

I AM NOT SELLING ANYTHING: EXPERIMENTS IN TELEPHONE INTRODUCTIONS

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Abstract:

A series of split-run experiments was conducted in the Netherlands to test the efficacy of a "we are not selling" message in telephone survey introductions. Data were collected at 10 market research firms, all members of the Netherlands Association for Market Research. The topics varied in saliency and are a fair representative of the studies undertaken by the research institutes. In total 101625 persons were contacted, of which a random half heard the experimental introduction and the other half the firms' standard introductions. On average, the 'not selling'-introduction reduced the refusals with 2%. This is a small, but significant effect. As the 'not selling'-argument is very easy to implement and not costly, we strongly advise to use it when introducing a telephone survey.

Key-words: Telephone survey, introduction, experiment, non-response, refusal rate

Telephone surveys have become more and more popular in the last thirty years, reaching its zenith in the 1990's. Main advantages, as compared with face-to-face interviews, are less costs and stricter interviewer control. Extensive research has improved telephone survey methods considerably (cf. Groves et al, 1988), and telephone surveys can produce high quality data (De Leeuw, 1992; De Leeuw & Van der Zouwen, 1988).

Approaching the new millennium, telephone interviewers are faced with new problems that threaten the validity of the method. The growing number of unsolicited calls (e.g., tell-sell, telemarketing, polls) may influence the willingness to cooperate. Recent studies in the Netherlands showed that *each* Dutch adult receives 5 uninvited phone calls a year on average. Although some subgroups will receive considerable more calls, depending on age, profession, and status, overall a Dutch household will answer 11 unsolicited calls (7 from telemarketing & 4 from research institutes) a year on average (Steenis, 1998). It is therefore not surprising that there is a growing negative attitude towards market research. When asked about market research, 28% of the respondents have the opinion that they are asked to cooperate far too often. Even more worrisome is that 22% are convinced that market research is selling under the guise of research (Brennecke, 1998). This will influence the interpretation of the intent of a call; in psychological terms the cognitive script that guides the reactions to uninvited calls. More often potential respondents will react to uninvited telephone calls, using the 'they want to sell

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something'-script. They expect a sales-pitch and not a serious and legitimate survey.

Telephone interviewers are more limited than face-to-face interviewers in the tools to correct this erroneous script. They have less means and less time to convince respondents. Not standing on the doorstep, a telephone interviewer can only use audio- and paralinguistic communication to convey a message. They cannot show identity cards, or use other visual cues. In addition, a telephone interviewer has far less time; the message should be very short to prevent break-offs. Finally, when random digit sampling is used, this precludes the use of advance letters to introduce and legitimize the survey (cf. Groves & Couper, 1998; Hox, De Leeuw, Snijkers, 1997; Pondman, 1998).

One of the few tools a telephone interviewer has to establish legitimacy at the outset is simply saying, "I am not selling anything." Although some research firms both in the USA and Europe already use this sentence in the introduction, others refrain from it being afraid to alert respondents. In a series of split ballot experiments in the Netherlands we tested the effect of the "I am not selling"-message on the response.

2. Method

2.1. Data collection

To establish legitimacy at the outset we used the following introduction: Good-evening/morning/afternoon, this is from..... We are conducting a survey on... *We are not selling anything*. To ensure we get a *scientific sample*, I would like to speak to (next birthday-selection or other selection method). The message "We are not selling anything" is reinforced by the words "scientific sample", to convey that a serious, legitimate survey is being conducted.

In order to test this introduction a series of 29 split-run experiments were conducted at different periods (spring, summer, fall, winter) in 1999. These experiments were coordinated by the Dutch public information center "Your Opinion Counts" (UMT), ensuring that individual data would not be disclosed. Data were collected at 10 Dutch market research firms who are all members of The Netherlands Association for Market Research Companies. All firms agreed to conduct a split ballot experiment, using the experimental introduction in a random half of their sample, and their *standard* introduction (without "not selling" and "scientific sample") in the other half. During the fieldwork, a senior researcher responsible for that particular survey filled in a questionnaire on topic and saliency of the survey, and fieldwork procedures used (e.g., incentive, timing of calls).

All 29 experiments followed the same procedure: 'cold' calling for household surveys. This implies, that only new samples were contacted, no advance letters were used, and no incentives were used. All firms always used a short script in their standard introduction. The topics of the surveys varied, covering the normal range of market and opinion research. The populations investigated also covered the usual range from general population to specific groups. In total, the results are based on 101 625 contacted, that is, the total number of people the interviewers reached and spoke to over the phone.

