asked as the one question on its own screen, as was done on these surveys (Figure 1).

Figure 1

The fourth study reviewed was the June 2007 Shopping Centre survey with its male and female universe. In that survey, 4% of men and 5% of women did not answer the household income question when asked by the male researcher; and 4% of men and 6% of women did not answer when asked by the female researcher.

The two larger universe survey findings suggest no gender difference on response to a possibly uncomfortable question. So the mostly similar (with one discordant) results from these four studies suggest gender is probably not a factor in not answering questions about household income.

Not to be valid

The first hypothesis – that Australians respond better to an email invitation from a woman to participate in an online survey – was found to be not valid for the respondent groups tested. Rather, the survey results indicate other factors influence decisions to participate in a survey. In particular, the impact of inviting respondents to participate in a survey about their local (State) area seems to generate better responses and future testing will look to that as a way to strengthen response rates.

The further analyses of unsubscribe rates and of correspondence with the researchers also found no difference by the sender's gender.

The second hypothesis – that there are gender differences surrounding the answering of uncomfortable questions – was not substantiated. Rather, in general, men and women appear to answer uncomfortable questions in online surveys at the same level. In addition, the gender of the email invitation sender was not a factor affecting the level of answer given. Hence, the overall conclusion is that gender has no impact on online survey response rates or on the decision to answer uncomfortable questions among Australians. Other factors – time of year, localisation, topic, and not tested factors such as survey design, are more likely to influence the response rates and question answers.

Tested further

The conclusions drawn are based on Australian finance industry customers, women aged 25 to 54 years, Shopping Centre customers (male or female) and on a general population sample that was researched about financial affairs. Hence, it may be appropriate to test these findings in other industry sectors, about other topics, and with senders from minority groups, to be sure of the conclusions reached.

A more promising area for immediate response improvement seems to be named geographic proximity. That will be tested further.

The findings reported in this article expressly relate to Australia and to the online survey method and we will look at the relevance of these findings to other research methods in the future and would welcome other researchers' findings on those and for other cultures.

References

1 The Australian Market and Social Research Society Professional Code of Conduct requires all contact be from a legitimate and real person. Having a male or a woman sender of an online survey invitation would be, for most Australian marketing research companies, an easy matter to manage, as the professional and managerial elements of this sector are almost equally divided between males and females – according to Government statistics.

2 Criminal Courts, 2006-7. Australian Bureau of Statistics, January 28, 2008. Ref. 4513.0.

3 To comply with the Australian Market and Social Research Society's Code of Conduct, respondent contacts must be from identifiable, contactable and real people, so dummy names could not be used. The sender email addresses used in all tests were Sue.Derham@derhamresearch.com.au (the female researcher) and Philip.Derham@derhamresearch.com.au (the male researcher), as in the Australian culture, Philip is a man's name and Sue a woman's name. As the researchers' names are mainstream, the findings relate to mainstream gender names, and or may not also relate to the findings that could follow from the use of names associated with specific ethnic or religious groups. And further research on this may be advisable.

4 Question threat and response bias. Norman M. Bradburn, Seymour Sudman, Ed Blair and Carol Stocking; *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 1978.

5 The three contacts were a pre-survey notice that the survey would follow next week, the survey invitation and a "quick, the survey finishes shortly" reminder a day before the survey closed.

6 The sample had been drawn in proportion to the population, by Australian State and by age groups within each State. Each sample had a 60% female component. The end sample matched the State, age and gender distributions of the original universe invited to participate.

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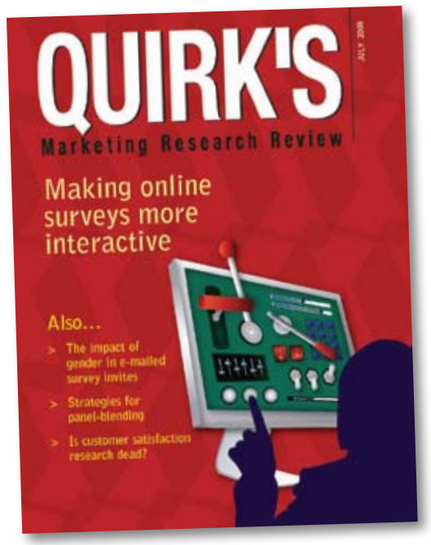
When *knowing* will strengthen your decisions...

