

Principles of Compliance and Influence- Practical Application to Letters in the ABS

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1. Introduction

The principles of social compliance discussed by Cialdini (1993) are being applied to ABS business survey letters to increase the respondent's motivation to comply. These include the principles of scarcity, liking, consistency, reciprocation, social validation and authority. Using these will improve both the effectiveness of survey letters and the efficiency of the follow-up process.

2. Compliance Principles applied to letters

Reciprocation Respondents are more likely to comply if they perceive they will get something in return. For example, the survey results may directly benefit the respondent or the survey may include a tangible gift. ABS business survey letters explain the purpose of the research, and where to find the results. The sentence "The information collected is used to base important decisions, which have the potential to directly or indirectly affect your business." is currently being added.

Automatic Response Respondents are more likely to comply with a request containing a trigger for an automatic response. The word 'because' is one such powerful trigger. The Economic Activity Survey 2004 cover letter used the sentence "Obtaining a completed form from your business is important because many people need to understand the performance of Australian businesses."

Authority Respondents are more likely to comply with requests made by someone perceived to have legitimate authority. ABS authority is conveyed in the letters by using the organisational name, the legislation under which the information is collected (*Census and Statistics Act 1905*) and the endorsement of an important signatory with a real-looking signature.

Scarcity Respondents are more likely to comply with requests that are perceived to be rare. An opportunity to respond to a one-off collection may cause the respondent to feel privileged to represent others or articulate their own interests or views. The Salinity Survey 2002 conveyed this idea with the sentence, "This is the first time the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has conducted this type of survey."

Social Validation Respondents are more likely to comply if they believe similar others would comply, or have already. The Survey of International Investment 2004 used this in a thank you/reminder letter with the words "I would like to personally thank you as one of the great majority of businesses selected who have contributed..." and, "Your business and many other similar businesses have helped the ABS to provide accurate...statistics...".

Liking Respondents are more likely to comply with requests made by others whom they like. An obvious sign to the respondent of unimportance, is to begin a letter with, "Dear Citizen/Resident/Friend/Respondent". It suggests more quickly that the respondent is being mailed a standard letter and may create a feeling of animosity towards the ensuing survey. To promote 'liking' using survey letters, the ABS is removing salutations and otherwise potentially insensitive language.

Consistency Respondents are more likely to comply if they have complied in the past, due to internal pressure to be consistent with that previous decision. When the respondent is known to have responded to previous ABS surveys, this is noted to them explicitly. The ABS has also reduced the length of cover letters for repeated quarterly surveys, and for some ongoing respondents no letter at all is used, because they no longer need to be convinced.

Rejection then Retreat Requests for information may look relatively small, a concession, if they follow a larger request. Although this principle has not been exploited explicitly, the ABS has experienced a situation where it worked in practice; the Salinity Survey 2002 mentioned above. Non-respondents to the 'parent survey', the Agricultural Census 2001 (a big request), later became respondents to the shorter supplement Salinity Survey 2002 (concession).

3. Conclusion

The ABS is currently in the process of changing its suite of business survey letters by optimising the content and process to reflect the most efficient ways of increasing respondent motivation. To date, feedback from survey managers has been very positive. Changes to best practice have produced higher response rates and better data due to a more consistent and persuasive message to respondents.

REFERENCES

Cialdini, R.B. (1993) *Influence: Science and Practice*, 3rd Ed., HarperCollins College Publishers, New York

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article décrit le Bureau Australien de l'expérience de Statistic's avec l'application pratique de la théorie méthodologique et les principes à l'enquête conjoncturelle des lettres pré-s'approchent, de couvrent et de rappel. Plusieurs des principes sociaux de conformité et d'influence commencent à être employés par l'ABS pour augmenter des taux de réponse, la vitesse de réponse et la qualité de données. Ceux-ci incluent les principes de la pénurie, d'aimer, de l'uniformité, de la réciprocité, de la validation sociale et de l'autorité.