Uninformed response bias in telephone surveys

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Abstract
This research examines the uninformed responses consumers offer to telephone surveys. Consumers in a random sample of 946 households freely offered opinions about fictitious government agencies and consumer brands for which they were uninformed. Pressuring consumers to respond through verbal introductory statements to the survey and not offering a Don’t Know (DK) option led to significantly higher uninformed response rates. Further, increased pressure to respond resulted in more negative responses, and fewer positive responses. If consumers are willing to offer opinions on fictitious issues or brands, they are likely to offer opinions on actual issues or brands about which they are uninformed or unfamiliar. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Telephone surveys; Uninformed response bias; Consumers

1. Uninformed response bias

Researchers have found that respondents freely give opinions about issues for which they have no information (Hanley, 1946; Bishop et al., 1980, 1983, 1986; Schumm and Prestier, 1980, 1981; Gilliam and Granberg, 1993). For example, Kolson and Green (1970) found that grade-school children had opinions about a fictitious political figure (Thomas Walker). Collett and O’Shaughnessy (1976) found that people were willing to give directions to places that did not exist. In each case, those expressing opinions were by definition uninformed because the issues were fictitious — thus the term uninformed response bias.

It is very important that marketers understand this phenomenon. If people are willing to express an opinion on a completely fictitious issue, they are likely to express opinions on actual issues (brands) about which they are uninformed or unfamiliar. Marketing and business decisions might then be based on meaningless answers to survey questions. And, efforts to increase response rates (e.g., forms of pressuring subjects to respond in an effort to increase item response rates, reduce sample bias and non-response errors) might actually increase the chances for uninformed response bias. Uninformed respondents can be pressured (forced) to provide meaningless answers to survey questions (Converse, 1964, 1970; 1974; Kalton and Schuman, 1982; Kanuk and Berenson, 1975; Linsky, 1975; Hawkins and Coney, 1981; Yu and Cooper, 1983).

How do consumers answer questions about which they are uninformed? The knowledge schema activated when a question is asked guides the respondents’ answer. Consumers form answers to survey questions based on reasoning from a store of related information (Zaller, 1992; Nadler and Niemi, 1995) and by “sampling from a set of frames, schemata, cues, considerations, beliefs and feelings in their heads” (Chong, 1993, p. 871). If knowledge about a specific issue, object, or brand does not exist, consumers use whatever related knowledge they have to answer the question. The norms of natural conversation suggest that when a question is asked, not only should it be answered, but it should be answered with available information and knowledge (Bradburn and Sudman, 1988; Sudman et al., 1995).

When no related knowledge exists, consumers are still expected to answer survey questions. Research has suggested that when consumers have no knowledge schema on which to base their answer, contextual cues and stimuli factors often guide their responses. In such cases, the order of items (possible answers) becomes an important factor. Items near the beginning of a list may be read or listened to more carefully than items later in the list. Thus, items near the beginning of the list tend to get the more favorable
responses (Bradburn and Sudman, 1988). The tendency for respondents to choose the first response alternative—the primary effect—has been observed in numerous studies (e.g., Kroenick and Alwin, 1987; Audyilla and McClelland, 1990). Further, such order effects should be greater in telephone surveys because subjects have little time to think about question and are therefore more likely to give "top-of-the-head" responses (Hippel and Schwartz, 1987). Such primacy effects will occur when response alternatives are of equal size and from the greater favorable option to the alternative that is heard first (Schuman and Presser, 1981).

