“Survey by knocking the door and response rate enhancement technique in international business research”

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ARTICLE INFO	Maria Yosephine Dwi Hayu Agustini (2018). Survey by knocking the door and response rate enhancement technique in international business research. *Problems and Perspectives in Management*, *16*(2), 155-163. doi:10.21511/ppm.16(2).2018.14
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.21511/ppm.16(2).2018.14
RELEASED ON	Thursday, 10 May 2018
RECEIVED ON	Tuesday, 13 February 2018
ACCEPTED ON	Wednesday, 18 April 2018
LICENSE	This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License
JOURNAL	"Problems and Perspectives in Management"
ISSN PRINT	1727-7051
ISSN ONLINE	1810-5467
PUBLISHER	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”
FOUNDER	LLC “Consulting Publishing Company “Business Perspectives”

NUMBER OF REFERENCES	NUMBER OF FIGURES	NUMBER OF TABLES
24	0	1

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BUSINESS PERSPECTIVES

LLC "CPC "Business Perspectives"
Hryhorii Skovoroda lane, 10, Sumy, 40022, Ukraine

www.businessperspectives.org

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SURVEY BY KNOCKING THE DOOR AND RESPONSE RATE ENHANCEMENT TECHNIQUE IN INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS RESEARCH

Abstract

Low response rate has been considered as a matter in a survey. Even though researcher has applied techniques to enhance the response rate, they very often still experience low rate of response. This paper tries to share the challenging experience in dealing with low response rate in the context of international business research. This is a questionnaire survey of small firms in Indonesia that were doing business abroad. The results show that it is more important to select the most effective survey method rather than techniques to enhance response rate in order to deal with local condition. Survey by knocking the door is found to be the best suited alternative for maximizing the response rate.

Keywords response rate enhancement techniques, survey by knocking the door, Indonesia, international business research, non-response bias

JEL Classification M16, F23

Received on: 13th of February, 2018
Accepted on: 18th of April, 2018

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INTRODUCTION

Survey is the most common method used in many researches (Fawcett et al., 2014) including those in the area of international business (Chang, van Wittleloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). Most research in international business is cross-cultural or across national borders (Childlow, Ghauri, Yeniyurt, & Cavusgil, 2015). With this nature, survey is considered as the most expedient way to reach the objects that are dispersed around different countries or are located in distant area. Appropriateness of survey in an international business (IB) research may lie on its ability for generalization of the results (Crowther & Lancaster, 2009; Glasow, 2005).

Dominance of survey in IB research has raised concerns on occurrence of sources of error from a survey. The editors of Journal of International Business Studies (JIBS) – one of the high reputable journals in the area of IB – once wrote their concern on this matter in terms of common method variance (CMV) resulted from a survey instrument (Chang, van Wittleloostuijn, & Eden, 2010). CMV is variance which is attributable to the measurement method. This variance can occur if a researcher asks questions using self-administered questionnaire at the same time from the same respondents. The respondents may have propensity to provide consistent responses that may be less relevant. Since common methods can cause Type I and Type II errors, the editors suggested that the researchers must do whatever they can do to eliminate or reduce the errors to make the survey results ac-

ceptable. They made this as a requirement in submission of an article to JIBS to ensure the researchers have addressed CMV properly. One indicator for the researchers to successfully address this problem is high response rate.

High response rate has become a concern of many researchers, and response rate enhancement techniques have been applied to achieve the acceptable level of response rate. Besides, it can increase the types of statistical techniques that can effectively be applied to the collected data, high response rate also shows credibility of the collected data in the eyes of key stakeholders and more importantly can leverage the actual generalizability of the collected data (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007). It is thus understandable if researchers must ensure high response rate is achieved in their research. The purpose of this paper is to share the challenging experience in dealing with very low response rate in the context of international business research and to show importance to select the most effective survey method rather than techniques to enhance response-rate according to local condition.

The paper is divided into four parts. First, it discusses debates on response rate in a survey. Second, it discusses response rate enhancement techniques and their effectiveness. Third, it presents the empirical findings on enhancing response rate. Finally, it concludes based on the empirical findings.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1. Response rate issues

Dillman (1991) outlined four types of error in survey: sampling error, non-coverage error, non-response error, and measurement error. Majority of researchers concern with non-response error and apply ways to reduce the error by increasing response rate. The underlying reason is that the greater the response, the more accurately it will estimate the parameters of the population from which the samples were withdrawn (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975). Thus, it can be stated that response rate is considered as a matter in a survey (O'Rourke, 1999) and attention is given to increase it using response rate enhancement techniques (Holbrook, Krosnick, & Pfent, 2008).

Response rate is the proportion of completed surveys by the eligible participants. According to Holbrook, Krosnick, and Pfent (2008), response rates are a function of two aspects of the interaction with the participants: contacting the participants and gaining their cooperation in which each involves different strategies. Contacting wrong participants and not gaining cooperation from the right participants can result in low response rate (Client Heartbeat, 2018).

