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The effect of prenotification techniques on refusal rate in telephone surveys

A real-life study in light of the Compliance and Elaboration Likelihood Theories

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Response rate is of great importance for the representativeness of a study. When it is low, there is a chance that response is selective, as the people who refuse may constitute a selective sample of the target population. Much research has already been done into the sociopsychological aspects affecting response, but so far little attention has been paid to the effect of different communicative approaches. In our study we examine the effects of a two-phased communication plan on refusal rate in telephone surveys. In real-life experiments, we investigated the effects of two prenotification techniques: sending advance letters and leaving a message on an answering machine or voice mail. Sending advance letters led to a statistically significant decrease in refusals by 25%, but leaving a message on answering machines or voice mail led to no statistically significant decrease in refusals. The results are interpreted in the light of COMPLIANCE THEORY and ELABORATION LIKELIHOOD THEORY. Possible consequences for research bureaus that conduct telephone surveys are discussed.

Decreasing response

In the last decade of the twentieth century, research bureaus all over the world observed a decrease in response (De Heer, 1999). This decrease was particularly strong in the Netherlands. Between 1983 and 1997, the response to the Labour Force Survey, a survey conducted in a large number of countries, decreased from 81% to 56%, whereas the decrease in most of the other countries was no more than 10% (see Table 1).

A high nonresponsee is alarming because it may have consequences for the generalizability of the results of surveys and this may lead for instance to faulty decisions by politicians. This happened in the Netherlands shortly before the start of the European Football Championship in 2000. The results of a survey among Dutch police officers showed that 90% of them were apprehensive that hooligans would cause riots, 80% thought the police force was not sufficiently prepared for the event, and over 90% thought that they would not be able to do their normal tasks. The Minister

Table 1 Response rate of Labour Force Surveys in several European countries where it is not compulsory to take part in the survey.

Country	1983	1997
Netherlands	81%	56%
Belgium	90%	86%
United Kingdom	81%	80%
Sweden	94%	87%
Finland	96%	87%

