

# FORUM

## Ethics in practice

### Using compliance techniques to boost telephone response rates

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Survey researchers face declining response rates, due to lower contactability and more selective cooperation by potential respondents. Commercial market research companies are under even greater pressure than academic researchers as most commercial surveys do not have high social status. Several persuasion techniques to enhance cooperation have been used in academic surveys, though some of them might be considered unethical. Given the commercial pressures of time and cost, this study investigated the extent to which market research companies favoured these persuasion techniques. A survey of fieldwork managers in companies operating in Australia was conducted, along with qualitative research. It was found that some techniques were unacceptable as they threatened long-term relationships with the public, some were impractical and others were useful, but not for all surveys.

#### Introduction

Marketing research (MR) depends on the cooperation of respondents. Unfortunately non-cooperation is a major and growing problem for researchers (Curtin *et al.* 2005), especially those who operate commercially (CMOR 2003). In university studies, where cooperation is comparatively high, the lowering of response rates may not yet cause a major problem with representativeness, even with limited callbacks (Gendall & David 1993). However, in the commercial research settings studied in this paper,

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only a minority of eligible respondents typically participate in surveys (CMOR 2003), raising serious concerns about this issue (Brown 1994). In addition, limited cooperation increases fieldwork costs and prolongs the time needed to achieve the required sample sizes. Since they are also facing declining contactability (Plocinski *et al.* 2006), commercial survey firms are under immense pressure to boost response rates. At the frontline for this task are the field managers whose job it is to recruit, train and manage interviewers. Their roles are poorly documented, even though their importance has been long recognised (Martyn 1977). They have available to them a variety of ways to boost cooperation. The question this paper raises is whether they do or should use these techniques.

One of the main ways to boost cooperation rates is to use compliance appeals (Groves *et al.* 1992), otherwise known as social persuasion attempts. They are particularly relevant to telephone surveys where interviewers can speak directly with potential respondents and persuade them to comply. Interviewer training in persuasive techniques (CMOR 2006; Blohm *et al.* 2007), better introductions (Brennan *et al.* 2005) and interviewer experience (Bednall & Hall 2004) all point to the major role interviewers can play here.

However, some compliance techniques border on the unethical because they rely on deception or half-truths. Thus, the key question for this study is *whether commercial researchers, given the extreme pressures on them, will be tempted to use these techniques*. This paper first discusses these techniques and reviews them in the light of the Code of Professional Behaviour (CPB 2008) adopted by the market research industry in Australia (AMSRS 2008). This is based on the ICC/ESOMAR Code of 1995. It shares its basic views on cooperation with other major market research bodies, such as ESOMAR (2007), AAPOR (2007), CASRO (2006) and other national market research bodies in the UK (MRS 2005), New Zealand (MRSNZ 2008), Japan (JMRA 2008) and the United States (MRA 2003). The CPB has been modified to take account of changes in legislation, such as the revised Privacy Act in 2003 and Do Not Call legislation in 2007 (ACMA 2008).

The cited guidelines express the view that participation is voluntary. They insist that participants should be aware of what they are consenting to, and that they are not misled about specific features of the survey, such as length. On the other hand, many techniques to persuade or to overcome respondent objections are not specifically excluded by these codes. Rather, the research industry recognises that its future lies in developing good long-term relationships with potential respondents. This is a sensible approach

to take given that survey participation is distributed very unevenly through the population (Bickart & Schmittlein 1999). The majority of surveys are completed by a minority of the population. If frequent participants lessen their participation, response rates might reach diabolically low levels.

### Social persuasion techniques

All the techniques described in this paper have been reported in academic studies. The principle of *reciprocation* involves establishing an inequitable exchange where the potential respondent is given something and then asked to return the favour by participating. Examples include offering pre-paid unsolicited incentives (Singer *et al.* 2000; Brennan *et al.* 2005), prenotification letters (Mann 2005) and survey length concessions (Mowen & Cialdini 1980). The first example involves a token reward incommensurate with the value of time and effort required, but at least the value is transparent. Hence it is not prohibited by the CPB. Survey length concessions involve the respondent being asked to do a long survey and then, if this request is refused, being offered a shorter survey. If the researcher's real aim is to conduct the shorter survey, the practice is deceptive. As the CPB (2008) states, 'Researchers and those working on their behalf (e.g. interviewers) must not, in order to secure Respondents' co-operation, make statements or promises that are knowingly misleading or incorrect – for example, about the likely length of the interview' (p. 7).