2.2. Analysis

For both the experimental condition (not selling) and the control condition (standard introduction) the following figures were registered for this study: the total number called minus the number of *known* ineligible (e.g., fax, business), the number of completed interviews, the

number of partial interviews, the number of break-offs, the number of refusals, the number of noncontacts, and the number of other non interviews (e.g., physically unable, language problems). Because the number of partial interviews was very small, we counted a partial interview as break-off.

Unit nonresponse is the failure to obtain any measurement on a sample unit (Dillman, Eltinge, Groves & Little, 2002). There are several indices for (non) response, each emphasizing a different source of nonresponse (cf Smith, 2002). From a practical point of view the Response Rate is of interest. The Response rate is the number of complete interviews divided by the number of *eligible* reporting units in the sample. This figure is most often used in reports, articles, and papers. However, to evaluate the effectiveness of the 'not selling' argument, it is better to focus on the Cooperation Rate. In the later the number of completed interviews is divided by the total number of *contacted* known eligibles, instead of the number of known eligible units. After all, to evaluate the effectiveness of an argument, one should concentrate on the cases that are subjected to the argument: the *contacts*.

We computed for both the experimental and control groups the following indices (see AAPOR 1998 brochure on standard definitions for the precise definitions): Response Rate (RR1, or minimum response rate, AAPOR, 1998), Cooperation Rate (COOP1, or minimum cooperation rate, AAPOR 1998), Contact Rate, that is the proportion of all cases in which some responsible household member was reached (AAPOR, 1998), and Refusal Rate (REF). The Refusal Rate was calculated as proportion of refusals based on the total of eligible units *contacted*. In addition, we calculated Other-Non-Interview Rate (OR), indicating nonresponse for other, miscellaneous, reasons and Break-off Rate (BOR), an index for partial interviews caused by disconnection initiated by the respondent during the interview, in a manner similar to the refusal rate (AAPOR, 1998)².

To assess the global effectiveness we performed paired sample t-tests between the estimates for the experimental (no selling) and control (standard introduction) groups. For the follow-up analyses we used log-linear regression with cooperation rate as dependent variable. Goal of these follow-up analysis was to detect possible interactions with background variables, such as saliency of topic, and type of population. In other words, to investigate for which type of survey the 'not-selling'-argument is most effective (Hox & de Leeuw, 2002).

3. Results

3.1. Effectiveness of introduction

First of all, we tested whether there was any difference between the experimental (no-selling) and control (standard introduction) groups in Contact Rate. There was no statistically significant difference between the two conditions ($p=.56$); in both conditions the mean Contact Rate was 83%. In other words, the randomization in the split run experiments was successful.

In the next step we compared the experimental (no selling) and control (standard introduction) group on Response Rate (RR1), Cooperation Rate (COOP1), Refusal Rate (REF), Break-off Rate (BOR) and Other-NonInterview Rate (OR). There was a significant difference for the response rate, the cooperation rate, and the refusal rate. There was no significant difference for

² It should be noted that in each case we computed the most conservative estimate. That is partial interviews were not counted as interviews. Also only known ineligible cases were counted as ineligible. No estimate of the proportion of ineligibles was made cf. AAPOR-brochure, page 18).

the other noninterview rate (See Table 1).

Table 1 Paired Sample T-test

Mean for both groups (e.g., not-selling and standard introduction) with standard deviation in parenthesis and p-value of t-test for five response indices.

Response Index	Not-Selling Introduction	Standard Introduction	Pvalue
Response Rate 1	0.262 (0.12)	0.246 (0.11)	.00
Cooperation Rate 1	0.309 (0.12)	0.289 (0.12)	.00
Refusal Rate	0.579 (0.13)	0.603 (0.12)	.00
Break-Off Rate	0.013 (0.02)	0.015 (0.03)	.41
Other-Non-interview	0.096 (0.10)	0.089 (0.09)	.39

Note. Response Rate was based on the number of eligibles, while the other four indices were calculated with the number of contacted in the denominator.

There is a statistical significant improvement of response in the 'not-selling' condition. The increase in response was 2% on average. This improvement was mainly caused by a lower number of refusals in the 'not-selling' condition. Although the number of break-offs was also less, this difference was very small and did not reach statistical significance.

On average, that is over all topics and research firms, adding the 'not selling' argument to the introduction increases the response in telephone interviews with 2%.

