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Abstract:

In a face-to-face survey, an interviewer is physically present to ask the survey questions and to assist the respondent in answering them. This survey delivery mode can offer many advantages over mail and telephone surveys in terms of the complexity and quality of the data collected. However, because these advantages come with significantly increased logistical costs as well as additional potential sources of response bias, face-to-face surveys are typically conducted only when there are compelling reasons to opt out of other survey delivery modes.

Face-to-Face Surveys

A face-to-face survey is a telephone survey without the telephone. The interviewer physically travels to the respondent's location to conduct a personal interview. Unlike the free-wheeling type of interview one sees on *60 Minutes*, where the interviewer adapts the questions on the fly based on previous responses (or lack thereof), face-to-face surveys follow a standardized script without deviation, just like a mail or telephone survey. From the respondent's point of view, the process could not be easier: the interviewer arrives at a convenient, pre-arranged time, reads the survey for you, deals

with any questions or problems that arise, records your answers, and is shown the door. No one calls you during supper and there are no envelopes to lick. This ease of response in fact makes face-to-face surveys ideally suited for populations that have difficulty answering mail or telephone surveys due to poor reading or writing skills, disability, or infirmity.

Compared with mail and telephone surveys, face-to-surveys offer significant advantages in terms of the amount and complexity of the data that can be collected. For example, face-to-face surveys can be significantly longer. Most people will allow an interviewer to occupy their living room couch for up to an hour, whereas respondents will typically not tolerate telephone interviews that extend much beyond half an hour or mail surveys that require more than 15 or 20 minutes of effort. The additional length allows researchers the opportunity to ask more questions, longer questions, more detailed questions, more open-ended questions, and more complicated or technical questions. Skip patterns, in which different respondents navigate different paths through the survey depending on their answers, can also be more complicated. In addition, the use of graphic or visual aids, impossible by telephone and costly by mail, can be easily and economically incorporated into face-to-face surveys.

Face-to-face surveys also offer advantages in terms of data quality. More than any other survey delivery mode, a face-to-face survey allows researchers a high degree of control over the data collection process and environment. Interviewers can ensure, for example, that respondents do not skip ahead or “phone a friend,” as they might do when filling out a mail survey, or that they do not watch TV or surf the internet during the interview, as they might do during a telephone survey. Since the interviewer elicits and

records the data, the problems of missing data, ambiguous markings, and illegible handwriting that plague mail surveys are eliminated. If the respondent finds a question to be confusing or ambiguous, the interviewer can immediately clarify it. Similarly, the respondent can be asked to clarify any answers that the interviewer cannot interpret.

Perhaps the most important procedural variable affecting data quality in a survey study is the response rate, that is, the number of completed questionnaires obtained divided by the number of people who were asked to complete them. Since it is much more difficult for people to shut the door in the face of a live human being than hang up on a disembodied voice or toss a written survey into the recycling bin with the junk mail, face-to-face surveys typically offer the highest response rates obtainable (over 90% in some cases). Like telephone surveys, face-to-face surveys also avoid a type of response bias typical of mail surveys, namely, the tendency for respondents, on average, to be more highly educated than those who fail to respond.

Of course, all of these benefits typically come at a great cost to the researchers, who must carefully hire, train, and monitor the interviewers and pay them to travel from one neighborhood to the next (and sometimes back again) knocking on doors. Largely due to the nature and cost of the travel involved, face-to-face surveys can end up costing more than twice as much and taking more than three times as long to complete as an equivalent telephone survey. Face-to-face surveys can also have additional disadvantages. For example, budgetary constraints typically limit them to a comparatively small geographical area. Also, some populations can be difficult to reach in person because they are rarely at home (e.g., college students), access to their home or apartment is restricted, or traveling in their neighborhood places interviewers at risk.

There is also evidence that questions of a personal nature are less likely to be answered fully and honestly in a face-to-face survey. This is probably because respondents lose the feeling of anonymity that is easily maintained when the researcher is safely ensconced in an office building miles away. In addition, since face-to-face interviews put people on the spot by requiring an immediate answer, questions that require a lot of reflection or a search for personal records are better handled by the self-paced format of a mail survey.

Perhaps the largest “cost” associated with a face-to-face survey is the increased burden placed on the researcher to ensure that the interviewers who are collecting the data do not introduce “interviewer bias,” that is, do not, through their words or actions, unintentionally influence respondents to answer in a particular way. While interviewer bias is also a concern in telephone surveys, it poses even more of a problem in face-to-face surveys for two reasons. First, the interviewer is exposed to the potentially biasing effect of the respondent’s appearance and environment in addition to their voice. Second, the interviewer may inadvertently give respondents nonverbal as well as verbal cues about how they should respond. Interviewing skills do not come naturally to people since a standardized interview violates some of the normative rules of efficient conversation. For instance, interviewers must read all questions and response options exactly as written rather than paraphrasing them, since even small changes in wording have the potential to influence survey outcomes. Interviewers also have to ask a question even when the respondent has already volunteered the answer. To reduce bias as well as to avoid interviewer effects, that is, the tendency for the data collected by different interviewers to differ due to procedural inconsistency, large investments must typically be made in providing interviewers the necessary training and practice. Data analyses of face-to-face

surveys should also examine and report on any significant interviewer effects identified in the data.

In summary, face-to-face surveys offer many advantages over mail and telephone surveys in terms of the complexity and quality of the data collected, but these advantages come with significantly increased logistical costs as well as additional potential sources of response bias. The costs are in fact so prohibitive that face-to-face surveys are typically employed only when telephone surveys are impractical (for example, when the questionnaire is too long or complex to deliver over the phone or when a significant proportion of the population of interest lacks telephone access).

Further Reading

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