The effects of source credibility and message variation on mail survey response behaviour

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Grounded on persuasive communications theory, the impact of source credibility and message variation on response behaviour towards a mail survey on a sample of the general public are examined. An experimental design comprising three levels (high, medium and low) of these variables is employed. Source credibility and the interaction of message variation (i.e. usefulness of the study) and source credibility have a significant impact on response rate. Overemphasising the usefulness of a study is found to be counterproductive. For sources that are arguably average or lower in credibility, a strongly worded message (in terms of usefulness) was less effective than more modest objectives.

Introduction

Maximisation of response rate and completeness of replies are two key concerns associated with survey-based studies. Consequently the literature evidences considerable research designed to test the impact of a wide array of methods, techniques and approaches on survey response behaviour (see, among others, reviews by Scott 1961; Kanuk & Berenson 1975; Linsky 1975; Yu & Cooper 1983; Harvey 1987; Yammarino et al. 1991). Irrespective of the viewpoint and orientation of the related research, the need for the inclusion of a well-designed cover letter is acknowledged. In a note published as early as 1953 in the Journal of Marketing, the impact of the cover letter on respondents’ compliance to a request to complete
and return a questionnaire was highlighted (Sigband 1953). This view was later supported by Houston and Nevin (1977, p. 377), who stated that ‘The cover letter, an element common to all mail surveys, should therefore receive careful attention so as to plan its content in the most effective manner.’ This remains a relevant issue whether survey data are collected in a postal or electronic format (Dillman et al. 2009).

Although reported results are not always consistent, empirical evidence broadly supports the claim that the content and style of a cover letter can significantly impact on return rate and degree of questionnaire completeness. Summaries of the related literature published since the early 1960s (see the above listed reviews) and recent summaries by Greer et al. (2000) and Gendall (2005), illustrate that research is dominated by examination of the effects of personalisation (Dodd & Markwiese 1987; Dillman 2000; Gendall 2005), sponsorship of the study (Houston & Nevin 1977; Jones & Linda 1978; Faria & Dickinson 1992, 1996; Gendall et al. 1995; Schneider & Johnson 1995), and the various forms of appeal (Houston & Nevin 1977; Jones & Linda 1978; Childers et al. 1980; McKillip & Lockhart 1984; Dommeyer 1987; Biner & Kidd 1994; Gendall et al. 1995; Schneider & Johnson 1995).

With the exception of Dillman’s (1978) work, which was explicitly grounded in social exchange theory, early literature was largely descriptive, leading Furse and Stewart (1984 p. 79) to conclude that ‘There have been few attempts to develop a theory of mail questionnaires.’ Responding to such a challenge, a number of theoretically grounded models designed to explain survey behaviour have been proposed and tested. In addition to the above mentioned social exchange, cognitive dissonance, self-perception, commitment/involvement, motivation hierarchy-of-effects and theory of planned behaviour offered the theoretical underpinnings of research (Furse & Stewart 1984; Childers & Skinner 1996; Albaum et al. 1998; Cavusgil & Elvey-Kirk 1998; Evangelista et al. 1999; Helgeson et al. 2002; Bosnjak et al. 2005; Dillman et al. 2009).

According to Bosnjak et al. (2005), social exchange, cognitive dissonance and self-perception theories can be grouped under the general umbrella of persuasion principles. The need to examine the role of communications as determining response behaviour is further supported by Helgeson et al. (2002, p. 307), who stated that ‘Thus, the task of the survey researcher is to mount a persuasive communications campaign designed to move the respondent through each subsequent decision process stage until the desired behaviour is performed.’ Using the AIDA model they go on to suggest that the structure and content of the cover letter is especially influential in the
attention stage of the process. Drawing on these two papers, it is posited that the behaviour of the cover letter of a survey (in this case a postal survey) is located within the broad domain of persuasive communications. Specifically, a cover letter can be classified as a psychodynamic strategy (for a review see DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1989), which suggests that a communicator (in this case the researcher) can achieve the desired action (e.g. response rate and completeness) by using a message that is capable of altering the psychological functioning of an individual’s mind. Grounded on such, the aim of this study is to examine the impact that perceptions of source credibility and variations in the message about the use of the study have on the survey behaviour of the general public.

