Managing Privacy Managers

By Melissa J. Herrmann

As survey researchers, we are constantly facing new challenges. Americans seem to be getting savvier and more protective of their privacy every day. One step in the direction of avoiding telemarketers and researchers (as if they were the same beast) was the answering machine: people could just put it on and figure that if the call was important, the caller would leave a message! The next step was Caller ID, in which the potential respondent could look at the number of the caller before deciding whether to answer the call. Now, people do not even have to make that determination for themselves; they can purchase services that "block" calls for them. These so-called privacy managers are proving to be a tough obstacle for researchers to overcome.

According to AAPOR's *Standard Definitions* (2000), unknown household cases include "call-screening, call-blocking, or other telecommunication technologies that create barriers to getting through to a number." Traditionally we have dispositioned the sample in this fashion, but both cost and representativeness are important considerations.

When we create a random digit dial (RDD) telephone file for a research

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project, our goal is to represent the population being studied as accurately as possible. By excluding people who opt to use these privacy managers, we are excluding part of the general population. We are forced to consider them unreachable because we cannot even get as far as to get someone to answer the telephone, let alone determine if the household is eligible for a given study.

The inability to reach these households also reduces the usefulness of response rates as indicators of how well we gained cooperation from our sample. And the necessity of dialing fresh sample to compensate for all those dispositioned as "privacy manager" can get expensive.

There are many types of call blocking available, but the most common are anonymous call rejection, do not disturb services, and privileged number lists.

Anonymous call rejection blocks any call showing up on a Caller ID box as "unavailable" or "out of area" (i.e., out of state). In some versions, the call never goes through to the hous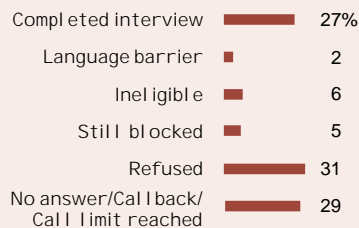ehold. Rather, callers receive a recording that informs them that the person they are trying to reach does not accept unidentified calls or calls from out of the area. In other versions, callers get the same message, then are given the option to type in an access code or speak their name and, in some systems, the pur-

pose of their call. This is then announced to the respondent, who has the option to accept or reject the call, send it to voice mail, or—in the case of at least Nevada Bell—send a "phone solicitor" recording back to callers, requesting that they be put on the "do not call" list.

With a do not disturb service, users can specify a time when they wish not to be be called. It can be a standard time every day, such as the dinner hour or the kids' bedtime, or the service can be activated on an *ad hoc* basis. When this service is operational, the caller is informed that the person is unavailable.

Households using privileged number lists specify up to 20 numbers that are the only ones ever allowed to get through. All other calls—regardless of whether or not they are identified—will be rejected.

This list of products is not exhaustive. For example, AT&T has a feature that allows respondents to reject specific *types* of calls—specific area codes, long distance calls, or operator-assisted calls. With each different telephone company come many different options, all

> ## "Redialing got us through to all but 5% of the numbers blocked by privacy managers."

determined to achieve one goal: protecting the privacy of its customers.

Figure 1
Redialing Results, 5-Week Poll

Completed interview	27%
Language barrier	2
Ineligible	6
Still blocked	5
Refused	31
No answer/Callback/Call limit reached	29

A crucial feature of call blocking from the standpoint of researchers is that most of these services can be turned on and off at will. A household may decide to have the block on one night but turn it off the next. They may decide to put the Do Not Disturb service on for one hour, but be reachable an hour later. Some services are unable to block calls from WATS lines or operator-assisted calls, but can block calls from direct lines. Others do just the opposite.

International Communications Research (ICR) conducts at least two EXCEL omnibus surveys per week. Additionally, our sister company CENTRIS conducts an omnibus survey called ACCESS. Between these two sets of surveys, approximately 1.4 million pieces of sample were dialed between January and June 2001. Throughout this period, the telephone interviewers, when reaching a household with a privacy manager or call-blocking feature, would disposition it as such. What we found was a steady increase in the incidence of reaching a privacy manager when calling an RDD sample, from .51% in January to 1.09% in June.

In an effort to overcome this worsening problem, we decided to attempt phone numbers blocked by privacy managers more than once. We found that although we might never reach some of these numbers, in other cases simply calling at a different time would get us through to the household. This was of particular significance when achieving a certain response rate was one of the goals of our research project. If we considered privacy managers as a final disposition, according to AAPOR standards, they would be allocated as unknown households. In all actuality, these sample pieces may be more productive than fresh sample because they are quite likely to be the phone numbers for households and potential respondents.

We investigated this concept further in two RDD studies: a survey conducted at ICR by The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard School of Public Health, and a market study conducted at ICR of respondents in the state of Wisconsin. In order to increase the response rate as much as possible, the 589 numbers initially identified as privacy managers in these two studies were redialed on telephone lines that identified ICR as the caller. Although there is no way to know whether we were able to get through to households with privacy managers because we dialed the phone number at a different time of the day or because the number was now identified to the household, we were able to complete interviews with more than one-quarter of the originally blocked numbers (see Figure 1).

This approach is more productive than fresh sample in terms of reaching working versus non-working numbers. Since we can be relatively sure that blocked numbers are households, there is a good likelihood of reaching a potential respondent if the privacy manager can be gotten through.

This group of households, though small, is a portion of the population we, as researchers, are constantly trying to represent. Thus, by redialing privacy manager sample, we are making strides towards making our samples more representative. What is striking is that redialing got us through to all but 5% of the numbers blocked by privacy managers. Also, of the households at which we were able to contact a potential respondent, we were able to complete interviews with almost half.

As a final test, we also explored recontacting the privacy managers as a part of our omnibus survey, EXCEL. This was a difficult feat, as this is only a 5-day field period project. We wanted to look into the feasibility of dialing this otherwise final-

Figure 2
Redialing Results, 5-Day Poll

Completed interview	6%
Language barrier	1
Ineligible	16
Quota filled	10
Still blocked	13
Refused	12
No answer/Callback/Call limit reached	41

dispositioned sample in terms of a quick-turnaround research endeavor. As Figure 2 shows, redialing privacy manager numbers clearly does not work as well for surveys of short duration as it does for those with a longer field period.

Our findings support the notion of not treating privacy manager sample as a final disposition. The sample not only yields active telephone numbers, but also yields completed interviews. These completed interviews can be critical when trying to achieve a certain response rate.