No need for a woman's touch?

The impact of gender in e-mailed survey invitations

As published in the Quirk's Marketing Research Review

In the February 2007 Quirk's article "Does the survey sender's gender matter?" Stephan Althoff reported that when email invitations to participate in some German industries' online surveys appeared to come from a woman, the response rates were better than when men had sent the invitations. He also noted that this difference had not been replicated in general-community online survey trials.



These initial German findings suggested two gender-related hypotheses which we subsequently tested in Australia. The first and obvious hypothesis was whether response rates from emailed invitations to participate in online surveys were higher when the emails are apparently from a woman.

The second hypothesis was that women answer online survey questions less openly than men, because of a lesser willingness to expose themselves in a more assertive Australian male culture.

If either hypothesis were valid in Australia, changes in marketing research practice would be needed for better data collection and strengthened online survey response rates[1]. Hence, it seemed appropriate to test the hypotheses to determine the impact, if any, of gender.

The summary findings are that in the Australian context, the gender of the email invitation sender does not influence the response rates achieved in online surveys, and in online surveys, women answer questions as openly as do men. Additional study is recommended, as there is room to test the hypotheses further among specific audiences and topics.

Hypothesis 1 - Australians respond better to email invitation from a woman

On first view, the hypothesis that Australians would respond better to a woman's email appears reasonable. Australian men can appear more threatening than women – we know that four in five Australian murders and four in five Australian assaults are undertaken by men, making men actually and apparently the more dangerous sex[2].

Conversely, gender in email invitations may be an irrelevance as the email appears on a computer screen as gender-neutral text, and many spam-type emails purporting to be from one person are commonly thought to have been sent by someone else.

To test the hypothesis, we used clearly gender-different first names in email invitations to participate in four test surveys conducted between October 2007 and June 2008. The first three surveys were of women invitees only and the fourth test survey was with a larger female and male universe.

In accordance with the Australian Market & Social Research Society's Code of Conduct, the email addresses used were those of real people and the gender-identifying names used are, in the Australian culture, mainstream names[3].

Women-only surveys

The first three online surveys were of respective samples of 3,500 women, 3,600 women and 1,000 women aged 25 to 54 years, who were invited to participate in a Shopping Centre café survey. Each woman received one personally addressed email invitation, had eight days to respond and was offered the opportunity to enter a competition to win one of 13 individual $A100 cash prizes.

It was expected that the only known element was a subject line note that the email was being sent to people who had completed a First Direct Solutions survey some time before receiving this survey invitation. (It was considered unlikely that the respondents would have heard of the research company or the researchers before the invitation email.)

Each sample was divided into State groups and each State's sample was divided on an A-K and L-Z basis so that in each State, half the sample received an email from the named female researcher and the other half received an email invitation from the named male researcher. To avoid any possible alphabetical order or State bias, the alphabetical order of sample emailed by the female researcher in the first survey was emailed by the male researcher in the second survey.

The first two surveys used different survey links so the identity and gender of the email sender was clear. The third survey used one link and used the respondents' email addresses to determine whether the female or the male researcher had invited the respondent to participate.

The gender of the email senders was confirmed when the recipients opened or clicked on from the invitation, as they were asked to advise the female or the male researcher, by name, that they had received the invitation.

The results were interesting.

Table 1: Responses to a female or to male email sender, 2007-2008

Sample details	Survey 1 Oct. 2007	Survey 2 Dec. 2007	Survey 3 Jan. 2008
% Survey response - Female researcher	25%	20%	18%
% Survey response - Male researcher	24%	19%	16%
Total response rate	25%	20%	19%*

* 2% of the total responses from the survey 3 could not be allocated to either sender as the respondents had used different response email addresses than those in the database used to determine which sender the respondent had responded to.

