

AN INVESTIGATION OF AVOIDANCE BEHAVIOR IN MALL-INTERCEPT MARKET RESEARCH

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Much of the research focusing on the efficiency of the mall-intercept form of market data collection has been concentrated in three areas. These studies address themselves to developing an understanding of the personal/demographic characteristics of mall shoppers, studying shopping behavior of individuals who may participate in mall-surveys, and improving the procedures employed in mall-intercept research. However, there has been no detailed research investigating the personal/demographic characteristics, stated shopping behavior, and mall survey perceptions of those who choose not to participate in a given mall-intercept survey or who actively avoid being approached. A mail survey was sent to 966 households with a cover letter requesting the primary shopper to complete it. A total of 407 surveys were returned. The results showed that 33 percent of the general population saw themselves as "avoiders" when faced with a mall-intercept survey and that these "avoiders" possess somewhat unique characteristics when compared with "responders". The implications of these findings indicate that the sample likely to be obtained in a given mall-intercept research situation may be biased away from the types of individual consumers from which the researchers hope to gain information.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of research devoted to the mall-intercept form of market data collection is concentrated in three areas. These studies address themselves to developing an understanding of the personal/demographic characteristics of mall shoppers, studying shopping behavior of individuals who may participate in mall surveys, and improving the procedures employed in mall-intercept research. However, there has been no detailed research investigating the personal/demographic characteristics, stated shopping behavior, and mall survey perceptions of those who choose not to participate in a given mall-intercept survey. A review of the mall survey process suggests that the population from which a mall-intercept sample may be drawn is comprised of three types of individuals. These are: respondents, individuals who are approached and agree to participate; nonparticipants, individuals who are not considered as part of the sample; and nonrespondents, or "avoiders", those who will not respond if approached and actively avoid the mall survey situation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The mall-intercept form of data collection has become a widely accepted market research tool. Dupont (1987) identified that slightly less than 20% of all market research is conducted in a mall setting. The advantages of obtaining data, particularly data relevant to purchase behavior, at a centrally located site specifically designed to facilitate that behavior are obvious: increased speed of data collection, flexibility in adjusting to respondent attitudes, and more comprehensive information.

Several studies have focused on the characteristics associated with those likely to participate in a mall-intercept survey and the resulting sample biases. Dupont (1987) found that respondents are similar on certain demographic characteristics including age, education, marital status, employment status, and family income. In addition, Wiseman (1983) confirmed that mall respondents are similar on personal characteristics such as: a relatively large amount of free time, being relatively comfortable with strangers, and concerned with monetary incentives.

Some studies have also concentrated on respondent shopping behavior. Several focused on the behavior of "browsing", the act of examining retail merchandise in the absence of any immediate purchase intention. Bloch (1989) found evidence to indicate that "browsers" will bias the research. This bias is due to the fact that

"browsers" are likely to make up a significant portion of any sample drawn in a mall-intercept setting and that they possess unique characteristics: these individuals tend to be opinion leaders and have a high level of product knowledge. Bush (1985) identified that another respondent type which may bias sample data is the mall employee. They are likely to participate in mall surveys as they have exhibited a tendency to spend their break time walking through the given mall.

Much of the remaining research relating to mall surveys has been directed at improving the techniques in mall-intercept research. The implied hypotheses within these studies are that by making technical improvements, the quality of the sample and the resultant data will be significantly increased. Balasubramanian (1989) demonstrated that certain methods could be employed to improve the mall-intercept form of data collection. These methods include providing a monetary incentive to encourage respondent cooperation and possibly reducing data collection costs by using a "tailored" interview to increase response quality.

Unfortunately there is no generally agreed upon method which will improve the overall quality of the data. Sudman (1980) has argued that because composition of shoppers varies significantly by time of day, day of the week, and reason for visiting a mall, the data must be collected at various points throughout the given mall and then weighted to reduce the effects of these biases. At the same time, Dupont (1987) has stated that weighting the data is in some cases impractical and has no significant effect. In particular it has been shown that by using the technique of weighting demographic characteristics, no significant differences were obtained across frequent and infrequent shoppers. It was further argued, in the same study, that although a given sample may be biased toward frequent shoppers, that bias did not appear to affect the survey results.

