

2008 Annual Conference
Harvard Program in Survey Research
May 9, 2008

Strategies and Standards for Reaching Respondents in an Age of New Technology

Thomas M. Guterbock
Director, Center for Survey Research
University of Virginia

Center for Survey Research
University of Virginia

Overview

- Fundamentals:
 - The basic bargain
 - Dillman principles
- Technology 101
 - “High tech/high touch”
- Five broad factors of change
- Technology helps us, but also helps respondents
- The Grand Dialectic (us vs. them?)
 - “High Tech/High Touch”
- Five stages of response to technology by SRO’s
- Where this might take us with regards to standards, probability sampling

A few fundamentals

The basic bargain of the survey interview

- The basic ‘bargain’ between survey researcher and respondent hasn’t changed much:
 - Give us some of your time (for free? for a little cash?)
 - We’ll show interest
 - We won’t judge you
 - We’ll keep your views confidential (or anonymous)
 - Your opinions will get heard
 - Your (collective) needs will be communicated
 - This could help things get better for you or others

Or, as Dillman formulates it:

- Maximize rewards to respondent
- Minimize apparent costs
- While also communicating legitimacy
- And engendering trust

Total/Tailored Design Method, 1976, 2000, 2007.

Our challenge:

How do we communicate the terms of this bargain through the media of the new technologies and their new ‘obstacles?’

Keep in mind: *communication* involves not just the text or verbal message, but also meanings attached to the form of communication in a specific social context.

Five broad factors

Our ability to reach respondents is affected by:

- 1) Changing technology
- 2) New and emerging regulations
- 3) Evolving social norms
- 4) Our professional standards
- 5) The general approaches we choose to take
 - And how much we are willing to invest in outreach

Technology 101

- Technology: Not just hardware but also:
 - Software
 - The uses to which it is applied
 - The social context of its use
 - The meanings people assign to the technology
- Technology rarely has linear or one-sided effects
 - Has varied effects depending on context
 - Effects vary over time
 - Effects may be contradictory

Keep Naisbitt's insight in mind

“High Tech: High Touch”

Any successful introduction of a new technology must be *balanced* with increased attention to the social and emotional needs of people using the technology.

- John Naisbitt, *Megatrends* (1982)

So, how does changing
technology affect our ability
to reach respondents?

Technology helps us reach people

- We have new or high-tech ways to reach people:
 - Cell phones
 - Smartphones, PDA's, Blackberries
 - Text messaging
 - E-mail
 - Web-based technologies
 - Social networking sites, Blogs
 - IVR, TDE
 - Instant Messaging
 - *What's next?*

There can be no doubt . . .

- People now communicate more
 - At more times of the day
 - In more places
 - At lower cost
 - With greater speed
- With some favorable societal outcomes:
 - Productivity, coordination, flexibility
 - Security and support
 - Opportunity for self expression
 - Richer social capital
- But, does this make people more accessible to us?

Technology helps us to select and target respondents

- Delivery Sequence File
- Geocoding/GIS/Google Earth
- On-line transactional records
- Myriad targeted lists
- Market segmentation
- Targeted broadcast e-mail
- Micro-targeting

Technology also helps people *prevent* us from reaching them

- Answering machines/voice mail
- Caller ID
- Privacy managers
- Call forwarding
- Multiple phones, devices
- Spam blockers
- Distinctive ring-tones for different types of calls
- Privacy policies, opt-out tools

