Improving the Implementation of a Research Tool: Methods to Increase Library Survey Response Rates

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IMPROVING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF A RESEARCH TOOL:
Methods to Increase Library Survey Response Rates

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In the winter of 1992 we began research into the implementation of a university-wide survey. This project grew out of discussion about ways Merrill Library could be more responsive through collection development to changing trends in course offerings and research emphases at Utah State University. It was felt that our collection development policies traditionally answered and were based upon teaching needs but might not address research-related needs adequately. This was in large part due to a lack of information about the evolution of research directions throughout the USU community. The problem was further exacerbated by the spiraling costs of journal subscriptions and splinterization of journals into sub-specialty titles. We decided to implement a survey to identify specific areas of research and what journals might be needed to support such research.

As our idea developed, it became apparent that the collection of the kind of information we sought might benefit other aspects of library service, such as document delivery and electronic access. The proposed survey grew in length and breadth, and drew the interest of the Research Council and administrators of the Research Park. Additional modifications of the questionnaire addressed consulting areas and patent development. A university-wide database of research interests and faculty/research publications would make available
consultation information and serve to attract high quality graduate students and faculty. As the uses for the survey multiplied, we realized that its value would increase in direct proportion to the highest rate of response we could obtain.

**PROBLEM**

A mail survey seemed the most practical approach to a survey of this size and depth. However, this posed a problem, as mailed surveys typically receive low response rates, 50% or even less being considered an acceptable return in some studies (Dillman, 1978). Such a low rate of return would certainly be inadequate for our needs. Although there is an apparent correlation between degree of education and willingness to respond in written format, university surveys tend to provide even poorer returns. Overworked or uninterested faculty members often prove a difficult population from which to extract information. Busy faculty may set questionnaires aside, either temporarily or permanently. Often faculty do not feel that a library survey is worth their time. Certain individuals may be reluctant to share some of the information requested in surveys. The low response rate for our pilot survey reinforced these concerns.

Because our project was on a large enough scale to preclude reverting to a personal interview system, we felt that the most practical course would be to modify our presentation of the questionnaire and build a routine of follow-ups to enhance our own efficiency as well as the response rate. Our search for
methods to do this led to the Dillman "total design method" (TDM) (Dillman, 1978). His methods have been developed primarily by and for social scientists and are applied to both mail and telephone survey techniques.

**APPROACH**

There are two main areas of focus using TDM, which coincided nicely with our perception of where improvement was needed. One is on the survey process - ways of stimulating or encouraging positive response behavior. The second area is organization of procedure to increase consistency and efficiency of implementation.

Much of TDM is predicated on social exchange theory - the concept that the juxtaposition of costs and rewards apparent in a given relationship influences behavior. Our task was to review our questionnaire and procedures with an eye toward minimizing the cost to the potential respondent in terms of time and effort expended while maximizing as far as possible the reward perception.

**The Questionnaire**

We reviewed, for clarity and logic, the wording and order of the questions we had developed. Comparing the answers received to the information sought seemed to indicate that our questions were not obscure or misleading. We then focussed on presentation.
Questions were grouped according to subject, and groups of related questions were set off visually from one another by the use of boxing and shading, thus increasing the cognitive accessibility (Nederhof, 1988). This had the added advantage of breaking the four-page questionnaire into "bites" of various size, none of which would be as intimidating as the questionnaire viewed as a whole. It also made it easier for the respondent to formulate responses in separate sessions or to omit sections of the questionnaire which might not apply. PageMaker4 software was used for the redesigning process (see Appendix A). The modifications made in the questionnaire were intended to give the impression of ease and brevity, while in fact the questionnaire was the same length as in the pilot run. The apparent costs to the respondent in time and effort would thus be reduced.

The Utah State University Seal was represented on both the first and third pages of the questionnaire to reinforce the importance of the research being conducted and the significance of the respondent's information (Jansen, 1985). This constitutes a reward by implication - "you and your opinion are significant to us and, more importantly, to the university."