Appeals to the individual's need for behavioural *consistency* can be made by requesting a survey so short that respondents should comply and consequently perceive themselves as 'survey participants', making them more willing to yield to the subsequent request to complete a longer questionnaire – the target behaviour (Reingen & Kernan 1977). This is analogous to the salesperson's use of the foot-in-the-door technique. Again, it is deceptive because respondents are not told the true intent and thus prohibited by the CPB.

A related principle of *commitment*, or low-balling (Hornik *et al.* 1991) exploits the fact that once individuals commit to a decision they will maintain a positive attitude towards it even after some favourable aspects have been removed. Thus, respondents could be asked to complete a very short questionnaire. Those who consent to this are then told that more questions have just been added to the survey by the supervisor. Clearly, this is deceptive under the CPB if the aim of the survey was always to administer the full set of questions. Survey companies commonly use an additional or leave-behind questionnaire to supplement the original

questionnaire. This will not be an ethical problem if completing the first set of questions is an end in itself. People may wish to do more surveys or to join a panel, having enjoyed the original survey. However, if the target behaviour was always the longer survey, some element of deception may be involved and the CPB violated.

The *social validation* principle relies on telling potential respondents that many others, or significant others, have already participated, thereby implying that they would be unreasonable to refuse. As a survey progresses it may well be true that many have participated, but many more are likely to have refused. Thus, an element of deception is involved. It constitutes a statement that is ‘knowingly misleading or incorrect’ (CPB, p. 7). An *authority* appeal stresses the authority of the survey sponsor and, given that requests from authority are more readily obeyed, compliance may be more likely. There is evidence that interviewers who sound authoritative are more likely to succeed (van der Vaart *et al.* 2005). So long as the survey sponsor is accurately identified, no deception is involved.

The *scarcity appeal* highlights the rareness of survey participation, to make it seem more valuable (Cialdini 2001). With declining response rates scarce participation may well be true! Some deception may be involved under the CPB if in making this claim it is knowingly and falsely implied that the experience is a rare honour bestowed on the invitee or is socially valuable for those who participate. Highlighting the survey’s social relevance, the *prosocialness* appeal has also led to higher cooperation (Dillard & Hale 1992). Research into the incidence of cancer-causing behaviours may indeed have social value. Similarly, a body such as a university may have legitimacy in this respect. However, if applied to everyday consumer products, such a claim may be dubious at best.

Instructing interviewers to be likeable to respondents utilises the principle of *liking* (Groves *et al.* 1992), making it more difficult for invitees to refuse. The ability to be likeable helps explain why some interviewers do better than others (Bednall & Hall 2004; van der Vaart *et al.* 2005). Finally, the *helping* norm, which motivates individuals to help others in need, may also be invoked with words such as ‘it would really help us out’ (Mowen & Cialdini 1980; Moskowitz & Martin 2008). None of this last group of appeals is necessarily unethical; however, if they are perceived as insincere, these attempts to sound friendly or solicit help may be rejected as manipulative. As shown below, such approaches are contrary to the spirit of the CPB.

In general, survey researchers have effectively used a variety of compliance appeals to boost response rates. Where they involve deliberate

deception or misinformation they clearly violate the CPB. Where they use what might be called sharp practice, in making exaggerated claims or in making respondents uncomfortable if they do not comply, they are contrary to the broader provisions of the CPB. These counsel against actions that undermine ‘the general public’s confidence in the integrity of market research’ (CPB 2008, p. 9). These practices may be also considered inimical to building long-term cooperation with respondents.

### **Research questions**

In the light of these issues, this study sought answers to the following questions.

1. To what extent are these compliance techniques considered contrary to the commercial researchers’ Code of Professional Behaviour?
2. To what extent do market research companies actually use them in seeking to improve cooperation?

In asking respondents about their own ethical behaviour, it was recognised that a social desirability bias was possible. The method aimed to identify not only reported behaviours but also the reasons for them. Given commercial imperatives, reported ethical behaviour that coincided with self-interest would be the most credible.

### **Method**

This study focused on the field managers of telephone surveys in market research firms. They have the responsibility for managing interviewers and implementing the survey design. The research was conducted in two stages. The first involved eight in-depth interviews with informants from companies with extensive experience in telephone survey facilities in Australia. Six interviewees gave permission for their interviews to be taped and transcribed. Respondents were asked about the cooperation management practices they used, including the compliance-boosting practices suggested in the literature. This stage was used to generate the items included in the survey reported in this paper.