What we know about the uninformed response bias is that it occurs with troubling regularity. And, the scant research that has attempted to identify moderating variables has shown that offering a don't know (DK) option will significantly reduce the amount of uninformed responses, but not eliminate it. For example, Hawkins and Coney (1981) found that 95% of respondents who returned a mail survey offered an opinion about a fictitious National Bureau of Consumer Complaint when there was no DK option. The presence of a DK option reduced the amount of uninformed responses to 63%. But, even when uninformed responses were controlled by knowledge the bias could be strongly and easily admit their ignorance. For example, respondents were asked eight questions about fictitious issues or brands. Past research has established that it is necessary to use fictitious issues to measure uninformed responses (Schneider, 1985). If consumers are asked questions about actual (real) issues or brands, there is no way of determining if a response is informed or uninformed. Thus, any response other than DK is considered by (definition) uninformed. Respondents were randomly selected to answer the questions on one of eight different versions of the survey. The research design was a simple 2 factorial. The three experimental factors were: (1) low versus high pressure to respond, (2) presence versus absence of a DK option, and (3) presence versus absence of a neutral scale point. It is hypothesized that a greater amount of uninformed responses will occur when respondents are pressured to respond, when there is no DK option (a form of pressuring consumers to respond), and when there is a neutral scale point (consumers can use as a way of second guessing without offering either a positive or negative response).

Schneider (1985) has hypothesized that uninformed response rates are higher for opinion (attitude based) questions, compared to knowledge (factual based) questions. To examine this possibility, respondents in the current study were asked both opinion (attitude) questions as well as knowledge (factual) questions.

1. Opinion questions

Respondents were asked their opinions of four fictitious National Bureau of Consumer four fictitious product brands with the following Likert scale items:

- The National Bureau of Consumer Fraud provides an effective means for victims of consumer fraud to obtain legal relief.
- The National Bureau for Hurricane Relief provides an effective means for hurricane victims to restore lost or damaged property.
- Yamazaki brand stereo equipment is high quality stereo equipment.
- Yamazaki brand cheese is high quality cheese.
- Barojet brand stereo equipment is high quality stereo equipment.
- Deslandes brand cheese is high quality cheese.

Using Japanese and French brand names for stereos and cheeses allows for an examination of how cues such as country-of-origin activate a knowledge schema to guide consumers' expectations about a brand and affect their uninformed responses. To identify brand names that consumers would easily identify as originating from a particular country and (thus easily activate a schema of related beliefs and attitudes) the first consumers were read a list of 12 fictitious brand names (e.g., SanPedro, Gordik, Nishikaica). In open-ended responses, consumers indicated the country from which they thought the brand originated. Pretest consumers were not told that these were fictitious names, and none of them guessed that they were fictitious. Yamazaki, Yamajitsu, Barojet, and Deslandes had the greatest consistency in consumers' beliefs about their country-of-origin. On average, over two-thirds of test subjects believed that Barojet and Deslandes originated from Japan, and Yamazaki and Yamajitsu originated from France.

These same products also indicated their perceived quality of products originating from various countries. They did this on a 7-point scale, where 1=low quality and 7=high quality. A repeated measures analysis of variance revealed that Japanese stereos were rated as significantly higher in quality than Japanese cheeses (means=6.5 for stereos vs. 2.4 for cheeses; F1,48=32.66, p<.001). In the case of French stereotypes, stereos were rated as significantly higher in quality than French stereos (means=5.9 for stereos vs. 3.1 for stereos; F1,48=13.88, p<.001). If consumers are presented with uninformed responses to unfamiliar brands are guided by expectations about similar brands (resulting from cues such as country-of-origin), then the valence of consumers' uninformed responses should parallel these pretest results.

1.1. Response options to opinion questions

All respondents were given the response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree, and Strongly Agree. Respondents in the DK present condition were simply never informed that a DK answer was acceptable. However, all respondents were allowed to respond with "Don’t Know," even if they were not specifically given that option. DK responses were coded as 0 for the presentation of response options and no responses. Similarly, subjects in the neutral present condition were also given a Neither Disagree Nor Agree option. Since a neutral mid-point can be used to indicate unawareness as well as neutrality or indifference (Spang, 1984; Churchill, 1996), it can thus be used as a DK response. If so, uninformed consumers might use the neutral point as a way of responding without actually responding (expressing either a positive or negative opinion).

2.2. Knowledge questions

Subjects were also asked the following two questions to measure their knowledge of (fictitious) information.