There are no monetary considerations for respondents, as the University mail system is being used. On the other hand, our use of the results of the survey should result in better service and more responsive collection development, which could be construed to have eventual financial advantages.
The Schedule

Using Microsoft Excel software, we created a schedule with which we could track the timing of each step in the process of surveying a given department or research unit, including the inputting of data accumulated from the responses (see Appendix B). We could thus tell by a glance at computer screen or printout, who had responded, who had not, what the next mailing should be and when it should be sent, and if a respondent’s data had been entered into the appropriate database. This allows us to run questionnaires and appropriate follow-ups to various departments in overlapping time slots without losing track of the process. A large (4’x6’) whiteboard with a month’s calendar drawn on it is used to coordinate the individual schedules of all departments being run concurrently.

The Cover Letter

We reviewed and revised our original cover letter, keeping in mind the concepts of real and apparent rewards. Although Dillman addresses the use of tangible rewards where appropriate, this was not a tool available to us. Instead, we strove to indicate respect for the expertise of the respondent, appreciation for their time and effort implying a consultant role, and assure them that their response would be applied by us in a productive manner.

This last addresses the concept of trust. According to social exchange theory, the potential respondent must trust that
the administrators of the survey will use the information supplied to them in a responsible way that will somehow benefit the respondent. To this end, we identify ourselves by title and align ourselves with the library and the university as a whole to establish a degree of trustworthiness. We also indicate both specific and possible uses for the results of the survey, the potential benefits of its application, and highlight the usefulness of the very tangible faculty bibliography that will be available to them and their colleagues. A bullet format is used to accentuate the rationale and objectives of the survey. At the end of the letter we express our appreciation and encouragement to contact us personally in case of questions or problems. The letter is printed on official letterhead, and signed by hand for personalization (Worthen and Valcarce, 1985). The envelope is also official library stationary, and is addressed to each individual by title as well as name. A definite time limit for response is suggested as two weeks from the date we anticipate the questionnaire will be received (see Appendix C).

The Follow-ups

Our series of follow-ups employs a variety of themes and formats designed to encourage return of completed questionnaires without alienating the potential respondent. We determined initially that a time limit would have to be placed on the cycle in order to control costs and keep the project moving toward completion. Dillman recommends no more than 8 weeks from initial
contact to closure, and we have adopted that constraint.

One week after the original mailing of the questionnaire and cover letter, a friendly reminder is sent. This takes the form of an oversized, brightly colored postcard with a reminder that the individual’s response is important to the study, that their discipline should be fully represented, and that we are at their disposal for information or provision of another questionnaire. A graphic of an hour glass gently suggests the passage of time (see Appendix D).

Just after the two week deadline suggested in the initial mailing, a second postcard is sent. This card, of a more strident color, includes a large graphic of a clock and a message slightly more urgent in tone. The theme is the necessity of completing the data for the specific department. The implication is that only a few have not responded. Appreciation for participation is expressed (see Appendix E).

Four weeks after the initial mailing, a letter is sent to non-respondents, reiterating the necessity of the data we are requesting, and referring to the outline of goals in the original cover letter, a copy of which is appended. A second questionnaire is included to provide a replacement if the first has been lost or discarded, without the individual having to ask (see Appendix F). Dillman stresses the importance of not embarrassing potential respondents in any way.

Six weeks after the first contact, the "last call" or "reproach" is issued. In this letter, we stress the interest
held by the administration and the Research Council in our findings, and the missed opportunity for input and/or influence non-participation represents. We express regret that only the individual's name may appear in the university-wide faculty bibliography. We again offer our assistance if needed.

We have formulated two additional approaches to further increase our response rate, which we will implement for the first time this month. One is a request to each department head to issue a general memo asking cooperation with the survey at the same time that we send out the "last call." The second is using E-mail where available to encourage response. Our eventual aim is to administer the annual updates to the survey/bibliography in this manner.

A final communication with respondents that we have devised is a formal thank-you note. Heavy cream deckle-edged notepaper is used for a message printed in script (see Appendix G). A handwritten post script mentions a new library acquisition that might be of special interest to someone in that particular discipline. In departments where an update is being conducted, a postcard is used, with a similar message and a graphic of hands clasped in a handshake. We feel these notes are good public relations for the library and build good will for the next survey or update (Maheux, Legault, and Lambert, 1989).