**Theoretical underpinnings and research propositions**

As stated above, the departure point of this study is that the cover letter of a survey represents a form of communication. Although the intuitive definition of communication is the transmission of a message from source (A) to receiver (B), analysis of some 160 different definitions carried out by Merten (1977) resulted in two clusters: communication as a one-way process that encompasses categories of transmission, stimulus-response and interpretation; and communication as a symmetric process that encompasses categories of understanding, exchange, sharing, relationship, social behaviour and interaction. Consistent with this thinking, communication can be considered as a process by which individuals share meaning (Fill 2005) or as social interaction through messages (Fiske 1990). Consequently, two main schools in the study of communication developed (Fiske 1990; O’Sullivan et al. 1994): the process school, which sees communication as the transmission of messages by a process through which one person affects the behaviour or state of mind of another; and the semiotics school, which sees communication as the production and exchange of meanings, and is concerned with how messages, or texts, interact with people in order to produce meaning.

Given that the purpose of a cover letter is to create a desired behaviour (i.e. complete and return a questionnaire), it follows that, as a communication process, the impact of a cover letter is best examined under the principals of the process school. Within this school of thought the communication process is considered to comprise, ‘who (source) says what (message) to whom (receiver) how (channel) and with what effect (destination)’ (Fishbein et al. 1980, p. 219). Consequently, there are four types of factor that determine the persuasiveness of a communication:
The effects of source credibility and message variation on mail survey response behaviour

1. source-related factors
2. message-related factors
3. receiver-related factors, and
4. media-related factors.

This study focuses on the first two of these. There is considerable research devoted to the examination of the impact of receiver (i.e. respondent) related factors on survey response behaviour (see Bosnjak et al. (2005) for a short review), while the medium of interest here is mail/post.

Source-related factors

Source-related factors refer to all the communicator’s positive characteristics that affect the receiver’s acceptance of a message and collectively represent ‘source credibility’ (Ohanian 1990). A long-standing principle of persuasion is that a credible source will usually enhance persuasion (Engel et al. 2000). Review of the related literature indicates that source credibility is the outcome of perceptions of expertise and trustworthiness (see, for example, Ohanian 1991; Dholakia & Sternthal 1977; Engel et al. 2000). Expertise is defined as ‘the extent to which a communicator is perceived to be the source of valid assertions’, while trustworthiness is ‘the degree of confidence in the communicator’s intent to communicate the assertions he considers most valid’ or, more simply, ‘A listener’s trust in the speaker’ (Ohanian 1990, p. 41). Although a number of studies have attempted to examine the impact of a communicator’s credibility (see, for example, Ohanian 1991; Erdogan 1999; Silvera & Benedikte 2004; Reinhard et al. 2006), the related findings are equivocal, with some authors indicating that, under certain circumstances, a source of low credibility may be more persuasive than one with high credibility (see, for example, Dholakia & Sternthal 1977; Sternthal et al. 1978; Grewal et al. 1994; Buda & Zhang 2000).

Focusing on the survey response literature, we suggest that there is congruence between the above and research dealing with the impact of auspices or sponsorship of the research (see the debate in the Introduction, above). Specifically, comparisons between university and commercial organisations are considered to reflect different levels of source credibility. On balance we propose that there is a positive relationship between sponsor credibility and response to a postal survey.
Message-related factors

The message-related factors are categorised as representing aspects of either message structure and content, or message appeal (Delozier 1978). The impact of the latter on survey response behaviour has been extensively researched (see the Introduction, above) and is outside the remit of this study. When dealing with message structure and content, the literature indicates that attention should be paid to a wide variety of issues, the most important of which are: message format (i.e. set of arguments and factual evidence to support the arguments as well as recommended actions), message organisation, message sidedness (i.e. whether one or both sides of an argument should be presented), order of presentation, and whether or not conclusions to the arguments put forward should be stated (for a review, see Buda & Zhang 2000).

Although rather sparse and lacking explicit reference to theory, there have been some survey response-related studies that have attempted to examine issues similar to those debated above. For example, Alderson and Hay (1976) examined order of information provided, Furst and Blitchington (1979) examined the impact of degree of information about the study, Dommeyer (1987) tested for response differences between negative and non-negative messages, and Gendall et al. (1995) investigated the complexity and tone of the cover letter. However, there is general agreement that the manner in which the respondent (or his/her referent groups) will benefit from a specific study is an important part of a cover letter (see, for example, Erdos 1983; Harvey 1987; Bourque & Fielder 1995; Dillman 2000; DeVaus 2002). Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence of general scepticism about the effectiveness of commercial research, and there is public questioning of the usefulness of such research. On the strength of the above we propose that there is a positive relationship between message content, specifically the usefulness or application of a study’s findings, and response to a postal survey.

