

Dillman D A. *Mail and telephone surveys: the Total Design Method.*

New York: Wiley, 1978. 375 p.

[Washington State University, Pullman, WA]

Mail and telephone sample surveys have been considered undesirable means of collection to be avoided for most social research. The procedures described here, based upon social-exchange theory, demonstrated that high quality and quantity of response could be obtained by means of such surveys, paving the way to their greater use for social-science research. [The SSC<sup>®</sup> indicates that this book has been cited in over 340 publications.]

## Using the Principles of Social Exchange in Surveys

Don A. Dillman

Social and Economic Sciences Research Center  
and Departments of Sociology and  
Rural Sociology  
Washington State University  
Pullman, WA 99164-4014

February 26, 1990

In 1969, as a new PhD trained to address sociological issues with data collected through sample surveys, I accepted a faculty position at Washington State University in far eastern Washington. At that time conducting high-quality research surveys was synonymous with collecting data by means of face-to-face interviews. My desire to conduct statewide general public surveys projects in this way was thwarted, however, by the fact that the Cascade Mountain range and nearly 300 miles separated me from three-fourths of the state's population; the cost of mounting the desired face-to-face interview studies would have been enormous.

I shared my frustrations with Professor Walter L. Slocum, who encouraged me to consider mail surveys as an alternative, despite the low response rate expectation (20-30 percent) usually given in research methods texts. He provided me with an article he had published that suggested high response rates were possible.<sup>1</sup>

The existing mail survey literature was voluminous but not very helpful. Individual studies had showed cover letters, follow-ups, even stamps, could make a difference, but the studies provided no sense of how to combine procedures to get response rates up to an acceptable level. Regular morning coffee with an ardent advocate for social-exchange theory (which emphasizes that people are likely to engage in behavior they find rewarding and avoid those they

find costly) led to my utilizing that framework for deciding how to combine dozens of potential procedures together in a way that would get high response rates and acceptable data quality.

Even the earliest trials, first in Washington and then in other states,<sup>2</sup> showed that 70 percent or higher response rates to general public surveys were obtainable. Needing a convenient descriptor for this comprehensive approach, I chose the "Total Design Method" to convey the importance of considering all visible elements of the survey contact and manipulating them in concert to create a positive social-exchange situation. Later research confirmed the importance of attention to such detail.<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after beginning the mail survey work, I was asked to establish a telephone survey facility for the university—an outcome of student protests that closed down the university and led to an administrator's suggestion that a telephone laboratory could do quick surveys to help resolve any future disruptions. Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered nearly a complete void of literature that would offer ideas on how telephone surveying should be done. Lacking such guidance, I chose to follow the principles of social exchange in much the same way they had been utilized for the development of mail survey procedures.

This book was the first one to provide detailed, step-by-step procedures for getting high quantity and quality of response to both mail and telephone surveys. And, it provided a theoretical rationale for why the methods worked. It was published at a time when societal demand for surveys was increasing dramatically and costs for face-to-face interviews were escalating.

Many disciplines rely on surveys, and the high number of citations can be explained partly by the book's multidisciplinary appeal. Its most significant impact was to encourage researchers to take mail and telephone methods seriously. It has enhanced the ability of individual scientists and graduate students, employed outside of national survey centers, to collect high-quality primary survey data that they otherwise could not get. It has also contributed to the development of survey centers that rely solely on telephone or mail surveys in dozens of colleges and universities throughout the US.

The telephone procedures published in the book rapidly became dated as technologies changed, e.g., development of computer-assisted telephone interviewing, and the volume of research rapidly expanded.<sup>4</sup> The mail procedures, on the other hand, have changed relatively little. Both the social-exchange framework and procedures for mail surveys described in the book remain widely used in the US, Europe, and other developed countries throughout the world.<sup>5</sup>

1. Slocum W L, Empey L T & Swanson H S. Increasing response to questionnaires and structured interviews.

*Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 21:221-5, 1956. (Cited 20 times.)

2. Dillman D A, Christenson J A, Carpenter E H & Brooks R. Increasing mail questionnaire response: a four-state comparison. *Amer. Sociol. Rev.* 39:744-56, 1974. (Cited 85 times.)

3. Dillman D A, Dillman J J & Makela C J. The importance of adhering to details of the Total Design Method (TDM) for mail surveys. (Lockhart D C, ed.) *Making effective use of mailed questionnaires*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1984. p. 49-64.

4. Groves R N, Biemer P P, Lyberg L E, Massey J T, Nichols W L & Waxberg J. *Telephone survey methodology*. New York: Wiley, 1988. 581 p.

5. DeLeeuw E D & Hox J J. The effects of response-stimulating factors on response rates and data quality in mail surveys: a test of Dillman's Total Design Method. *J. Official Statist.* 4:241-9, 1988.