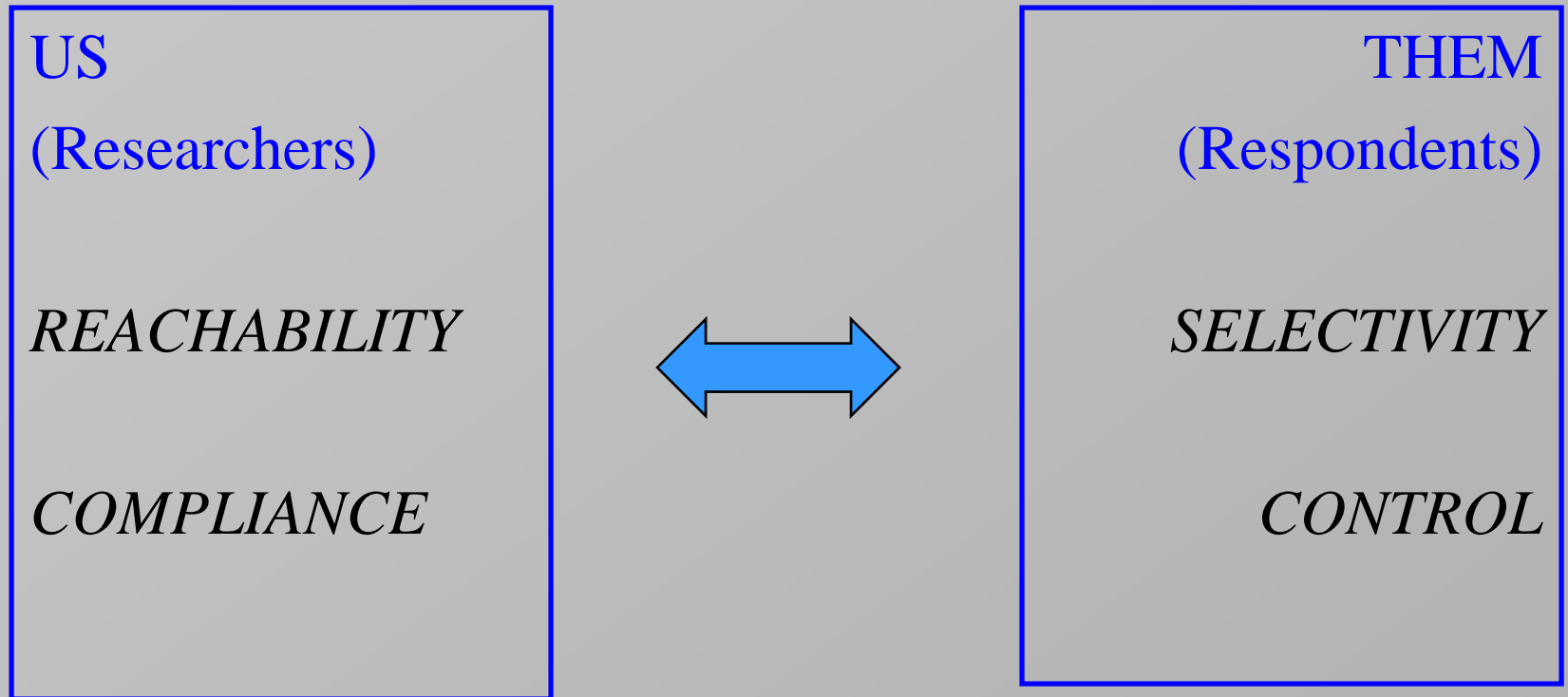
And various norms and technologies can block us from targeting

- No population registry in the U.S.
- Voter lists not available in some states
- Census keeps its records strictly confidential
- Unpublished phone numbers
- Cell phones not published
- Multiple e-mail addresses, aliases
- No system for assigning e-mail addresses
- Credit record privacy

Some of these obstacles are laws or regulations

- HIPPA
- FERPA
- CAN-SPAM act
- TCPA 1991
- Federal Human Subjects Protections
 - As embodied in your institution's IRB
- Do-Not-Call legislation
 - Federal, State
- CASRO anti-SPAM standards for research

The Grand Dialectic



*Technology is deployed by both sides
in a continually evolving struggle.
Each side can act individually and collectively.*

Social norms are involved here:

- We have more ways to reach people
- People have more ways to screen and identify senders of messages
- Communications norms are changing accordingly
 - Consider, for example, Dillman's discussion of the changed norms for answering a ringing telephone
 - Norms about interrupting a phone call ('hold')
 - Norms about multi-tasking
 - Norms about where it's OK to talk on the phone
 - Netiquette

Five Stages of response by Survey Research Organizations to the Challenges and Opportunities of New Technologies

(The later stages are still in our future . . .)

Stage one:

Use the new modes to communicate

- Leave messages on the answering machines
 - But not too many!
- Send e-mail
 - But don't write them like paper letters
 - Be prepared for instant and personal responses
- Call cell phones, not just landlines
 - But watch for legal obstacles
 - Be sensitive to (fading) norms defining the cell phone as private
- Use outbound IVR
 - Or is that too obnoxious, impersonal?
- Send text?
 - That's illegal unless there is a prior relationship

Stage two: Use multiple modes

- Dillman (2000) proclaimed the trend away from interviewers toward self-administration
- But personal contacts, individual choices are needed to achieve acceptable rates of response
 - High tech: high touch
- Result: mixed mode studies
 - Web and paper as alternatives
 - Phone reminders for web or paper surveys
 - Postal invitations for web surveys
 - Phone and web as alternatives
 - . . . And many variations on this theme

Multi-mode = multi-problem

- Coordination of multi-mode studies is problematic
 - Especially for small organizations
 - Especially for projects with lean budgets
- Modes run on different platforms
 - Databases
 - Software
 - Personnel
- Difficult to keep modes closely coordinated
- Result: Bad experiences for respondents

Multi-mode = multi-contact

- Now we are interacting with the respondent on more than one channel
 - E.g., e-mail, phone, and mail
- Panel studies, studies with incentives may involve multiple interactions with a given respondent
 - Often through different channels
- Result: our relationship with the respondent is beginning to change
 - More interactions, in more varied ways

Stage three: Change our basic approach to “THEM”

Are they . . .

- “Cases,” “sampled units”
- “Research subjects”
- “Participants”
- “Panelists”
- Customers?