Interaction effects

It is logical to assume that there are positive interaction effects between source credibility and message-related factors. Specifically, it is expected that response to a postal survey increases for high levels of source credibility the stronger the perceptions of the message content of the study.
The effects of source credibility and message variation on mail survey response behaviour

Methodology

Unlike other studies that have tested for differences between university and commercially sponsored research, this research focuses exclusively on surveys carried out by commercial organisations. A fictitious conservation group, based in south London, UK, and specialising in tree conservation, was created. Data were collected through a cross-sectional survey, the theme of which, for purposes of congruence with the firm, was environmental impact on local trees.

Experimental levels and construction of messages

The study comprised two experimental variables – source credibility and message variation – each tested at three levels – high, medium and low – thus resulting in nine experimental treatments. The creation of the different levels of both source credibility and message variation (i.e. usefulness of the study) was built upon the scale developed by Ohanian (1990). Following a small number of face-to-face interviews, the final wording employed for the three levels of the two variables is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Description of the source credibility levels</th>
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</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assumed level of credibility</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>H&amp;G Conservation Services is an <strong>award-winning, international</strong> organisation of tree surgeons, working with other environmental groups to save threatened tree species through the provision of information, conservation action and support for sustainable use. For more than <strong>50 years</strong>, H&amp;G has worked to ensure that <strong>scientific information</strong> on the conservation of threatened tree species is readily available through the <strong>quarterly publication of The World List of Tree Conservation</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>H&amp;G Conservation Services is a <strong>UK</strong> organisation of tree surgeons, working with other environmental groups to save threatened tree species through the provision of information, conservation action and support for sustainable use. For more than <strong>10 years</strong>, H&amp;G has worked to ensure that <strong>information</strong> on the conservation of threatened tree species is readily available through the <strong>annual publication The UK List of Tree Conservation</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>H&amp;G Conservation Services is a <strong>local</strong> organisation of tree surgeons, working with other environmental groups to save threatened tree species through the provision of information, conservation action and support for sustainable use. H&amp;G is working to ensure that <strong>information</strong> on the conservation of threatened tree species will be readily available through the <strong>regional report: Tree Conservation in South London</strong>.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Irrespective of the experimental treatment, the following represented the call to action for all cover letters:

We would like your opinion regarding the impact of environmental conditions on local trees. As urbanisation expands, planting and preservation is increasingly important in order to safeguard heritage trees and improve survival rates of young trees. Tree and hedging are also increasingly important havens for wildlife under pressure.

Questionnaire construction

The questionnaire consisted of three sets of questions. The first set requested information on the types of tree, hedging and wildlife the respondents had (or had seen) on their property, with replies selected from multiple categories. The second set of questions assessed the perceived threats to local trees and wildlife in the respondent’s neighbourhood. Replies for the second set were obtained on a 7-point Likert scale. The final set comprised demographics in the form of age, gender and education level. The total survey comprised eight multiple category questions and eight Likert-type questions.

Sampling, data collection and response rate

The target population was defined as households in a particular south London borough. Because of difficulties in obtaining a reliable sampling frame, an area sampling approach was adopted and a drop-off self-administered survey was employed. The neighbourhoods were chosen to reflect a consistent geodemographic profile, and the households were selected systematically. The delivered package was addressed to the main income earner of each household. In an effort to encourage responses, a small contribution to the Woodland Trust Tree-For-All, a UK children’s tree-planting project, was offered.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Message variation: assumed level of usefulness</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Highest</td>
<td>The results of this study will help <strong>save</strong> endangered tree species by formulating conservation schemes that <strong>target specific tree species</strong>, <strong>hedging and wildlife in your area</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>The results of this study will help <strong>identify</strong> endangered tree species in your area. It will be used to <strong>develop better regional knowledge</strong> for future tree planting and preservation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower</td>
<td>The results of this study will <strong>broaden our understanding</strong> of tree species and wildlife in your area.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In order to obtain sufficient replies to allow meaningful analysis, 200 questionnaires were allocated to each of the experimental treatments, thus resulting in the distribution of 1800 questionnaires. A systematic approach to the distribution of the treatments was adopted. A second wave of questionnaires was distributed approximately two weeks after the initial wave.