While all of the above studies focused upon the possible methods for increasing the quality of the sample, none addressed the problem(s) associated with "avoiders". Individuals with a stated aversion to the mall-intercept may have distinct characteristics related to purchase and shopping behavior. The absence of these individuals in a given shopping mall survey sample would adversely affect the quality of the data if these "avoiders" do in fact have unique characteristics.

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this study is to provide specific insight into the characteristics of individuals likely to be

"avoiders" in a mall-intercept situation and why they decline to participate. The resulting profile should assist the market researcher in understanding the possible biases likely to be encountered in mall-intercept surveys as well as suggesting areas for further research. In addition, insight will be gained into the types of individuals who, while essential to achieving a complete data set, may not be included within a given mall survey sample.

While earlier research established "respondent" profiles, the profiles of responders may differ from those of "avoiders". This research investigates the similarities and differences of responders versus "avoiders" in the following areas: 1) demographic characteristics, 2) shopping behavior, and 3) perceptions of market research in general and of mall-intercepts in particular. The stated hypotheses then are:

H(1): "Avoiders" will have unique and identifiable demographic characteristics.

H(2): "Avoiders" will display a significant difference in shopping behavior.

H(3): "Avoiders" will display distinct differences in their perceptions of market research.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The method of data collection employed by this study was a mailed questionnaire targeted toward the general population. The sample was randomly selected from the telephone directory of a midwestern city with a population of approximately 75,000. Of the 966 surveys mailed, 407 were returned for a response rate of 42%. A cut-off date was set at 21 days following the actual mailings, including weekends. No additional steps such as prior notifications, incentives, or follow-ups were taken to increase the response rate.

The questionnaire was two and a half pages in length and gathered information pertinent to the three data categories previously discussed: 1) demographics, 2) shopping behavior, and 3) perceptions of market research. The questionnaire took approximately eight minutes to complete. A cover letter addressed "Dear Participant" was included which explained the study and requested that the adult member of the household who was the primary mall shopper complete the survey. A review of the data indicates that this objective was at least partially achieved as only 5 of the 407 respondents reported themselves to be in the under 18 age category. A self-addressed, postage paid

business return envelope was enclosed with the questionnaire.

To establish whether a person could be classified as an "avoider", they were asked to check one of the statements associated with the following phrase:

"Which of the following best describes your reaction to mall surveyors?"

- ___ Avoidance -- actively avoid the surveyor by reversing direction, walking way around, avoiding eye contact and/or other evasive action.
- ___ Indifference -- do not care if approached or not.
- ___ Interest -- actively move in the direction of the surveyor.

If the second or third choice was selected, the individual was classified as a "responder." However those that indicated "avoidance" behavior were then asked the following question:

"If you described yourself as an active avoider, do you always avoid mall-intercept surveys or have you considered participating?"

- ___ Always actively avoid.
- ___ Have considered participating.

A respondent who checked "always actively avoid" was then classified as an "avoider." A respondent checking "have considered participating" was viewed as being indecisive and was not classified as either an "avoider" or "responder."

RESULTS

The completed surveys showed that 33 percent of respondents specifically characterized themselves as "avoiders". This result indicates that a substantial portion of the general population will decline to participate in mall-intercept market research. However, when considering the true size of the "avoider" population, keep in mind that this study achieved a response rate of 42%. How would the other 58% classify themselves? Intuition would suggest that "avoiders" of mall-intercept surveys would also avoid mail surveys, thus the "avoider" population would be much greater than was reported. On the other hand, the "avoiders" indicated that although they avoid mall-intercept surveys, they are more accepting of mail and in-home surveys. This would suggest that the "avoider" population is not as large as reported. Regardless of which position is correct, it appears that the "avoider" population is significant.

