



The Answering Machine Dilemma

Does leaving a message improve response rates?

By Peter Tuckel and Trish Shukers

People who have answering machines are still accessible to telephone survey researchers, but should interviewers leave a message or not? If so, which message is best, and what is the best thing to say in a survey introduction? A two-wave survey reveals that messages emphasizing that the call is not a sales solicitation have the most influence on respondents.

Telephone survey refusal rates have increased sharply during the past few decades. According to Diane Bowers, president of the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR), refusal rates have gone up by approximately 20% in the past seven years alone. This increase both limits the generalizability of findings and adds significantly to the costs of administering surveys. Opinion and market researchers need to study different approaches that might lead to greater cooperation rates or, at least, prevent further decline.

Two approaches that deserve far more attention than they been afforded in the past are (1) leaving messages on telephone answering machines and (2) designing more effective survey introductions. Researchers want to know:

- How accessible are answering machine owners to survey researchers?
- Does leaving a message help?
- What is the effect of leaving more than one message?
- What is the best kind of message to leave?
- How do respondents themselves feel about

the effect of the message on their willingness to participate in a survey?

- What should be included in a survey introduction?

To answer these questions, Quality Controlled Services, a division of Maritz Marketing Research Inc., conducted a national random-digit-dialing (RDD) survey of the general population in two waves. The first wave was conducted during the week of Nov. 11-18, 1996, and the second wave was conducted during the week of April 14-21, 1997.

ACCESSIBILITY

The continuing rise in the level of answering machine ownership poses a potential threat to telephone survey research. Clearly, if answering machine owners use these machines primarily to screen incoming calls rather than to receive messages when they are not at home, this might lower telephone survey response rates.

Early research on this topic provided grounds for optimism. A sizable proportion of answering machine owners were found to be accessible to telephone survey researchers. Moreover, compared with households that yielded a "no answer" response disposition on the first call attempt,

Exhibit 1

“Answering machine” vs. “no answer” and “busy” households

	Contact rate					
	Answering machine households		No answer households		Busy households	
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
Wave 1	78.5%	(483)	63.4%	(443)	93.7%	(79)
Wave 2	73.1%	(499)	47.9%	(403)	93.4%	(61)
Total	75.8%	(982)	56.0%	(846)	93.6%	(140)

	Completion rate					
	Answering machine households		No answer households		Busy households	
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
Wave 1	51.4%	(245)	52.8%	(161)	45.5%	(55)
Wave 2	55.8%	(249)	41.9%	(124)	35.9%	(39)
Total	53.6%	(494)	48.1%	(285)	41.5%	(94)

A substantial proportion of answering machine owners still are reachable by telephone survey researchers and willing to participate in surveys.

households that produced an “answering machine” response disposition on the first call attempt had both higher contact and completion rates at the end of the calling period. (Contact rate refers to the proportion of eligible household numbers that yielded a “live contact”; completion rate refers to the number of completed interviews divided by the number of completed interviews and refusals.)

These early studies, though, were carried out at a time when the penetration level of answering machines in U.S. households was approximately 25%. Today the incidence of ownership is estimated at between 60%-70%. As this population has increased, its composition has changed as

has its pattern of telephone survey participation. Thus it is important to continue to monitor usage patterns among this population.

The study indicates that a substantial proportion of answering machine owners still are reachable by telephone survey researchers and willing to participate in surveys. As Exhibit 1 shows, three quarters of those households that yielded an

answering machine response disposition on the first call attempt were contacted on subsequent call attempts. By comparison, only 56% of those numbers that produced a “no answer” response disposition on the first call attempt were reached at the end of the calling period. Also, the completion rate of households that yielded an answering machine response disposition on the first call attempt was higher than the corresponding rate for both the “no answer” and “busy” households, although the differences were not statistically significant.

Finally, the 984 respondents who completed the interview in wave 2 of the study were asked if they owned an answering machine, and 63% said “yes.” Thus, the evidence based on both actual response dispositions and self-reported ownership of answering machines points to the conclusion that answer machine owners, by and large, remain accessible to telephone survey researchers.

LEAVING A MESSAGE

The widespread proliferation of answering machines raises an important question for telephone survey researchers. Should researchers leave a message on the machines of potential respondents or not? Some might argue that leaving a message would increase response rates because it would help legitimize the survey. Others might say that leaving a message would not be beneficial because it would “forewarn” potential respondents about what they might construe as a “nuisance call.” And still others might contend that leaving a message would have no discernible effect because either the message itself would lack salience or the time lag before the respondent is re-contacted would nullify its putative positive (or negative) effects.

Previous research concerning the impact of leaving a message has produced somewhat contradictory results. Two studies found that leaving a message had no effect on either the contact or completion rates. Another found that leaving a message boosted the contact rate, but not the completion rate. These studies were carried out under government or university auspices or under the sponsorship of a well-known newspaper. Because it is reasonable to assume that government, university, or newspaper sponsorship lends a certain degree of legitimacy to a survey, this factor alone may have increased the salience of the messages left on machines. Also, these studies were confined to limited geographic areas and were carried out at a time when the level of answering machine ownership was far below what it is today.

What about the effect of leaving a message on response rates to a market research company sur-

vey? The study found little difference in the overall contact rate when interviewers left a message and when they did not. Those households that received a message had a slightly higher completion rate than their no-message counterparts but the difference was not statistically significant.

Repeat Messages

Several studies have been conducted to measure the effect of leaving a message on response rates, little attention has been devoted to examining the impact of leaving repeat messages. Two different views could be advanced concerning the possible effect of leaving repeat messages vs. one message on answering machines. On the one hand, leaving repeat messages could be thought of as beneficial for a number of reasons. First, leaving more than one message would serve to underscore the legitimacy of the survey. Second, it might invoke the “norm of reciprocity,” whereby a potential respondent might feel more obligated to make him- or herself more accessible because of the researcher’s effort. Third, it would increase the probability of a given respondent in a household personally hearing the message. On the other hand, the potential respondent might construe the repeated messages as a source of annoyance.