The second stage involved a survey of Australian market research companies that conducted telephone survey fieldwork. The target list was constructed using a record of all market research companies accredited by the industry quality scheme (MRQA 2006) for telephone interviewing, the

local market research association's member company directory (MRSA 2004), which listed companies that conducted telephone surveys, and the listing of companies that claimed to do market research in the electronic *Yellow Pages*. In total, 347 anonymous questionnaires were distributed, addressed to the company's 'Fieldwork Manager'. Where companies operated from more than one location, the questionnaire was sent to head office. It was recognised that many companies on these lists, especially those listed only in the *Yellow Pages*, would not actually be large enough to have their own phone room or CATI system. But they were included to ensure that *all* qualifying companies be given a chance to participate.

A low initial response of 23 completed interviews was received. A second mailing was used, which incorporated the compliance principle of *consistency*. That is, fieldwork managers were reminded that they sought the cooperation of respondents to their surveys and we were doing the same. This resulted in a response rate more than double the initial response. In total, 54 completed questionnaires were received, along with 76 responses from companies reporting that they were ineligible because they rarely, if ever, conducted telephone interviewing.

Assuming that the ratio of ineligible to eligible companies was reflected by the return rates of completing and ineligible companies, then a response rate of 37% was obtained. The companies that participated in this study reported the number of telephone interviews they conducted in the previous year. They represented an estimated 2,283,000 telephone interviews, or around 75% of all commercial telephone interviews carried out in the past year. This is based on a notional cost to the client of \$A45 per interview and the estimated gross revenue from telephone survey research (ABS 2003). Thus, although the survey numbers were small, they appear to have captured the majority of industry activity.

In what follows, the outcomes of the qualitative and quantitative research are reported.

## **Results**

### *Qualitative research*

The managers disliked the use of most of the compliance principles. As expected they were concerned about the ethics of using the *reciprocal concession* and the *consistency* appeals. These essentially involved misleading respondents about the true duration of the interview – a breach of the industry CPB. According to the managers, a double request set-up –

long and short interview in the case of *reciprocal concession* and short and long interview in the case of *consistency* – created other problems. These included difficulties in costing questionnaire design, fieldwork and data analysis – practical issues not previously discussed in the writings about survey management. Two of the interviewees expressed interest in the idea of engaging respondents in a short, initial questionnaire, which on the basis of *consistency* might increase the likelihood of invitees completing the longer survey – as long as it was done within the industry guidelines.

Concerns were also raised about the use of the *social validation* compliance principle, which involves the interviewers mentioning to respondents that the survey has met with ‘great enthusiasm and cooperation from others’. Some managers thought that this appeal might not be strong enough to induce participation because respondents would question the link between other people’s cooperation and their own. Managers felt that the *social validation* appeal might align them with telemarketing, even if its use was not dishonest. They saw the industry as trying to distance itself from telemarketing because the public’s confusion of the two activities worked against market research. In that sense they were honouring the broad requirement of the CPB for maintaining the good reputation of the industry.

*That sounds a bit like selling, and we have got to be really wary of appearing to be selling. Market research is purely voluntary, and we really keep away from anything that appears like we are trying to sell something.*

Managers felt that appealing to *scarcity*, by telling potential respondents that they are one of ‘the select few people’ asked to participate in the survey, would not have the desired consequence of increasing cooperation. They believed that, in the current climate of respondents being concerned about privacy, appealing to *scarcity* might make potential respondents feel even more nervous and suspicious about how the research company acquired their details. However, one manager pointed out that any invitation to participate in a telephone survey is in fact a scarce opportunity for respondents, because they are essentially representing thousands of others. From that point of view, an appeal to *scarcity* can be made by explaining the sampling process, and therefore this appeal had some legitimacy. Concerns about privacy can be allayed by emphasising the randomness of selection if random-digit dialling is used.

Other compliance principles were generally more popular. The interviewees indicated that when appropriate they would be likely to emphasise a survey’s sponsorship by an *authority* such as a government

department or a university to increase cooperation. It could also help to assure respondents about confidentiality. The principle of *liking* was also commonly engaged in telephone research as interviewers were instructed to sound friendly, pleasant and courteous – however, not to sound too familiar, as a telemarketer would. The impression gained from the interviews was that appeals to *reciprocation* by pre-paid incentives were highly unlikely to be used in Australian telephone research because clients would be unwilling to bear the costs. However, pre-notification letters – another way of evoking *reciprocation* – were sometimes used in telephone surveys. The *helping* norm – telling respondents that their participation ‘would really help’ – was sometimes used by their interviewers, but only when scripted in the introduction. *Prosocialness* appeals, which involved presenting the survey topic in a prosocial way, were also used in telephone surveys when the survey topic warranted it, and where the managers believed that it had some positive effect on cooperation.