To test for significant differences, a test of proportions was employed comparing the proportion for each characteristic, behavior, or attitude for "avoiders" versus "responders" against the overall avoidance result of 33%. The results for the demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1. The data in Table 1 show that while there are some differences between "avoiders" and "responders", there are more similarities than differences. However, the variables upon which "avoiders" differ from "responders" may be viewed as quite important in mall populations. The data indicate that females may be underrepresented in mall-intercept surveys. They demonstrated a higher propensity to avoid mall surveys (40%). In addition, the research also revealed that self-identified "avoiders" were more likely to be employed full-time (42%) and have a college degree (44%). Based on these results the research provided limited support for the first hypothesis.

The results for mall shopping behavior are displayed in Table 2, as the data show, "avoiders" do not differ significantly from "responders". The shopping behavior and perception of the shopping process in general were consistent between "avoiders" and "responders". The research did not provide sufficient evidence to support the second hypothesis.

However, as shown in Table 3 the information gathered did reveal significant differences between those in the "avoider" category versus the "responders" in the area of market research perceptions, thus providing support for the third hypothesis. As may be intuitively expected, the "avoiders" perceptions of mall survey research were negative. The "avoiders" considered mall surveys to be generally of no value to anyone but the company or organization conducting the study. "Responders" tended to be of the opinion that mall surveys resulted in unspecified benefits to the shopper. Those respondents who identified themselves as "avoiders" prefer mail surveys and strongly opposed to personal interviews. They also prefer participating in market research when the data is collected in their home as opposed to other locations. This result is undoubtedly to be expected as those who respond to a mail survey are more likely to be favorably disposed to the mail survey method.

In addition, when "avoiders" were asked if they would respond when approached, regardless of their attempt to avoid the mall survey situation, most indicated that they would not respond. The respondents further indicated that the surveyor's appearance and method of approach would not induce them to modify their avoidance behavior.

TABLE 1
DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF "AVOIDERS" VERSUS "RESPONDERS"

Demographic Characteristic	Number (Percent) of Respondents Identifying Themselves as:			Chi Square	p<
	"Avoiders"	"Responders"	Totals		
Age					
18-25	16(41)	23(59)	39	1.038	.5959
26-35	18(35)	34(65)	52	.519	.7502
36-50	40(41)	58(59)	98	.088	.8783
50	23(29)	55(71)	78	2.970	.0884
Sex					
Female	70(40)	103(60)	173	4.422	.0377
Male	27(29)	65(71)	92	.445	.7722
Marital Status					
Single	23(43)	31(57)	54	2.083	.2851
Married	67(35)	122(65)	189	.600	.7261
Other	7(29)	17(71)	24	.188	.8486
Number in Household					
1	17(39)	27(61)	44	.405	.7841
2	36(42)	50(58)	86	3.389	.0699
3	17(32)	36(68)	53	.000	1.0000
≥ 4	27(32)	57(68)	84	.054	.8885
Number of Children					
0	33(38)	55(62)	88	.823	.6598
1	18(45)	22(55)	40	2.849	.0937
2	26(37)	45(63)	71	.579	.7323
≥ 3	18(29)	45(71)	63	.640	.7142
Currently Employed					
Yes	71(37)	121(63)	192	1.512	.4549
No	26(35)	48(65)	74	.247	.8311
Employment Status					
Full-time	59(42)	82(58)	141	4.596	.0340
Part-time	13(25)	40(75)	53	1.385	.4930
Household Income					
0-10,000	7(30)	16(70)	23	.192	.8474
10,001-20,000	19(37)	33(63)	52	.356	.7987
20,001-30,000	14(34)	27(66)	41	.000	1.0000
30,001-40,000	21(36)	37(64)	58	.314	.8111
> 40,000	32(40)	49(60)	81	1.389	.4915
Credit Cards					
Yes	79(37)	134(63)	213	1.723	.3922
No	17(32)	36(68)	53	.000	1.0000
Education Level					
< High School	3(33)	6(67)	9	.000	1.0000
High School	22(37)	38(63)	60	.300	.8150
Vocational School	10(29)	25(71)	35	.507	.7538
Some College	16(28)	41(72)	57	.711	.6931
College Degree	42(44)	54(56)	96	4.688	.0321

TABLE 2
SHOPPING BEHAVIORS OF "AVOIDERS" VERSUS "RESPONDERS"