Table 2: Responses to the male or female email sender, 2008

Survey	Sent by the male researcher	Sent by the female researcher	TOTAL	The male's % of total	The female's % of total
Net sent	10,812	11,088	21,900	49%	51%
Completed surveys	2,894	2,678	5,571	52%	48%
% response	27%	24%	25%	52%	48%

Table 3: Unsubscribe responses and general correspondence with male or female email senders, 2008

Shopping Centre customers Survey	Sent by the male researcher	Sent by the female researcher	TOTAL	The male's % of total	The female's % of total
Net sent	10,812	11,088	21,900	49%	51%
Unsubscribe requests	186	205	390	47%	53%
Unsubscribes as a % of all sent	1.7%	1.8%	1.8%	47%	53%
Correspondence from respondents	31 emails	32 emails	63 emails	49%	51%
% of correspondence from respondents	0.3%	0.3%	0.3%	49%	51%

Table 4: Responses to the male or female email sender, 2007-2008

Sample details	Survey 1 Oct. 2007	Survey 2 Dec. 2007	Survey 3 Jan. 2008
Unsubscribe rates – Male researcher	1%	1%	1%
Unsubscribe rates – Female researcher	1%	1%	1%
Correspondence rates – Male researcher	0.4%	0.3%	0.4%
Correspondence rates – Female researcher	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%

The first survey (undertaken in October 2007) had one in four response rate, and the second and third surveys were undertaken shortly before or after the Christmas-New Year holiday season and had one in five response rates. The differences between the response rates from emails sent by either researcher were statistically insignificant as Table 1 shows. Each survey's results were within standard error (2% and 3% for the first two surveys and 4% and 7% for the third survey, at the 95% confidence level).

Noticeably, the main influence on response rates appeared to be timing.

Surveys dispatched within a month of the Christmas holiday periods (which, in Australia, began on December 25, 2007) had noticeably lower response rates than the survey invitations sent some months before. This is definitely an Australian cultural issue as December is generally dedicated to finishing the year's business, school and social activities, to shopping for Christmas and preparing for holidays after Christmas. Then, until mid to late January, more are on vacation or in caretaker mode than at other times of the year.

Almost all respondents provided their email addresses, as these were needed to enter the competitions to win one of the prizes. In survey 1, 93% gave an email address; in survey 2, 96%; and in survey 3, 89%. In the fourth (male and female universe) survey, 94% of women and 94% of male respondents provided their email addresses to the male researcher and 91% of men and 94% of women gave their email addresses to the female researcher. These high email address responses levels indicate the respondents were unconcerned about providing their email addresses to a male or to a female researcher, indicating little concern for the gender of the email invitation to participate. Once the decision to participate in the survey had been made, the sender's gender appeared to be irrelevant.

A female and male sample

A fourth survey test was undertaken in June 2008 with people who lived near Shopping Centres. The net universe of 21,900 prospects was drawn from the First Direct Solutions panel previously used and a third of the sample were men (31%).

Each invitee was sent a one-time email invitation and in this survey, the panel source was not indicated in the subject line. Instead, the subject line stated the email was about a Food Court Survey – with cash prizes draw! The emails were again personally addressed to each prospective respondent. (By title, first name, family name, home suburb, Australian state and post code and addressed to them as Dear Title and Family Name.) The email letters were signed by either the female or the male researcher, with the same email and receipt details as before.

There was one unintended difference between the two samples in this fourth survey. For dispatch ease, both samples had been grouped by the recipients' home State and were sent out in mail-merged small batches of less than 2,000 emails per time. During the tedium of sending, as each batch was sent separately, the invitation line was inadvertently changed.

Three quarters of the invitations from the female researcher were sent with the planned Food Court Survey – with cash prizes draw! subject line but a quarter were sent with the residents' home State shown at the start and all the male researcher's invitations were sent with the home State shown at the start – e.g. NSW Food Court Survey – with cash prizes draw!

This difference, rather than the sender's gender, seemed to affect the response rates between the two senders, as table 2 shows.

The 3 percentage points difference in response is greater than the standard error would indicate (a 1 percentage point difference between the two would be expected). This difference appears to have been driven more by the State localisation of the survey subject line as both the male and the female senders received almost identical numbers of unsubscribe request and other emails from the people contacted, as the next section notes.

Larger Universe

The Shopping Centre customers' survey test had a larger universe of invitees and also had a larger number of responses than the earlier three surveys. The larger number was in surveys completed but also in the number of unsubscribe requests received and in email correspondence from invitees.

The researchers responded to all unsubscribe requests, acknowledging the request would be honoured, and responded to all other emails with appropriate answers. In doing so, it seemed that more emails came from recipients of the female researcher's invitations and were often chattily addressed.

When analysed, there was minimal difference between the researchers in unsubscribe requests received or in email correspondence, as table 3 shows.