- Which of the following statement about the American Red Cross is TRUE?
  0.1. The American Red Cross provides low interest mortgage loans to needy families.
  0.2. The American Red Cross is a U.S. government agency.
  0.3. The American Red Cross receives local (city) government funding.
   - Who is the director of the National Bureau of Consumer Fraud?
  0.1. Johnathan Oliver Hess
  0.2. Steven B. Schmid
  0.3. Richard Bogart.

None of the three statements about the American Red Cross are true. Similarly, there is no such entity as the National Bureau of Consumer Fraud. These two questions were framed as multiple choice questions where respondents were read all three options and then asked to pick which one they thought was correct answer. Again, subjects in the DK present condition were verbally given a DK option before answering. There was no manipulation of the neutral present condition for these factual knowledge questions. To examine the effects of uninformed responses to uninformed responses on knowledge about an issue on their uninformed responses, all subjects were asked to indicate how familiar they were with the American Red Cross on a 5-point scale (1=not at all familiar, 5=very familiar). This subjective familiarity question was asked prior to the question about the fictitious descriptions of the American Red Cross. If not, consumers' inability to correctly answer the factual question about the Red Cross might affect their estimates of their familiarity with the Red Cross.

3. Method

3.1. Procedure

Consumers' names and phone numbers were randomly selected from local phone books. Undergraduate marketing research students conducted the telephone-university marketing research project under the direct supervision of their marketing instructor. Upon answering the phone, consumers were greeted with the following introductory statement:

Hello, my name is [Name]. I am conducting a telephone survey of local residents. The survey is very short, and will take only a few minutes of your time. Also, you and your responses will be completely anonymous. Would you be willing to answer a few short questions?
This is a relatively low-pressure introduction to the survey. If the consumer agreed to participate, then the next statement the interviewer read was dependent on the level of response pressure to which the respondent was randomly assigned. For respondents in the low-pressure condition, the interviewer simply began the interview by asking the first survey question. For respondents in the high-pressure condition, the interviewer continued with the following statement:

"It is very important that you answer every question. I do not get any credit for incomplete surveys."

After reading this statement, the interviewer began the interview by asking the first survey question.

3.2 Debriefing

After completing the interview, all respondents were told the true purpose of the study and that all of the issues addressed on the survey were fictitious (except that the American Red Cross does exist). None of the respondents were able to guess the true purpose of the survey during the interview.

4. Results

The overall response rate for the survey was 79.3% (range = 72.7% to 84.4% for the eight versions of the study). A χ² test revealed no significant differences in response rates across the eight versions of the survey. The high-pressure statement respondents to all questions was made after consumers agreed to participate in the survey. Thus, it should affect item response rates, but not consumers' willingness to participate.

The results presented in Table 1 show that consumers were very willing to answer the knowledge questions and provide opinions about fictitious government agencies as well as fictitious brands. For individual survey questions, the unformatted response rates ranged from a low of 31.9% to a high of 99.1%.

Unformatted response rates varied by the type of survey question asked. Consumers were more likely to offer opinions about the fictitious government agencies. On average, 82.7% of consumers offered opinions about the two government agencies. In contrast, an average of 62.8% of consumers offered opinions about the four fictitious brands of steroids and cheeses, and 66.1% of consumers offered an opinion about the correct answer to the two fictitious knowledge questions. The high percentage of unformatted responses to the government agency questions could be due to consumers' lack of familiarity with specific government agencies. As such, they were not able to correctly determine that a described agency did not exist. Consumers might have even confused these fictitious agencies with actual agencies (e.g., the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection, the National Fraud Information Center, Federal Emergency Management Agency) and allowed their attitudes and opinions about these real agencies to guide their unformatted responses to the fictitious agencies (more will be said about this in the discussion section).

The current findings offer both supporting and contradicting evidence regarding Schneider's (1985) hypothesis of higher unformatted response rates for opinion questions compared to knowledge questions. The comparable unformatted response rates for knowledge questions and opinion questions about the brands contradicts this hypothesis. However, for the same topic, unformatted response rates were lower when consumers were asked to identify the director of the National Bureau of Consumer Fraud (knowledge question) than when asked to evaluate the bureau (opinion question; 60.3% vs. 80.9%). This finding supports Schneider's (1985) hypothesis. Future research needs to further clarify the differences in response rates for various types of survey questions.