RESULTS

Our pilot survey obtained mixed results. From a small
department with an enthusiastic department head, all questionnaires were returned quickly. But from a larger department with a less enthusiastic, though gracious, acting department head, only 7 out of 31, or 23 percent, were received. As we implemented our adaptation of the "total design method" and follow-ups, response rate for the latter department increased with each step of the process, until 90 percent of the surveys were returned (see Graph 1).

Pleased with the results (although we would have preferred an even higher response rate) we moved out of the pilot phase of our survey. Eleven departments in three colleges are in the process of being surveyed at this point. Return rates from the initial questionnaire have varied from 0% to 63%, with an average of 18%. After the first follow-up, return rates have improved from 8% to 100% of the total number of people surveyed, with an average of 37%. Follow-up number two brought the lowest return rate to 23%, with an average of 62% of questionnaires returned. The second questionnaire with accompanying letter boosted the return rate still further. While only 35% of one department returned the survey, the average had risen to 70%. The "last call" will be the final attempt to include all faculty in each department in the database for this year. Graph 2 illustrates return rates for the four departments filling out the survey for the first time that have been completed at this point (up to the "last call").

The return rates have varied widely by department (Graph 3
highlights different rates of response by department and survey stage. The period of the school year in which the questionnaire was received no doubt influences return rates. Many respondents are gone during the summer, or are very busy toward the end of a quarter, for example. With a limited time frame in which to work, we have not been able to orchestrate the timing of initial mailings as closely as we would prefer. Enthusiasm, or lack thereof, on the part of department heads and college deans toward the project may have influenced faculty. Two departments of the eleven surveyed thus far were updating from the pilot questionnaire, which requires considerably less effort. The results for these departments show average response rates approximately doubling those of departments being surveyed for the first time at each stage in the survey process, and support the case for making surveys shorter and easier to fill out, if possible.

CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the first phase of our project, we have followed the Dillman principle of continuous adjustment. We have modified the questionnaire and our methods as the need or an idea has arisen, to the point where we feel our system is solid. Detailed statistical comparison is not available at this stage, but the trend indicates that using the methods outlined above has improved the return rate for our survey dramatically.

By next year, when most faculty will only be asked for
update information, and the relational database and faculty bibliography are available, we expect return rates to rise even more. The database will be accessible campus-wide and will contain the name of every faculty member. Seeing their name with nothing after it will no doubt spur reluctant survey takers to return their questionnaire.

University faculty may prove to be a difficult group from which to obtain information through a library-related survey, but we have taken steps to effectively improve return rates. Creative contact and the Dillman "total design method" form the basis of improved information gathering survey strategies.

**Bibliography**


20. Nederhof, Anton J. "Effects of a final telephone reminder and questionnaire cover design in mail surveys." *Social Science Research* 17 (December 1988): 353-361.


USU FACULTY RESEARCH/INTEREST PROFILE

NAME: ___________________________ DATE: ___________________________
DEPARTMENT: ___________________________ PHONE: ___________________________
RANK: ___________________________ UMC: ___________________________
Email: ___________________________ FAX: ___________________________

RESEARCH SPECIALIZATION OR SUBJECT INTEREST AREA(S): 

CONSULTATION AREA(S): 

CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECTS: (Funded)

SOURCES OF FUNDING OR SUPPORT: 

CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECTS: (Unfunded)

SOURCE AND NATURE OF SUPPORT: ie. facilities, time, other

PATENTS HELD:

PATENTS PENDING:

Judith R.J. Johnson
Anne E. Hedrich 1993
INTERLIBRARY SERVICES - DOCUMENT DELIVERY

Approximate number of photocopy requests you make in a year? ________

Approximate number of book/thesis requests you make in a year? ________

Do you send ILL requests and receive notification electronically (VAX)? □ Yes □ No

Did you know you could? □ Yes □ No

What would you consider a reasonable turn-around time from date of request to ILL until you are notified of arrival? ________

What would you consider to be a reasonable flat fee cost for 24 - 48 hour document delivery to you for an article? ________

Would you be willing to pay part or all of the expense of 24 - 48 hour document delivery service for materials obtained off campus? ________% □ all □ none

Would you be willing to pay for delivery from the Library to your office? □ Yes □ No

LIST COURSES YOU TEACH:
Course #          Course Title:

What materials or services would you find most useful as additions to the new Science and Technology Library (eg. book or journals titles, CD-ROM, databases...)?