3.2. Influence of survey characteristics on the gain in response

The decision to respond depends on many factors and besides the interviewer's introduction other survey characteristics play a role (Groves & Couper, 1998; De Leeuw, 1999; De Leeuw & De Heer, 2002). Survey characteristics may interact with the efficacy of the 'not-selling' argument. For instance, when the topic is very salient for the respondent the 'not-selling' argument may have far less influence than with a not salient topic. In some studies, it was possible to mention the sponsor (e.g., university, European communion); theoretically these studies hardly needed the non-selling argument. Also, the research firms themselves differ in 'image' with the general public; some are well known from election polls and opinion research for the media (newspapers, television), others do not have this advantage.

To investigate these effects, all studies were coded by two independent coders on saliency (1=not salient, ... 4=very salient indeed), on whether or not an official sponsor could be identified, and on type of population investigated. The coders also coded the number of words in the introduction before the 'not-selling'-argument was given. One should remember that each research firm in this experiment placed the 'not selling'-argument in their usual standard introduction. Some agencies used a more elaborate or longer introduction than others. This enables us to investigate the hypothesis that the 'not selling'-argument is more effective if it is used as quickly possible in the introduction. Finally, the research firms were incorporated as a 'dummy' variable in the analysis.

It is often argued that some knowledge about the survey-burden can influence interviewer behaviour. For instance, when an interview is long or has difficult questions interviewers may be more reluctant or hesitant in their introduction (cf. Groves & Couper, 1998, p. 289). We asked the senior researcher, responsible for each survey to fill in a short questionnaire with background information on the survey, including average length of interview in minutes, number of open and closed questions, cognitive burden on respondent (1=very simple questions,..., 5 very difficult questions).

We performed a loglinear regressions analysis with cooperation rate as dependent variable. It is not surprising that overall cooperation is influenced by saliency of topic, type of population, respondent selection (random household member vs. the one who answers the phone), and local vs. nationwide study. Highly salient topics result in a higher response; when a special population (e.g., members of an organization) is interviewed this also results in a higher response. In contrast, a nationwide study results in a lower response than a local study, as does the use of a random selection procedure of a household member (e.g., asking to speak with the person who has the next birthday). These are all factors that depend on the research question itself and cannot be changed by a researcher and some factors (e.g., random selection) are necessary to avoid biased results!

In addition, we found that the duration of the interview did influence response, but that cognitive burden (type of question, difficulty) did not. The effect of length can be caused by interviewer behaviour; when interviewers know that an interview will take some time, they can -subconsciously- be less assured and be more hesitant in their introduction. It can also be an effect of initial questions of the potential respondent. 'How long does it take' is one of the most common asked questions during the introductory 'spiel'. Potential respondents that pose this question will react to the answer. Unfortunately we do not have tape recordings of the introductions available to check this assumption.

When we correct for the above variables, there is a slight 'agency' effect; some agencies do better than others. But for all agencies, the experimental 'not-selling' introduction did improve respondent's cooperation!

In the next step we investigated if the experimental introduction worked better in certain situation. In other words we investigated the interaction of the variable experimental condition with background variables such as saliency, type of population, respondent selection.

There was a strong and significant interactions with 'place of argument' in the introduction. The experimental introduction worked best when it was given right at the start of the introduction. However, there were *no* significant interactions with saliency or type of population. The 'not selling' introduction works as well with salient topics as with not salient topics; it also works equally well for the general population and special groups. Finally, there is some indication that the experimental introduction has a stronger effect in more difficult situation; that is when further respondent selection is performed (e.g., next birthday method).

Conclusions and discussion

Adding the message 'I am not selling anything' to the introduction does work in reducing refusals. 'Not selling' works well in all situations. It works equally well with salient and non-salient topics, and with different types of populations. There was a significant interaction with place in the introduction!

People do react to what they hear in a telephone introduction and they do listen to what

is being said. Not all arguments have an equal effect on respondents, as can be substantiated with empirical findings. We also ran 18 split-ballot experiments with an 'anonymity'-argument in the introduction. That is, the interviewer assured the potential respondent that the answers were confidential and that anonymity was guaranteed. This did not have any effect on the response, neither positive nor negative!

The overall effect of 'I am not-selling' was small: 2%. However, it is very cost effective. Another, more costly method to convey reassurance is an advance letter. Sending an advance letter can have an effect of a 7-9% increase in response (cf. Heberlein & Baumgartner, 1978). However, much depends on the content and length of the letter (cf. Dillman, Gallegos, & Frey, 1976; Lynn, Turner, & Smith, 1997). Advance letters can even have a negative effect on response (For an overview, see Groves & Couper, 1998). Recent research in the UK (Lynn et al, 1997) showed that the effect of a *well-written* advance letter is now around 3%. In sum: As it is easy to implement and not costly, we strongly advise to use a 'not selling'-argument in the introduction to a telephone interview. We also advise to use the 'not selling'-argument as early as possible in the introduction.

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