

How to improve survey response rates

As a part of my PhD research in the Department of Information Studies at Curtin University I used three research methods to collect data. One method was an Australia-wide survey of public libraries to discover whether surveyed libraries had graphic novel collections and how collections were selected, acquired, catalogued, housed, and promoted.

Due to the large number of libraries to be surveyed and the need to cover all of Australia I decided a postal survey was the best way to accomplish this. I read extensively about conducting surveys and considered electronic distribution, but this would only reach those who had internet access and were comfortable with using the internet. The survey was conducted in 2006 and some respondents in small rural or remote libraries may not have had adequate or reliable internet connections (and still may not) thus the post was deemed the best method of sending and returning the questionnaire.

The questionnaire was developed after consulting a range of sources to ensure a questionnaire of the highest quality and it was pretested with a small sample. The final questionnaire was an A5-size, eight-page booklet. This was posted with a cover letter and reply-paid envelope.

The response rate was close to 80% of the sample, an exceptional result as surveys often attain response rates under 50%. This was achieved using a schedule of reminders, which proved very important because less than a third of the questionnaires were returned before the first reminder.

The first postal reminder was postcard size and the second included a reworded cover letter, as well as a replacement questionnaire and reply-paid envelope. Every questionnaire had an individual number corresponding to the list of libraries in the sample. As each survey was returned the library was removed from the list and the number removed from the

questionnaire (to ensure confidentiality). Thus, reminders were only sent to libraries that had not responded.

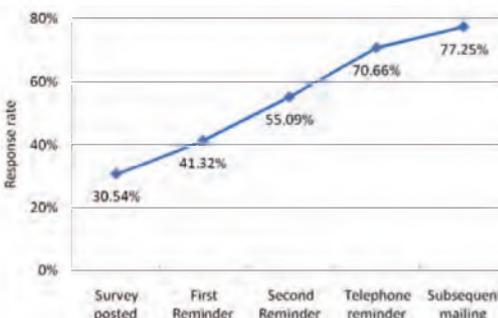
A little over half of the questionnaires were returned before the telephone reminder, indicating the postal reminders value in increasing the response rate. The differences between individual libraries and local councils in receiving mail caused problems, which could only be resolved by talking to non-responding libraries. Some respondents were encouraged to complete the survey which they had previously disregarded and some were willing to answer the questions over the telephone. A few respondents said they were too busy to complete it and this was helpful to know. Another respondent said she had been busy and had not completed it. After thanking her for considering it, she continued by saying she did want to help with the research and asked to be sent another copy. This was a very satisfying outcome.

Having a contact name within a library to personally address letters was useful, and was acquired through the telephone call. One respondent said if a letter is not marked "Personal" it would be opened by the Records Department and "could end up anywhere." In this case, the librarian had seen none of the three mailings. In some libraries there were different people responsible for acquisitions and junior collections, so more than one person was needed to complete the questionnaire. A couple of these respondents had only answered questions relevant to their work and not completed the rest. The telephone reminder provided encouragement to send it to their colleague who could complete the remainder and return it.

The above problems could only be resolved by a conversation, thus the telephone reminder was invaluable. The time and cost involved in telephoning libraries that had not returned questionnaires was well worth the effort in terms of the increase in responses.

The return rate was improved by 46% (from 31% to 77%) through the schedule of reminders. Figure 1 shows the number of responses received after each reminder.

Figure 1: Response rate after each reminder



After completion of the survey I sent a thank you postcard to respondents. I would also like to thank respondents here. Your help was invaluable for my research and the results of my study will be available soon when my thesis has been examined.

The questionnaire and a list of my reading about conducting surveys and developing questionnaires are available from my website <http://alia.org.au/~csnow/research>.

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