Five weeks after initial distribution, 655 completed replies had been received. This resulted in an effective response rate of 36.4%, which, given the response distribution presented in Table 3, offers an appropriate analytical basis. Given the method of distribution, there was no practical way to identify respondents.

### Table 3  Response pattern

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Treatment condition</th>
<th>Source credibility</th>
<th>Message usefulness</th>
<th>First wave</th>
<th>Second wave</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(N) Responses %</td>
<td>Responses %</td>
<td>Responses</td>
<td>Responses %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>High</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>200  67 33.5</td>
<td>17  12.8</td>
<td>84 42.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>200  43 21.5</td>
<td>14  8.9</td>
<td>57 28.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>200  34 17.0</td>
<td>14  8.4</td>
<td>48 24.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Medium</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>200  53 26.5</td>
<td>12  8.2</td>
<td>65 32.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>200  57 28.5</td>
<td>15  10.5</td>
<td>72 36.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>200  84 42.0</td>
<td>13  11.2</td>
<td>97 48.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Low</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>200  50 23.0</td>
<td>22  14.7</td>
<td>72 32.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>200  56 28.0</td>
<td>20  13.9</td>
<td>76 38.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>200  63 31.5</td>
<td>21  15.3</td>
<td>84 42.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>1800 507 28.1</td>
<td>148  8.2</td>
<td>655 36.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Once the reliability and validity of the adopted measures for knowledge and social usefulness were confirmed (see Churchill 1979; DeVellis 1991; Spector 1992; for scale items and results contact the authors), non-response bias was tested by comparing the pattern of answers received within one and five weeks (Armstrong & Overton 1977). No significant differences were identified for either number of responses or completion rate. For the same points in time no significant differences were identified in terms of age, gender or education. On the collective evidence of these results, lack of non-response bias was confirmed.

### Analysis and results

Consistent with other similar studies, analysis is carried out at two levels: (1) response rate (whether replied or not), and (2) response completeness (measured as percentage of completed questionnaire).
Response rate

The data were analysed using ANOVA (justification for using ANOVA when the dependent variable is binary can be found in Cochran (1950) and Hsu and Feldt (1969)). The information provided in Table 4 indicates that, in terms of main effects, only source credibility significantly explained variation in response rate. The interaction effects between source credibility and message variation are significant.

Subsequent analysis of the main effects is carried out through testing for differences in the proportions responding to each of the source credibility treatments. The response rate for the high, medium and low credibility sources was 31.5%, 39% and 38.7%, respectively. Hypothesis testing reveals significant differences between the high credibility treatment and the other credibility levels. There were no significant differences between the low and medium credibility levels.

The pattern of interactions is presented in Figure 1. Highly credible sources perform best when supported by messages of high usefulness. On the other hand, the highest rate of reply for medium and low source credibility are associated with low usefulness.

Response completeness

The information provided in Table 5 indicates that neither the main effects nor the interaction of the two experimental variables (i.e. source credibility and message usefulness) were significant in explaining variation in the degree of questionnaire completeness.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Type III sum of squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corrected model</td>
<td>8.614</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.077</td>
<td>4.726</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intercept</td>
<td>238.393</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>238.393</td>
<td>1046.375</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source credibility (SC)</td>
<td>2.161</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.081</td>
<td>4.743</td>
<td>0.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Message usefulness (MU)</td>
<td>0.477</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.238</td>
<td>1.046</td>
<td>0.352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SC * MU</td>
<td>5.982</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.495</td>
<td>6.564</td>
<td>0.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Error</td>
<td>408.039</td>
<td>1791</td>
<td>0.228</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>655.000</td>
<td>1800</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corrected total</td>
<td>416.653</td>
<td>1799</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions and discussion

Grounded on principles of persuasive communications, the study presented here tests the impact of source credibility and message variation on postal survey response behaviour. Manipulation of the above experimental variables, at three levels each, has been applied on a sample of the general public. The results indicate that the main effects of source credibility,
and interactions between source credibility and message variation, have a significant impact on response rate. Neither factor nor its interactions has a significant impact on questionnaire completeness.