### *The survey*

The survey collected evidence about the recruitment and training of interviewers in the context of applying compliance appeals. Table 1 presents the actual questions asked and a summary of responses.

The *prosocialness* appeal was likely to be used by 59% of respondents. Larger companies (those conducting more than 15,000 interviews a year) were even more likely to use it ( $\chi^2(1) = 5.84, p < 0.05$ ). This may be due to larger companies being more likely to conduct large-scale fieldwork research for government and social agencies. These studies might indeed have social consequences. *Reciprocation* appeals based on the use of a prenotification letter were reported by 62% as very or somewhat likely. Pre-notification was most likely to be limited to studies not using random-digit dialling where there was also time for a pre-notification stage. Thus, the result probably reflected the desirability of using this approach, rather than common practice. Elsewhere in the survey, 68% of field managers said they were likely to suggest that clients use incentives. However, only 5% of consumer surveys and 15% of business surveys were reported as using incentives, suggesting that this advice went largely unheeded.

*Authority* appeals (74%) were even more likely to be used when relevant. Emphasising that the research was collected on behalf of an authority was assumed to increase cooperation because individuals comply more readily with requests from authority (Cialdini 2001) and a powerful sponsor adds credibility. Why *authority* appeals were not used in all relevant cases is unclear.

**Table 1** Use of compliance appeals

Compliance principle	Very likely (%)	Somewhat likely (%)	Somewhat unlikely (%)	Very unlikely/never (%)
<i>Authority:</i> Where relevant, interviewers emphasising to respondents that the study is sponsored by a government department or a government agency or by a university ( $n = 54$ )	46.3	27.8	7.4	18.5
<i>Prosocialness:</i> Interviewers stressing to the respondents that the results of the study will be used to make decisions that will benefit society ( $n = 54$ )	24.1	35.2	25.9	14.8
<i>Reciprocation/prenotification:</i> Sending letters to respondents if applicable, notifying them that they will be called to complete a survey over the telephone ( $n = 52$ )	17.3	44.2	19.2	19.2
<i>Consistency:</i> Asking the respondent five short questions and, once they comply say, 'You actually qualify for the next stage of our survey which is a 25-minute interview, do you have the time to do it now or can I arrange the time to call you later?' ( $n = 53$ )	13.2	13.2	32.1	41.5
<i>Helping:</i> Interviewers telling respondents 'We really need your help?' ( $n = 54$ )	9.3	29.6	31.5	29.6
<i>Social validation:</i> Interviewers mentioning to respondents that other people have really enjoyed doing the questionnaire ( $n = 53$ )	1.9	22.6	35.8	39.6
<i>Reciprocal concession:</i> Asking respondents to complete a 30-minute survey and, if they refuse, say 'one part of the survey is particularly important and it will take only 15 minutes, do you mind completing it now?' ( $n = 53$ )	0.0	9.4	17.0	73.6
<i>Scarcity:</i> Interviewers telling respondents 'You are one of the small number of people randomly selected to represent the rest of Australia' ( $n = 53$ )	0.0	24.5	22.6	52.8
<i>Commitment:</i> Asking respondents to complete a 5-minute interview and, once they agree, saying 'I was not aware more questions have been added, do you mind continuing?' ( $n = 53$ )	0.0	0.0	1.9	98.1

Certainly the qualitative interviews showed support for using this approach. It may simply be the case that field managers have limited power to influence clients where they have not included authority appeals in their survey design. We need further studies of field management to determine how much influence this group has on all aspects of survey design.

The use of *consistency* and *commitment* appeals in telephone surveys was overwhelmingly out of favour with the field managers. This was apparently because these principles involved a breach of the Code of Professional Behaviour (AMRSR 2008). This states that respondents should not be misled in any way when asked to complete a survey. The majority of field managers, 75%, were very or somewhat unlikely to use a *scarcity* appeal in telephone surveys. This lack of popularity may be because this appeal was common among telemarketers who often emphasise how rare or time limited their deals are. The market research industry is concerned to distance itself from telemarketing. The principle of *social validation* fared slightly worse than *scarcity*, with 23% of respondents indicating a limited preference for it. This may be because a legitimate use of *social validation* will be limited to surveys where respondents had indeed enjoyed the questionnaire or regarded it as important.