Shopping Behavior	Number (Percent) of Respondents Identifying Themselves as:		Totals	Chi Square	p<
	"Avoiders"	"Responders"			
Frequency of Shopping?					
Less than once a month	11(30)	26(70)	37	.123	.8679
1-2 times per month	44(36)	79(64)	123	.330	.8064
Once a week	29(39)	45(61)	74	1.542	.4460
More than once a week	10(37)	17(63)	27	.167	.8549
Do you enjoy shopping at the malls?					
Yes	71(33)	146(67)	217	.021	.8983
No	23(50)	23(50)	46	6.332	.0128
Generally visit shopping malls to purchase a specific item or to browse?					
Specific purchase	65(36)	117(64)	182	.622	.7196
Browse	26(40)	39(60)	65	1.758	.3818
Both	6(29)	15(71)	21	.214	.8409
Frequency of Purchase?					
Occasionally	19(39)	30(61)	49	.836	.6559
Half the time	45(44)	58(56)	103	5.313	.0223
Every time	33(28)	84(72)	117	1.385	.4927
Do you generally buy at more than one store?					
Yes	62(34)	118(66)	180	.100	.8748
No	35(39)	54(61)	89	1.841	.3571
Typical amount you spend when you visit a shopping mall?					
≤ \$20	17(25)	52(75)	69	2.348	.2063
\$21-50	71(42)	99(58)	170	5.992	.0160
\$51-100	6(26)	17(74)	23	.767	.6764
> \$100	1(33)	2(67)	3	.000	1.0000

CONCLUSIONS

Previous studies have already established that mall-intercept surveys can be biased in favor of certain individuals, most notably "browsers" and shopping mall employees. These individuals have been shown to possess traits that may be significantly different from the general shopping public. The results of this study indicate that there is a third group, "avoiders", who will further bias mall survey results. This research has shown that individuals who are likely to avoid the mall survey method of market research do have characteristics unique from "responders". Failure to take into account the possible omission of "avoiders" may bias the data gathered when the mall-intercept method is employed.

"Avoiders" who comprise 33 percent of the general population, are firm in their avoidance behavior and will not participate in a mall survey even if approached. While it is possible that additional surveyor training and improvement in sampling techniques may help to reduce the number of "biased" individuals due to "browsers" and mall employees, the results of this study indicate that these techniques will not overcome the bias problem associated with "avoiders". The data indicate that appearance and approach of the surveyor will not modify the "avoidance" behavior, "avoiders" will decline to respond under any circumstances. Finally, these individuals are more likely to respond to a market information gathering tool if it takes the form of a mailed survey which they can complete in the privacy of their own home.

The results of previous research and of this study indicate that mall surveys will end up with definitely biased samples. If information from individuals in the aforementioned demographic groups is required for the data to be useful, then the mall-intercept form of data collection may be an inappropriate choice.

It should be noted that the results obtained in this study reveal areas of additional research opportunity which would further the understanding of "avoidance" behavior. One such area would be a more detailed study of "inducement variables" which may reveal possible behavior modifiers related to "avoiders" in the mall-intercept situation.

TABLE 3
RESEARCH ATTITUDES OF "AVOIDERS" VERSUS "RESPONDERS"

Research Attitude	Number (Percent) of Respondents Identifying Themselves as:		Totals	Chi Square	p <
	"Avoiders"	"Responders"			
Indicate your general feelings toward surveys.					
research is helpful for the company but not customers	33(41)	48(59)	81	2.000	.3098
research will benefit customers	18(20)	73(80)	91	7.161	.0079
research is of little value to either company and/or customer	21(70)	9(30)	30	18.150	.0010
Which type of surveying method do you prefer?					
None	6(60)	4(40)	10	4.286	.0406
Mail	79(43)	105(57)	184	7.945	.0049
Telephone	5(26)	14(74)	19	.244	.8320
Personal Interview	1 (2)	44(98)	45	20.600	.0010
Where would you be more likely to respond to a personal interview?					
None	12(75)	4(25)	16	14.255	.0010
In home	42(46)	50(54)	92	7.123	.0080
At work	16(70)	7(30)	23	12.267	.0010
At a shopping mall	15(13)	100(87)	115	20.791	.0010

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