How to survive international mail surveys:

A personal reflection based on two large-scale surveys

Anne-Wil Harzing
University of Melbourne
Email: anne-wil@harzing.com
www.harzing.com
International mail surveys

- **Database of addresses**
  - Accuracy will vary across countries
  - Get locals to verify addresses

- **Mailing process**
  - International reply-paid, mailing times

- **Personalisation**
  - Pictures
  - Real signature
  - International committee of recommendation
  - Note for PA/secretary in local language

- **Incentives**
  - Money, tea/coffee, results, article

- **Language & timing**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Harzing, 1995-1996, mailed from the Netherlands
## Response rates by country

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Response rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North America</td>
<td>2.35%</td>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>3.48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Europe</td>
<td>2.92%</td>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>Czech Republic, Slovakia,</td>
<td>17%-100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>Slovenia, Vietnam, Pakistan,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria, France, Italy, Greece</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>Egypt, Tunisia, Ghana (6 questionnaires or less)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asia</td>
<td>3.28%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
IMS: Language effects

- Research question: Do people respond in a way that reflects the cultural assumptions embedded in the language of the questionnaire (cultural accommodation)?
- Strictly matched respondents, UG students in Business
  50% English questionnaire, 50% native language
- Three types of questions:
  - cultural values (Activity, Relationship), elective choice, ideal job
- 22 countries, major cultural groups: Anglo, Scandinavian, Germanic, Latin European, East European, Near Eastern, Far Eastern, Latin American (still looking for new countries!)
- 3,200 respondents, data collected March 2001-April 2002
- Conclusion: language influences responses on attitudinal questions and English-language questionnaires underestimate differences across countries
IMS: Timing effects
The September 11 effect

- Data collected as part of language project
  - USA in March 2001 and October 2001
  - UK February 2001 and October 2001
  - Anglo-Saxons in France Feb-June 2001

- Sign. differences between UK 1/2, Anglo France, US1 and USA 2 on:
  - Relationship Hierarchy
  - Relationship Individualism

- Significant differences between US 1 & 2 on:
  - Ideal job: variety & adventure, security of employment, serve your country

- Timing of data collection can impact results
IMS: Conclusions

- For top managers: forget it, unless you have a huge budget!
  - Too busy, PA will filter
  - Many MNCs company policy not to respond
  - Most incentive techniques will not work
  - Be realistic, more than 15-20% might be impossible even for domestic surveys

- In general: investigate alternatives

- If you do decide to conduct an IMS:
  - Pay attention to every minute detail yourself or get a dedicated RA
  - Don't treat data collection as a last minute operation, the weakest link will determine your result
IMS alternatives: Decentralised data collection?

- Good alternative for “easy” populations & research design, but think really long-term otherwise
- Translation procedures
  - Country collaborator responsible
  - Coordinator verified (back-)translation
- Data collection and data entry
  - CC responsible, provided details on circumstances of collection
  - Coordinator supplied 10 page (single-spaced) instruction document for data collection
  - Fully coded SPSS data entry file & data entry instructions provided by coordinator
- Team building
  - Regular status reports, democratic decision-making, introductions document, co-authorship, COMMUNICATION (>2000 emails)
Some references

- Dillman (2000) Mail and Internet Surveys. The Tailored Design Method, New York: Wiley [very good guide, but virtually no info on international mail surveys]