The results relating to source credibility support claims that this is a key response-inducing element that should form a focal aspect of a cover letter. However, the evidence presented indicates that attempts to over-emphasise the credibility of a commercial survey can have a negative effect. Our findings show a significantly reduced number of responses for the high source credibility cover letter as opposed to the low and medium treatments. Although on face value the results are surprising, research by Austin and Dong (1994) suggests that an innocuous message can be perceived to be more truthful than a sensational one, reflecting expressed public scepticism towards the motive of commercial research. In the current study, lack of brand familiarity may have led to (some) scepticism in terms of the high credibility source. Additionally, consumers have been found to be more sceptical about subjective claims than objective ones (Yalch & Elmore-Yalch 1984; Ford et al. 1990). The adjectives used for the high credibility source, such as ‘award-winning’ and ‘international’, are arguably more subjective than ‘UK’ or ‘local’. This may have encouraged respondents to ‘downgrade’ their assessment of the high credibility source, leading them to view the medium credibility source as more impactful.

A possible explanation for the non-significant main effects of message variation relates to the general appeal of the issue (the environmental impact on local trees). The ongoing media focus on environmental issues, and growing public concern over climate change and sustainability support this premise. Virtually all respondents completed every survey question, and many added lengthy comments. This suggests high interest in the topic, an important determinant of mail survey response (Helgeson et al. 2002). Altruistic appeals have also been shown to produce a high response rate (Gendall et al. 1995). The results indicate that potential respondents to a postal survey who are highly involved with the issues of the study are unlikely to be sensitive to cues related to the direct use of the research undertaken.

Finally, examination of interactions between source credibility and usefulness of study indicates the existence of joint effects. The disordinal pattern of interactions is consistent with general communications research (e.g. Wilson & Sherrell 1993), and indicates that messages about the usefulness of the study should be considered in combination with those related to the credibility of the sponsoring organisation. Specifically, the results suggest that the degree of congruence between source credibility and message usefulness is salient; a highly credible firm is best served
by message content with a high usefulness; firms with less credibility are better served if the message content is less ambitious. It is only for medium source credibility that response rates favour a mismatch, with significantly higher responses in the low message usefulness context. The differences in response rate between each optimal combination are not significant. These findings reflect research on cause-related marketing, which suggests that the perceived compatibility between sponsor and cause is an important determinant of consumer response (Trimble & Rifon 2006). A lack of compatibility increases the strength of consumer judgement of corporate profit motives and reduces corporate credibility (Rifon et al. 2004). It may be that, for the medium credibility source, the ‘low usefulness’ objective of a broader understanding of local trees and wildlife is more compatible than the medium objective of ‘identifying endangered species’.

In summary, the findings indicate that the greatest response rate is obtained by combinations of either high source credibility/high message usefulness, low source credibility/low message usefulness or medium source credibility/low message usefulness.

**Implications for practice**

The foregoing has a number of practical implications for surveys addressed towards the general public. Unless the recipient of a request to complete a survey has personal knowledge of the sponsor, attempts to demonstrate source credibility in the cover letter should aim to demonstrate a modest position, and avoid over-emphasis of position and status. It may be that respondents perceive ‘overly’ credible firms to be indulging in ‘spin’, and therefore less credible. Alternatively, respondents may consider highly credible firms to have less need for their response.

Looking at message variation alone, a statement as to the manner in which the results will be used seems to be of no differential impact. The findings suggest that individual involvement with the research area may act as the driver for survey response rather than the outcomes of the research.

The interaction of a highly credible source with varying levels of usefulness implies that respondents may be sceptical if the intended use of the research does not appear to match the strength of the source. Overall, the interaction effects suggest that the most effective combination may be one where source and message are relatively equally matched: a highly credible source is best served by a strong message; less credible sources yield more productive results if the message claim is modest.
Limitations and further research

It is inevitable that this study has limitations that potentially confound the results and offer opportunities for further research. First, in order to test the generalisability of the findings there is need for a broader examination using probability samples that cover a wide geographical area and demographic characteristics. The findings are equally relevant for online survey research as for mail methods (Manfreda et al. 2006). The perceptions of email invitations as spam, the self-administered nature of online questionnaires and increased competition for a respondent’s attention, make source credibility and message appeal especially important for internet surveys, and future research should consider online methodologies. Second, a more complete examination of message variation through the incorporation of additional related factors, such as message framing and order, should be carried out. Third, the examination of source credibility should be expanded to include existing rather than fictitious organisations, and respondent evaluations of perceived credibility should be accounted for. This might yield insight into the unexpected findings for the medium credibility/low usefulness scenario. Fourth, the stability of the results following repeat contacts (i.e. follow ups) should be tested. Finally, there is need to examine the potential moderating effects of variables, such as education, personality traits and so on, on the impact of source credibility and message variation on survey behaviour.

References


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