Table 1
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey question</th>
<th>Low pressure</th>
<th>High pressure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No DK</td>
<td>DK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No neutral</td>
<td>Neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sample n = 108</td>
<td>n = 128</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Fraud: 80.9% vs. 95.9%
- Hurricane: 84.6% vs. 89.1%
- Yarnell (biker): 73.2% vs. 82.5%
- Burdette (moto): 68.2% vs. 82.5%
- Red Cross: 71.8% vs. 80.6%
- Director: 70.3% vs. 80.6%

χ²(f(df)) test for different in unformatted response rates across the eight experimental treatments for each question:

- * p < 0.05
- ** p < 0.01

4.1 Amount of unformatted responses

The presence of a DK option clearly had a significant and consistent effect on consumers' willingness to offer an unformatted opinion for all types of questions asked. Without a DK option, an average of 87.3% of consumers offered an unformatted opinion. In contrast, when consumers were given a DK option, the average unformatted response rate dropped to 55.9% (23.5% fewer unformatted responses for opinion questions about government agencies, 33.3% fewer for opinion questions about brands, and 35.6% fewer for knowledge questions).

The main effects of pressure to respond on unformatted responses were not consistent. While consumers in the high pressure condition were significantly more likely to offer unformatted responses to the opinion questions about brands and the knowledge questions, the overall increase in unformatted response rates averaged only 53.7% (1.4% more unformatted responses for opinion questions about government agencies, 4.9% more for opinion questions about brands, and 10.2% more for knowledge questions).

The significant Pressure*DK, and Pressure*Neutral Point interactions suggest that pressuring consumers to respond had the greatest effect in increasing the amount of unformatted responses when there were other factors present that might also encourage unformatted responses (not offering a DK option, and offering a neutral point that consumers can use as a way of responding without having to express an opinion). The significant Pressure*DK interactions indicate that pressuring consumers to respond increased the amount of unformatted responses by 10.9% when there was no DK option, but had no effect on the amount of unformatted responses when there was a DK option. The significant Pressure*Neutral Point interactions indicate that pressuring consumers to respond increased the amount of unformatted responses by 11.7% when there was a neutral point present, but had no effect on the amount of unformatted responses.

Table 2
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pressure to respond</th>
<th>Presence of DK</th>
<th>Presence of neutral point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low pressure DK</td>
<td>High pressure DK</td>
<td>No neutral point Neutral point</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Fraud: 82.5% vs. 79.6% (69.9 vs. 94.4)
- Hurricane: 74.5% vs. 74.3% (85.8 vs. 83.6)
- Yarnell (biker): 70.6% vs. 75.5% (64.0 vs. 84.6)
- Red Cross: 66.7% vs. 66.6% (48.8 vs. 84.5)
- Director (moto): 70.6% vs. 70.1% (52.3 vs. 84.7)

Table 3
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter estimates from the logistic regression analyses examining the effects of the experimental variables on the amount of unformatted responses for each survey question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurricane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yarnell (biker)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red Cross</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director (moto)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < 0.05
** p < 0.01
Table 4
Percentage of negative, neutral, and positive uninformed responses to the survey questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Negative</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>χ²*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>55.5</td>
<td>193.0**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurricane</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>471.6**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamazaki stereo</td>
<td>37.9</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>103.8**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yonetsu stereo</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>154.3**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayreutl stereo</td>
<td>46.6</td>
<td>22.2</td>
<td>28.2</td>
<td>80.4**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deslardi cheese</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>45.7</td>
<td>53.3**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5
Percentage of negative, neutral, and positive uninformed responses by level of pressure to respond

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Low pressure</th>
<th>High pressure</th>
<th>χ²*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>38.4</td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>17.1**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6
Percentage of negative, neutral, and positive uninformed responses by presence vs. absence of DK option