Exhibit 2 shows contact and completion rates of answering machine households that received two messages vs. one message. The data show that there is a negligible difference in the contact rate of the two groups but that the completion rate of the one-message group is higher than the completion rate of the two-message group. This difference, however, does not prove to be statistically significant. In short, leaving two messages certainly does not enhance the prospect of reaching potential respondents and might, in fact, reduce their willingness to participate in the survey.

Different Messages

Even though overall leaving a message on the answering machines of potential respondents does not seem to have much of an influence on the contact rate, specific messages might have greater appeal than others. On the basis of prior mail survey research, we could hypothesize that messages underscoring the importance of respondent’s opinions or highlighting the prestige of the survey might lead to an increase in response rates. Therefore, the answering machine households in our study received three different messages: Message 1—a basic introduction, Message 2—a basic introduction plus a statement about the importance of the respondent’s opinions, and Message 3—a basic introduction plus a statement about the prestigious nature of the survey.

The data reveal little variability in the contact

Exhibit 2

Leaving two vs. one message

Rate	Two messages		One message	
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
Contact Rate	48.3%	(149)	51.9%	(187)
Completion Rate	50.0%	(46)	58.3%	(60)

Exhibit 3

Completion rates of households exposed to different introductory rates

	Completion rate					
	Statement No. 1		Statement No. 2		Statement No. 3	
	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)	(%)	(n)
Wave 1	53.9%	497	52.5%	632	50.0%	632
Wave 2	50.9%	642	47.2%	684	48.0%	683
Total	52.2%	1139	49.8%	1316	48.9%	1315

rate of the households exposed to the three messages. Respondents from households that received Message 1 participated in the survey at a higher rate than their counterparts from households that received Message 2 or Message 3. Interestingly, Message 1 is the basic introduction and makes no appeals to either the importance of the respondent’s opinions or to the fact that the survey results will be disseminated in a number of prestigious publications. It is the shortest message, however, and as other researchers have observed, brevity in survey introductions can be a virtue.

Impact of Messages on Participation

When respondents agreed to participate in the survey were asked whether they had personally listened to the message, 57% reported they heard the message themselves, and an additional 18% said “someone else in the household” had heard the message. Those who said they personally heard the message were then asked what effect, if any, listening to the message had on their willingness to participate in the survey. Only 27% responded that it made them more positively disposed toward survey participation, and 9% said it made them less inclined toward being interviewed. What is most striking is that a solid 60%

said that listening to the message had "little or no effect" on their willingness to participate, indicating that leaving a message has only marginally beneficial effects.

Respondents who said that listening to the message made them more/less willing to cooperate in the survey were then asked to describe what it was about the message, in particular, increased or decreased their motivation to participate. Those who said the message increased their willingness to participate replied that the most salient aspect of the message was that the purpose of the call was not a sales solicitation. About half of all the responses to this open-ended question alluded to the non-solicitation aspect of the message. Only one respondent mentioned the opportunity to offer one's opinions (as underscored in Message 2) as a motivating factor, and no one mentioned the prestigious nature of the publications in which the poll results generally appear (emphasized in Message 3).

INTRODUCTIONS

A second study focus was to consider the persuasive potential of different survey introductions. Because the vast majority of refusals in telephone surveys occur right after the introductory remarks have been made, it is important that these remarks be as motivating as possible.

Previous research on the effect of varying survey introductions on refusal rates has yielded mixed results. Recently, in a study of Alabama residents, researchers found that including a non-solicitation statement increased the completion rate by 6 percentage points. However, a study of adult residents in the Seattle metropolitan area discovered that including a nonsolicitation statement did not affect response rates.

In the present study, three different introductions were randomly assigned to potential respondents. These were the same introductions as those read to answering machine households once they were contacted. Exhibit 3 displays the completion rates of respondents who heard the three different introductions. The most notable result is the uni-

formity in the completion rates. The gap between the highest and the lowest rate is a mere 3.3%.

SHORT AND SWEET

Survey researchers might consider leaving one message on the answering machines of potential respondents if this would not add significantly to the costs of administering the survey. The message should be brief and explicitly state that the

purpose of the call is not sales-related. The mere fact of leaving a message would help to reinforce that notion since telemarketers generally do not leave messages.

Even though the study revealed that varying the introductory remarks has little bearing on completion rates, it would be erroneous to conclude that the content of the introductory statements is not important. As the respondents themselves said

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(in commenting on the salience of the answering machine messages), knowing that the call is not a sales call is critically important. Thus, the persuasiveness of the introductory statement might depend as much, if not more, on stating the absence of a negative (that the call is not a sales solicitation) than the benefits associated with participating in a particular survey. In this regard, it is again important for opinion and market researchers to identify the purpose of the call clearly and to differentiate it from a sales call. In sum, the most effective introduction would appear to have two attributes: brevity and an unambiguous identification as a public opinion survey. ■

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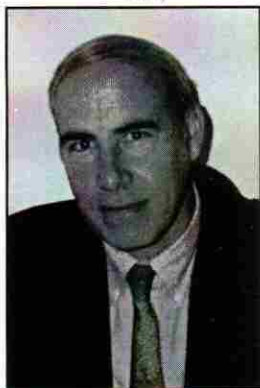
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Peter Tuckel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at Hunter College, City University of New York.

GN2



Trish Shukers is Director of Survey Center Operations, Quality Controlled Services, Fenton, Mo.

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