We need to begin to see our “subjects” as people, as customers—picky customers at that.

Note: this is the current stage for my organization

From a recent SSI seminar ad:

Improving Respondent Experience

London, Nov. 7, 2007

“ . . . ‘Research respondents are people who have similar needs and wants as you and I,’ said Pete Cape. ‘We’ll discuss the motivational rewards for panelists—and it isn’t cash—and you’ll learn about the psychodemographic profiles and other intrinsic qualities that characterize an ideal panelist.’ ”

Stage four: individual respondent tailoring

- Survey research has always posed a dilemma between scientific standardization vs. individualized treatment
- Dillman's original approach to mail-outs (1976):
 - Total Design Method, one approach, pre-specified to the last detail
- Revised approach (2000): Tailored Design Method
 - Different approaches for each different survey project
- Next stage: Individual Respondent Tailoring
 - Vary the form, number, and modes of contact to suit individual preferences, abilities, technological tools, and lifestyles
 - “Individuation” of the survey experience

Let's watch this IBM ad

- [IBM don't know me ad.htm](#)

What might individual respondent tailoring involve?

- Let the respondent choose the mode of taking a survey
- Let the respondents indicate how they wish to be contacted
- Let interviewers/callers tailor their approaches and introductions fairly freely (cf. Groves & Couper)
- Vary tone and look of paper and electronic invitations
- Find out more about your respondent in advance
 - From existing databases
 - Google the respondent?
 - Look at respondent's home or neighborhood on Google Earth?
- Segment the respondent sample

Problem: how would a survey organization successfully manage all that individualized attention?

- We're starting to think of the respondent as a customer
- We're having more interactions with that individual
- We're granting that individual more control and selectivity in the interaction
- Businesses use CRM to manage their customers
 - Can SRO's use similar tools to manage respondent relations?

Stage five: RRM and Transformation to RFSRO

- Needed: RRM
 - *Respondent Relations Management*
- What RRM is *not*:
 - [IBM customer service voice ad.htm](#)
- We need to transform our survey organizations into RFSRO's?
 - *Respondent-Focused Survey Research Organizations*

Some tips from IBM

The “Customer-Focused Enterprise” . . .

- Aligns “channels and touch points” and “products, services, and communications” with customer’s preferences.
- Delivers performance on both technical and emotional levels
 - (echoes of “high tech, high touch” here)
- Emphasizes customer authority, customer dialog
- Integrates execution across channels, processes

Some steps toward RRM

- Sensus Web's promise of a single database for web/phone multi-mode studies.
- CATI systems that integrate smoothly with existing databases and add-on applications
- “Respondent Help Desks” at some survey organizations
- Building web transactions into the interaction with sampled persons
- Organizational do-not-call lists

Which SRO's might become RFSRO's?

- The transformation might be costly
 - Advantage to the larger SRO
- The transformation is innovative and wholistic
 - Advantage to the smaller SRO
- Return on investment will be greatest when survey tasks are similar across projects and clients have generous budgets
 - Advantage to specialized, commercial firms
 - Advantage to firms with large internet panels

What about standards?

- Linchpins of all human subjects protection are:
 - Respect for persons
 - Beneficence
 - Justice
- “Respect for persons” is generally enhanced when RRM is effectively deployed and the organization becomes more respondent-focused.
 - Repeated contacts might occur, but they would be tailored, and come in ways that R. prefers.
- But: Important privacy concerns are raised by some microtargeting strategies, or the pooling of data across studies

What about strict probability sampling, standardization?

- We face a dilemma:
 - Continue to treat respondents as ‘sampled units,’ treating all cases uniformly, and achieve low rates of response
 - Or: Develop tech-enabled, individualized approaches with greater respondent control and selectivity, possibly introducing selection biases even as participation is increased.
 - Example: effect of advance letters in RDD studies.

Where we may be headed . . .

- My hunch: strong forces favor a more respondent-focused approach in many surveys
 - Technical, social, regulatory forces
- Legal controls and professional norms will continue to offer protections to respondents and limit the forms of contact SRO's may undertake
- As SRO's become more expert in deploying technologies in the RFSRO framework, resistance to contact from SRO's may ease among respondents.
- Respondent relationships (as in panels) will be emphasized in many projects, even at the expense of full representativeness.

Where we may be headed . . .

As strategies and technologies for reaching respondents change . . .

- Standards for judging survey quality will evolve
- Formal standards for protection of human subjects will require further refinement to achieve their vital purposes in a new environment
- But the fundamental ‘bargain’ of the survey encounter will endure
 - even if some cash changes hands in the process!

2008 Annual Conference
Harvard Program in Survey Research
May 9, 2008

Strategies and Standards for Reaching Respondents in an Age of New Technology

Thomas M. Guterbock
Director, Center for Survey Research
University of Virginia

TomG@virginia.edu

Center for Survey Research
University of Virginia