The widespread use of *liking* appeals by market research companies was reflected in their interviewer selection and training practices. In terms of recruitment, the results indicated that 'Friendly', 'Confident' and 'Professional'-sounding individuals were most likely to be hired as interviewers (see Table 2).

**Table 2** Interviewer training, briefing and feedback ( $n = 54$ )

	Recruiting/ screening (%)	Initial training (%)	Given as feedback (%)
Sound friendly	92.6	72.2	53.7
Sound confident	94.4	75.9	55.6
Sound clear over the phone	88.9	70.4	55.6
Sound courteous	85.2	70.4	59.3
Show respect	75.9	74.1	51.9
Show interest in the survey		59.3	35.2
Referring by first name		20.4	22.2
Being assertive		42.6	37.0
Converting refusals such as 'I'm busy' into callbacks		72.2	55.6
Emphasising that the call is not telemarketing		64.8	24.1
Interviewers matching tone of voice and manner of speaking to the survey subject		48.1	29.6
Smiling down the phone		68.5	38.9
Interviewers adjusting their approach to the respondent		70.4	44.4

The importance of these qualities was reiterated during training, according to these field managers. For instance, friendly-sounding interviewers were preferred (93%), and 'smiling down the phone', which conveys friendliness, was also widely encouraged (69%), confirming previous research (Bednall & Hall 2004). Likeable interviewers were believed to be more likely to convert potential refusals into interviews and to gain better cooperation for interviews and appointments.

## Conclusions

There were four groups of responses about the use of compliance appeals. Some compliance-inducing techniques were rejected as *unethical*. The *commitment* approach in particular was universally rejected, while *consistency* and *reciprocal concession* were unacceptable to most. Each involved a misleading practice of hiding the true targeted behaviour. It was felt that respondents exposed to this technique on more than one occasion would learn to mistrust market research companies. Fieldwork managers believed it was not in their interest to follow these practices. Thus, their perceived self-interest coincided with ethical behaviour, suggesting their reported answers represented actual practice.

Other techniques were largely or completely rejected because they were viewed as *counterproductive*, in that they might be perceived as akin to telemarketing. *Helping*, *scarcity* and *social validation* appeals were not used by most companies, for most surveys. The qualitative research suggested that such techniques sounded too much like a sales pitch.

The third group of appeals were *acceptable, but limited in application*. While *authority*, *prosocialness* and *reciprocation/prenotification* appeals were used by the majority of companies, there were many occasions when they could not be used given the sponsor of the survey, the topic involved or the timetable for doing the research. The final appeal, *liking*, was strongly supported because it made it easier to build rapport and establish cooperation.

The results also suggested that commercial fieldwork managers had limited power to influence matters like using incentives. Arguably, this is normally decided by research managers or by the client, not by field managers. However, it appears that they had somewhat more power to enforce a company culture, not to use sharp practices like *reciprocal concession*. Their greatest opportunity to set ethical standards of practice comes from recruiting, training and monitoring the work of interviewers.

While only a minority of survey non-respondents are likely to oppose participating in surveys in general (Rogelberg *et al.* 2003), field managers are greatly worried about declining response rates. Unethical practices are largely avoided due to a belief that they will make matters worse in the near future. There is a growing tendency for companies to set up panels where people are paid or rewarded when they participate, especially when using the internet and other more recent approaches (Tourangeau 2004). Should the process of rewarding participants extend to all consumer research, budgets will be greatly affected. Ultimately, this would flow on to all survey researchers, including universities and other non-profit organisations. In addition, panels are no universal panacea, as paid respondent misbehaviour (such as filling in internet survey responses without paying heed to the questions, or inattention) has become more common (Brooks 2008; Cooke & Regan 2008). Based on the *reciprocation* principle, panellists paid small or trivial amounts may feel only a limited obligation to spend much time or effort on the survey.

Limited research has been conducted on fieldwork managers. So long as interviewers are involved, their role will remain important. Further research is needed, particularly in university and government research, where there is more scope for prosocial appeals. Not all university researchers in countries like the UK or the US are subject to review by university ethics committees, but, where they are, it could be assumed that many persuasion techniques used in previous research would now be disallowed. Practical ethics may look very different in these circumstances.

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