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>DK present</th>
<th>DK absent</th>
<th>χ²*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>47.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurricane</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>38.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamazaki stereo</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamazaki cheese</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>96.9</td>
<td>12.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayreutl cheese</td>
<td>34.9</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deslardi cheese</td>
<td>30.6</td>
<td>34.3</td>
<td>40.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7
Percentage of negative, neutral, and positive uninformed responses by presence vs. absence of neutral scale point

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Neat point absent</th>
<th>Neat point present</th>
<th>χ²*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fraud</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>45.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hurricane</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamazaki stereo</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>50.0</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yamazaki cheese</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>72.6</td>
<td>37.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bayreutl cheese</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>61.6</td>
<td>40.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deslardi cheese</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>35.2</td>
<td>44.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* χ² (df = 2) test for differences in percent of negative, neutral, and positive uninformed responses for consumers in the low- and high-pressure conditions.
** p = 0.01.

...more were likely to choose the first possible answer offered to them, and least likely to choose the third (last) possible answer given to them. Data related to the effects of the experimental variables on the valence (content) of uninformed responses are presented in Tables 5–7.

The general pattern of results for the opinion questions suggests that increasing pressure to respond through verbal intra-personal statements to the survey (Table 5) and not offering a DK option (Table 6) resulted in consumers expressing fewer positive uninformed opinions and more negative opinions. This pattern existed regardless of the general tendency to evaluate a brand as either positive (Yamazaki stereo and Deslardi cheese) or negative (Yamazaki cheese and Bayreutl stereo). Increased pressure to respond led to 8.9% fewer positive uninformed responses, and 5.8% more negative responses to opinion questions. Not offering a DK option led to 22.6% fewer positive responses, and 11.5% more negative responses to opinion questions. However, neither pressure to respond nor the absence of a DK option had any effect on the particular answer consumers offered to either knowledge question. The presence of a neutral scale point obviously had an effect on the valence of consumers’ opinions (Table 7). There can be no neutral opinions when there is no neutral scale point. However, the change in the general pattern of uninformed responses when a neutral point was offered was not the same for all survey questions. When evaluating the governmental agencies, offering a neutral point led to a relatively large decrease in the percentage of positive opinions (19.1%) and a relatively small decrease in the percentage of negative opinions (7.1%). Interestingly, for the positively evaluated brands (Yamazaki stereo and Deslardi cheese), offering a neutral point reduced the percentage of positive opinions by an average of 27.1%, while reducing the percentage of negative opinions by an average of only 9.3%. Conversely, for the negatively evaluated brands (Yamazaki cheese and Bayreutl stereo), offering a neutral option reduced the percentage of positive opinions by...
To examine the effects of level of knowledge on unformed responses, consumers' familiarity with the Red Cross was identified as either high or low based on a median split of their survey answers. "How familiar are you with the American Red Cross?" (1 = not at all familiar; 5 = very familiar). Less familiar consumers (those respondents with either a 1, 2, or 3 on the knowledge scale; n = 397) were significantly more likely than highly familiar consumers (those respondents with either a 4 or 5 on the knowledge scale; n = 349) to offer unformed responses (75% of less familiar consumers, compared to 67% of highly familiar consumers; χ² = 6.9, p < 0.01).

Further, both high and low familiar consumers were more likely to offer unformed responses when pressure to do so was increased (p = 0.6). Increased pressure to respond led to more unformed responses for less familiar consumers (69.1% for low pressure vs. 79.5% for high pressure; χ² = 8.5, p < 0.05) as well as highly familiar consumers (57.6% for low pressure vs. 75.4% for high pressure; χ² = 12.4, p < 0.01). And, not offering a DK option led to more unformed responses for less familiar consumers (57.7% for DK present vs. 93.3% for DK absent; χ² = 354.3, p < 0.001) and for highly familiar consumers (39.4% for DK present vs. 74.7% for DK absent; χ² = 8.1, p < 0.05).

5. Conclusions

Clearly, consumers freely offer opinions and answers to questionnaires about which they are uninformed. If consumers are willing to offer opinions on fictitious issues or brands, they are likely to offer opinions on actual issues or brands about which they are uninformed or unfamiliar.

