership behaviour of the difficult to persuade respondent as their attitude to the interview. Also, the interviewer eager to complete the interview may be rushing a 'difficult' time-conscious respondent through. The argument that there is a respondent/ interviewer effect is supported by the fact that the indices appear lower for the magazines than newspapers, even allowing for demographic skews. We are accustomed to see much larger order effects for magazines than newspapers.

It is clear from the marketing data collected after the readership questions that partial answers are being given, with relatively high levels of refusal where possible. This is so even accounting for demographic profile. While it may not be surprising for potentially sensitive questions such as financial activities or items in home, there also is a relatively high refusal rate to many other questions. Terminal education age (TEA), which has been suggested as a potential discriminator of readership, has such a high level of refusal among the 'Difficult' that it is not possible to make out any peculiar profile by TEA.

Table 7: NRS Marketing Data cross-analysed by willingness to be interviewed

	Total	Willing	Reluctant	Difficult
Unweighted Sample	18,210	13,351	3,728	1,131
Est-Universe ('000s)	46,500	34,513	9,375	2,613
	%	%	%	%
Items in home				
Microwave oven	79.8	83.0	74.2	58.0
Audio CD	69.0	74.4	58.2	37.0
Television with Teletext	74.5	78.0	68.9	48.4
Dishwasher	25.2	27.1	21.5	14.1
PC with CD-Rom	28.4	31.7	21.4	10.3
Financial				
Use a cheque book	70.0	74.3	63.9	34.4
Any credit/charge card	61.4	66.1	53.3	27.3
Terminal Education Age				
Don't know/refused	1.9	0.6	3.4	12.5
Business trips in past 12 months				
Any taken	6.0	5.7	6.0	10.5
Don't know/refused to give number of business trips	0.8	0.1	1.6	8.0
One person in household	15.7	14.0	19.1	26.8

Base NRS Jan-Jun 99

It is worth stressing that the difficult, where most difference is apparent, comprise only 6% of the weighted universe and implications for estimates must be regarded in that context. Interviews obtained after 7+ calls comprise a similar proportion of the universe. Nevertheless, differences in the final 6% by willingness appear greater than those in the final 6% by calls.

Conclusion

As expected, the two main forms of non-response, refusal and non-contact, have quite different implications for readership estimates.

The classification of respondent willingness on the NRS appears to support the hypothesis that selected individuals who refuse the survey generally read less than those who do take part. Disappointingly, however, the quality of the data collected from the most difficult to persuade respondents renders any more specific extrapolation suspect, even taking demographic skews into account.

Although these findings are likely to reflect respondent and interviewer effects of which we are already aware, they reaffirm the need for caution in the way in which we pursue response rates in an increasingly difficult environment. If we do not adapt the survey to the realities of this environment, we are in fact asking more of interviewers and respondents and may aggravate the internal biases which to some extent always exist.

This emphasises the need to convince our clients that less can be more. We need to look at ways of taking some of the pressure off the most difficult respondents and their interviewers, rather than simply striving against the tide of lifestyle changes. One would expect an interview which is shorter, and possibly more interesting and relevant, to be generally helpful to both response rates and internal survey effects. The developing technology and modelling procedures available for readership research offer some new possibilities in this direction, without necessarily depriving users of large portions of the data they are accustomed to receive. Furthermore, it may even be worth considering differential treatment for the most difficult in terms of interview length, whereby only the readership and key classification questions are collected and all other data are modelled.

It is encouraging, however, that the data discussed in this paper indicate that around half the respondents interviewed at later calls are willing to participate. This suggests it may be worthwhile to directing resource at the non-contact element, with strategies to maximise initial contact and more flexibility to take account of respondent availability. Past experiments have indicated an interviewer placed self-completion questionnaire might have potential to improve response among respondents who have been identified, but who are not available for a face to face interview. NRS Ltd. is currently considering proposals for a mixed methodology test to explore the potential of such an approach specifically in London.

References

1. Martin, J. and Matheson, J. (1999) Responses to Declining Response Rates on Government Surveys. *Survey Methodology Bulletin,* 45
2. Windle, R. (1996) Public Co-operation in Market Research. *The Research Development Foundation*
3. Vorster, H and Frankel, L (1988) Are all those call-backs really necessary? *Worldwide Readership Symposium, Salzburg*
4. Thompson, I (1993) Enough Already, Please…Just Leave Me Alone!!! ***Worldwide Readership Symposium, San Francisco***