

Talk to Me

Understanding non-contacts, refusals, and response rates

By Robert P. Daves

Ah, yes, the response rate question. In many ways it's like the weather: Everyone talks about it; many complain; but relatively few do anything about it. It's bad enough that people confuse legitimate opinion research with telemarketing. It's bad enough that response rates have been dropping. But now "the response rate problem" appears to be creeping into the public consciousness, partly driven by the Ross Perots (who advise people to lie to pollsters) and the Arianna Huffingtons (who tell them to hang up on pollsters). Now that more people are becoming aware of this technical aspect of survey research, the work of those few researchers who are doing something about it takes on even greater importance.

Nearly all researchers who have been in the profession longer than a decade or so agree that no matter what the measure, response rates to telephone surveys have been declining. This is a potentially serious problem for a host of industries that depend on sample surveys.

While researchers, above all, know the value of achieving a representative sample, there is no rule of thumb to specify when a response rate is too low and consequently contains an unacceptable amount of non-response bias. And until recently there's been little understanding about the different types of non-response—non-contact rates versus refusal rates, for example.

"It's hard to know what the state of things is, outside of the National Election Study, the General Social Survey (GSS) and some of the big government surveys," says Tom Smith, head of the GSS at the National Opinion Research Center. Very little is known, he says, about non-response—and non-response effect—in market research studies and opinion polling.

Researchers—both those who do public polling and those who work for private clients doing market and other opinion research—hurt their own cause when they don't discuss response rates. When columnist Arianna Huffington asked in 1998 for response rates from several prominent media pollsters, she reported that responses ranged the full spectrum from rude refusal (MYOB) to attempts at compliance.

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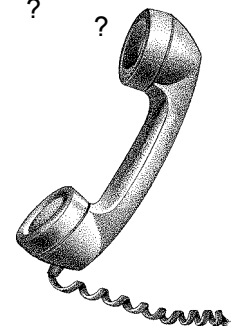
It's hard for journalists to believe that pollsters and other researchers don't know what their response rates are, but many researchers don't regularly compute them. That sounds like obfuscation to reporters, and public relations practitioners have known for a long time that one of the surest ways to get bad press is to refuse a reporter's legitimate request for information.

Part of the problem is that until recently, researchers just haven't had a standard lexicon to examine non-response. It's similar to the difficulty the blind men had when they tried to talk about an elephant. To one it felt like a rope, because he was holding the tail; to another it felt like a tree, because he was touching its leg. The "response rate" problem is just like that: It has a lot of parts, and they're all connected.

One of the basic goals of science is taxonomy. Until one can attach names to phenomena and can reliably measure them, it's impossible to understand them. Industry guardian organizations such as the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO), and the Market Research Association (MRA) have been studying the questions of non-response and disclosure of rates for years. One of the earliest articles on the subject appeared in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in 1944.

When AAPOR's council endorsed disclosure standards in 1967, they called for the disclosure of "completion rates." Unfortunately, while the industry moved on, AAPOR's code has stood still, by and large. "Completion rate" to most market researchers nowadays is a measure of efficiency, and thus cost, rather than sample performance, which is now best characterized by response rates.

In the 1980s, CASRO took a whack at defining response rates, and that effort led to what's known as the CASRO refusal rate, which many market researchers still cite. The CASRO refusal rate formula is still a good one, but with the explosion of "access impediments"—answering machines, Caller ID, and the like—and with top researchers beginning to examine the problem, it just isn't adequate to the task of understanding all facets of non-response.



In the last several years, a group of AAPOR researchers has led an effort to define outcomes and provide guidance for classifying final call outcomes and definitions for calculating refusal, response, cooperation and incidence rates. That effort has resulted in a booklet of definitions that survey researchers can use to define final outcomes of attempts to reach respondents when they do RDD telephone surveys and in-person household surveys. A new and easier-to-use edition is in the works that will be expanded to include mail surveys of individual persons. And AAPOR is also in the process of clarifying the part of its standards of disclosure that deals with response rates.

Getting non-response defined is a big step, and that's tough enough. Understanding the non-response effect on a sample is another matter. That effect is something good researchers have eating away at them each time they do a poll. Are non-respondents different than respondents? Are they different than respondents on key variables, and if so by how much?

In the past few years, the attention to non-response effect has been gathering steam. Last year, researchers from around the world gathered in Portland, Oregon at a conference dedicated to understanding survey non-response. Those proceedings have not yet been published, but the word coming out of Portland and other places suggests that a more complete understanding on non-response effect isn't too far away.

In one 1997 experiment, Andrew Kohut and his colleagues at the Pew Center for the People and the Press conducted two surveys. In one, the center used a 5-day fieldwork period. They then spent weeks paring non-response on the other. They found differences on racial attitudes between respondents in "amenable" households, which were easily contacted, and those in "reluctant" households, which required more concerted efforts to reach. However, they also found that for the majority of questions, the responses for the two types of households were fairly similar on many measures, including media usage, daily activities, and political ideology.

Bob Groves of the Joint Program in Survey Methodology has also examined the non-response problem, but from a somewhat different perspective. "It's clear that the framework of non-response is understood," he says. "You have to separate the non-contacts from the refusals."

Each group has different reasons for not participating. Groves' research shows, with the effects on survey data of non-contacts easier to understand and catalogue than those of refusals. Research in the early 1990s had indicated that those who had technological barriers to interviewing, such as answering machines, could be included in a survey with extra

effort; the Pew research took many of those extra steps. But Groves went on to summarize the now-known characteristics of people who are hard to contact. He found that in addition to those who use Caller ID or answering machines, non-contacts include people in single-person households, especially those who are employed, and people living in urban areas.

What does this mean for pollsters? For quickie polls, Groves says, you are disproportionately missing those folks, and, as a result, may run into problems measuring things such as out-of-home activities, hours working and other time usage, including community involvement. Groves and his colleagues found, though, as the Pew Center did, that a host of measures were not affected. In addition, he was able to rule out sponsorship of the survey as a cause of non-contact; the effect was driven more by calling rules and length of the survey.

But refusal non-responses are another matter, Groves' research suggests. A survey's sponsor and topics *do* have a big effect on refusals. His research is beginning to show that for many people, there has to be a "what's-in-it-for-me" component to compel participation. What interests some is the topic of the survey; for others without that interest, cash incentives, for example, are powerful.

Consequently, Groves says, an omnibus poll probably would do better than a single-topic poll because it is more likely to hit a respondent's hot-issue button. "When you make salient some aspect of the survey design [to a respondent's life], then you activate the response calculus," he says.

Groves describes the moment when a respondent is weighing whether to participate as "quite fragile." His current research focuses on trying to find the ingredients of non-response in surveys, and he says the field is "about three to five years away from identifying the set of non-response conditions." "I'm more upbeat about these things nowadays," Groves adds.

We all hope to share his confidence. 

For further information, please visit the American Association for Public Opinion Research website, www.aapor.org.