This lack of gender difference in the Shopping Centre survey unsubscribe or email correspondence rates suggested we review these measures from the earlier surveys. As table 4 shows, there was essentially no difference in unsubscribe or in the email correspondence rates.

Not an influence

The responses to invitations from a male or from a female email address indicate no online survey response rate differences with the samples tested. This then indicates the email invitation sender's gender is not an influence in the decisions respondents make whether to complete online surveys – at least for these topics and with these samples.

The survey results suggest that email invitations appear genderless as electronic text on electronic backgrounds on computer screens. Factors other than the sender's gender influence decisions to participate in a survey. In particular, the impact of inviting respondents to participate in a survey about their local (State) area seems to generate better responses and future testing will look to that as a way to strengthen response rates.

The further analyses of unsubscribe rates and of correspondence with the researchers also found no difference by the inviting email sender's gender.

Hypothesis 2 - Women respond differently to men

In testing whether women answered differently to men, we looked for a question that would be commonly asked of both and would be independent of gender-related behaviour. Bradburn's findings that respondents in self completion surveys under-report answers to questions that make them feel uncomfortable[4] suggested such questions could be logical tests for gender differences.

As our previous online surveys had not asked which, if any, questions respondents were uncomfortable answering (the absense of this does suggest a possible future project!), the "What is your total annual household income?" question was considered likely to be an uncomfortable question. This was because clients often expressed concern that it was intrusive, and Australian face-to-face interviews often use pre-coded answer sheets that give a letter or number for each income range, so respondents need not state an actual dollar amount or range. The assumption was strengthened when we found that 15% of recent telephone respondents and 10% of recent mail survey respondents refused or did not answer when asked for their household income (based on findings from three recent Derham Marketing Research community and three customer audience telephone surveys, and four recent postal self-completion survey).

Responded differently

The online surveys analysed for household income response differences all had optional household income questions. Answer places were shown but respondents could proceed to the next screen without answering (though respondents had not been told that). The results were analysed by respondents' gender to see whether men and women responded differently to the presumed uncomfortable question about household incomes.

The first online survey results reviewed were from a sample of 6,420 Australian financial institution customers and the one-time email invitations were sent from an unknown and gender neutral) email address (the sender was derhamp@derhamresearch.com.au). The email subject line said the email was an invitation to participate in the financial institution's customer survey and participants could win a prize.

When the emails were opened or viewed in a reading panel, they were seen to be on the financial institution's letterhead and signed by the financial institution's male Chief Executive Officer. When the readers moved their cursors to another email or sought to close the email, they were asked to acknowledge receipt of the email to a male researcher.

The non-response to the household income question differed minimally between men and women. Only 3.7% of men and 4.1% of women chose not to answer the household income question – the difference of 0.4% was well within standard error (1.8% at the 95% confidence level). This study suggested gender had little influence on household income answers.

The second online survey was of 4,350 customers from another Australian financial institution but differed because a three contacts approach was used[5] to generate response. The same email dispatch and email receipts procedures were used and again, the email components were mostly from men.

The non-response to the household income question in this second financial institution's sample differed markedly from that of the first study. In the second study, 32% of men but 40% of women chose not to answer the household income question – an eight percent difference and a significant difference (the standard error was of up to 5%).

This second study suggests women and men do answer questions that may cause discomfort differently or the women surveyed may not have known their household incomes. The survey had not asked why the household income question was not answered.

The findings of the two small-sample studies were contradictory and thus inconclusive. The third study reviewed was of a large scale survey. In that study, 20,000 Australians were invited to participate in an online survey[6]. The emailed survey invitation was sent from a gender neutral and unknown to-the-recipient email address. The subject line said the email was an online survey invitation, named the panel source (First Direct Solutions), and said there were potential prizes of cash, iPods and cinema tickets.

When the email was opened or seen in a reading panel, the sender was identified as a male researcher and when the cursor was moved or the opened email closed, the recipient was asked to acknowledge receipt to the male researcher.

In this larger survey, 0.2% of men and 0.4% of women chose not to answer the household income question. The 0.2 percentage point difference in response from women was well within the 1.7% standard error expected. This finding in itself begins to question conventional wisdom that the household income question is an uncomfortable question, when the assumption is made in relation to these online surveys, where the household income question is