5.1. Amount of unformed responses

In the study, uninform ed response rates ranged from 31.9% to 99.1%, depending upon the type of question asked, and whether or not the consumer was pressured to respond, offered a DK option, or offered a neutral scale point option. Uninformed response rates were higher for attitude questions about government agencies (82.7%), compared to attitude questions about consumer brands (68.2%) and factually based knowledge questions (66.1%).

Can efforts to increase item response rates to surveys actually have detrimental effects on the quality of the results from telephone surveys? Yes. It is clear that not offering a DK option (forcing consumers to report an opinion) can significantly and consistently increase the amount of uninformed responses to a variety of question types (knowledge and opinion), for both high and low familiar consumers. In this research, not providing a DK option resulted in nearly 25% more uninformed responses to questions about government agencies, and over 33% more uninformed responses to questions about consumer brands. Even when consumers could easily check the DK box, the majority of them still reported an uninformed response. Increased pressure to respond can also result in higher uninformed response rates. There was an average of 5.3% more uninformed responses from consumers in the high pressure condition compared to those in the low-pressure condition. However, this marginal increase in uninformed response rates must be weighed against the overall increase in response rates (larger effective sample size) that increased pressure to respond provides. Of course, the degree and type of pressure exerted on consumers to complete surveys can vary. Future research is needed to better understand the effects of varying degrees and types of pressure to respond (e.g., monetary incentives versus verbal incentives) on the amount of uninformed responses (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993).

Offering a neutral point had no significant main effects on increasing the amount of uninformed responses. It was expected that offering a neutral point would result in greater uninformed responses because it gave consumers a way of responding without having to express an opinion (either positive or negative). This was not the case. However, the significant interactions suggest that pressure to consumers to respond had the greatest effect on increasing the amount of uninformed responses. When there were other factors present that might also encourage uninformed responses (not offering a DK option, and offering a neutral point that consumers can use to respond without having to express an opinion).

5.2. Content (valence) of uninformed responses

Even if consumers offer opinions on issues or brands about which they are uninformed, can these uninformed responses bias our measurements? Yes. Uninformed responses are clearly not random guesses centered around the scale mid-point that tend to cancel each other out. Nor is there a general tendency for uninformed responses to be positive (as might be concluded based on past research examining uninformed responses to hypothetical government agencies). When asked to evaluate the brands, consumers apparently used country-of-origin cues to activate a schema of related beliefs and attitudes to form expectations about the quality of steroes and cheeses originating from either Japan or France.

When there was no knowledge base (schema) to guide responses to questions about unfamiliar items or issues (such as identifying the director of the Bureau of Consumer Fraud when each name was as plausible as the others), responses were influenced by the order of the response alternatives. This is not surprising. The tendency for respondents to choose the first response alternative — the primary effect — has been observed in numerous studies (e.g., Kronick and Alwin, 1987; Ajayda and McClelland, 1990). Researchers have suggested that such order effects will be greater in telephone surveys because respondents have little time to think about questions, and are therefore more likely to give "top-of-the-head" responses (Hippel and Schwartz, 1987). Such primary effects will occur when response alternatives are of equal appeal, and result from the greater favorable commitment to the alternative that is heard first (Schuman and Presser, 1981).

Interestingly, efforts by researchers to increase item response rates to surveys can also have significant effects on the content (valence) of those responses. Pressuring consumers to respond through verbal introductory statements to the survey and not offering a DK option (thus, increasing the overall response rate) led to more negative responses and fewer positive responses. However, it should be noted that all questions in the current survey were phrased positively ("Brand X is high quality"). Future research could examine how uninformed respondents answer questions that are reflexed — phrased negatively (e.g., "The Bureau of Consumer Fraud is doing a poor job."). This would allow researchers to examine whether increased pressure results in more negative responses, or merely more responses that disagree with the survey questions.

In conclusion, when (marketing) decision makers rely on the results of surveys and opinion polls to guide their decisions, they must be aware of the possibility for uninformed responses. And, efforts to increase response rates (e.g., forms of pressuring consumers to respond to an effort to increase item response rates, reduce sample bias and non-response errors) might actually increase the frequency of such responses and change response distributions.

References