Additional Comments about the Library/Research interface:

MERRILL LIBRARY

We appreciate your cooperation in completing this form. This information will foster more productive collaboration between the Research Community and the Library. For clarification or information call: Judith R. J. Johnson x 3331 or Anne E. Hedrich x 2165.
FACULTY RESEARCH/INTEREST PROFILE (FRIP) SCHEDULE 1993

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[ ] = Emeritus

| TOTALS | |
| Percentage of return | |

Appendix B
Dear Faculty member:

We are extending to your department the **Faculty Research/Interest Profile** project, a pioneering USU study, funded by Merrill Library and the USU Research Council, designed to:

- communicate *your* research and teaching information needs to the Merrill Library, so that it can better serve you and your students
- build a database of human resources within the university research community that can facilitate team building and consultation opportunities
- expedite more cost-effective and efficient library services and enhance the library/research interface
- provide an information base useful to administrators and sources of funding
- build a comprehensive faculty bibliography

The resulting **online database** will:

- be updated annually
- track changes in research and/or teaching emphasis
- expand to include all USU faculty and research associates

Your prompt and careful response is invaluable to us and eventually to the university community as a whole. We are counting on you!

**Please:** Fill the questionnaire out completely and return it to us as soon as possible, preferably no later than January 20, 1994. *Even if you feel that part or all of the questionnaire does not apply to you, please indicate that fact and return the questionnaire to us.* Questions? Concerns? Please call us.

Thank you very much!

Judith R. J. Johnson x3331
Anne E. Hedrich x2165

Science Reference Librarians
Merrill Library - UMC 3000
January 18, 1994

Last week a Faculty Research/Interest questionnaire was mailed to you. The full participation of every department in the College of Engineering is being solicited.

If you have already completed and returned it to us, please accept our sincere thanks. If not, please do it today. It is extremely important that your input is included if we are to obtain an accurate assessment of the information/library service needs of your discipline.

If by some chance you did not receive the questionnaire or it got misplaced, call us for another at x3331. We'll get one to you today.

Thanks for your help.

J. R. J. Johnson
A. E. Hedrich    UMC 3000

Appendix D

We're still waiting to hear from you ... can we help in any way? Your input is vital if your discipline is to be accurately represented in the 1993/94 UPU Faculty Research/Interest Profile.

Please Help us Complete Your Department!

Appendix E
December 30, 1993

Dear Colleague:

Re: Faculty Research/Interest Profiles

We have come to the point in our study where we must move on to other departments of the university if the database we wish to build is to be completed and made available for practical use in a reasonable period of time. We would definitely prefer to have your areas of expertise included with your name in the profile of the Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry.

Please take a few minutes now to review our earlier letter (copy appended) and fill out the questionnaire. The impending construction of the new Science and Technology Library affords an excellent opportunity for the library to revitalize and strengthen our efforts to provide the needed materials and services for this community of scholars. The process depends on factual data. Communication of your requirements can only come from you.

We appreciate the time it will take you to provide this information. We thank you, and assure you that it will not be time wasted.

Yours truly,

Judith R. J. Johnson x3331
Anne E. Hedrich x2165
Merrill Library UMC 3000

Appendix F
Dear

Thank you for your prompt response to our Faculty Research/Interest Profile questionnaire. Your assistance has helped to get an important project off to a good start.

Judith Johnson  x3331
Anne Hedrich  x2165
Merrill Library
UMC 3000

Appendix G
Math/Stats Return Profile

Graph 1

- Number of Faculty
- Items Sent
- Responses
- Total Responses

1st Mailing 2nd Mailing Reminder Last Call

0 5 10 15 20 25 30 35