Among others, mail survey is used extensively and is the most popular data collection method in IB research (Childlow et al., 2015) due to its expediency (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975). Mail surveys are low in cost, have simple procedure for administering it (Dillman, 1991), and geographically flexible (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975). It also enables to gather data more quickly, more abundantly, and more cheaply than other ways of survey, such as telephone survey or face-to-face interview (Dillman, 1991). However, mail survey has experienced low response rates (Paxson, 1995).

Beyond mail surveys, email surveys have recently gained popularity, since they are considered faster and more cost effective (Sivo, Saunders, Chang, & Jiang, 2006). However, they are limited in their coverage, since they can only be completed by the participants who can access the Internet. In this case, FluidSurveys Team (2014) differentiates response rate from completion rate. The former refers to the proportion of completed surveys over the number of participants to whom the emails are sent, while the later refers to the proportion over the number of those who entered the survey only. Regardless the term used, Paxson (1995) emphasized that low response rate is inevitable and becomes a concern, since it is considered as a major source of error through non-response bias. He has this to say:

"No matter how great the number of completed questionnaires, if only 20 percent of the recipients fill out and return a questionnaire or complete a

telephone interview, those opinions probably do not adequately represent the population. In other words, opinions of the 80 percent who do not respond may differ significantly from those of the 20 percent who do respond" (Paxson, 1995, p. 67).

In other way, O'Rourke (1999) stated that higher response rate indicates less possible bias and thus more confidence of the results. With this in mind, efforts to increase response rate are undertaken and particular techniques are applied accordingly.

1.2. Response rate enhancement techniques

Techniques to enhace response rate have been discussed extensively and researchers apply response rate enhancement techniques to encounter low rate of response in their research. The common techniques used by most researchers are by citing the purpose of the study to the respondent, providing cover letter using official stationery of the related organization, giving pre-notification, sending reminder cards, or providing incentives (Childlow et al., 2015; O'Rourke, 1999). Even the most extreme techniques such as bribes and threats are used occasionally (Ray & Still, 1987).

Surprisingly enough, response rate enhancement techniques are found as unnecessary and counter-productive, since they provide acquiescent response bias and thus damage the meaningfulness of the results (Ray & Still, 1987). Even Childlow et al. (2015) found that follow-up letters lower rather than increase the response rate. Templeton et al. (1997) concluded that a low response rate does not need to affect the validity of the data collected. In other words, high response rate is unnecessarily a guarantee of sample representativeness. For this they stated as follows:

"Any bias identified can then be modified by statistical procedures. Small biases are often collectable by weighing procedures and may not be as problematic as they at first seem. If a bias is known or expected in a sample, then allowances can be made for it" (Templeton et al., 1997, p. 94).

The debate is still ongoing. It focuses on effectiveness of a technique in enhancing the response rate. Nevertheless, the propensity to put concern on enhancing response rate is still high, since response rate is still considered as the acceptable indicator of non-response error (Dillman, 1991).

1.3. Effectiveness of response rate enhancement techniques

Applying response rate enhancement techniques in a survey may not be as effective as expected. Even though techniques to enhance response rate as suggested in the literature have been applied, they may not guarantee higher response rate is achieved. An interesting illustration can be found from the study of small firm internationalization by Brush, Edelman, and Manolova (2002). Their study used mail survey in two phases. The first phase was an exploratory study of 410 small firms and 76 completed questionnaires were received providing an acceptable response rate of 18.5%. In the second phase, 1120 questionnaires were mailed and response rate enhancement techniques were applied: asking trade association personally for obtaining list of firms; calling each firms prior mailing to identify key informant; updating the name and address; exacting promises for cooperation in completing the questionnaire; sending a reminder postcard after a period of 2 weeks. These ways provided only 208 responses or 19.6% response rate, an insignificant difference (in terms of percentage of response) compared to the first phase conducted without response rate enhancement techniques. It thus can be stated that the enhancement techniques have not significantly increased response rate.

Telephone call which is recognized as the most effective method of reminder (Templeton et al., 1997) also cannot guarantee high response rate. The study by Cohen et al. (2015) found that the telephone call technique was less effective. They used email survey via SurveyMonkey in their study and applied telephone calls to some of the participants to make them aware of the survey. To address the issue of CMV, they provided guarantee for total confidentiality responses, mentioned that there was no right or incorrect answer, and requested the participants to respond honestly. Of 800 samples, only 214 responded in a period of 3 months. This resulted in 26.75% response rate, which is an acceptable estimate for a mail survey (Paxson, 1995). However, after screening for apro-

priateness to the criteria of sample and completeness of the response, only 92 complete survey responses could be used further and this reduced the response rate to 11.5%. They considered this as low response rate and put it as limitation of the research.

The illustrations above indicate that low response rate is a matter beyond the technical issues. The problem may not relate to the techniques per se, but it more likely relates to participants. The empirical case shows this and how to deal with it.

1.4. An empirical case

The case is a research focusing on internationalization of small firms in Indonesia that was managed from Australia. In accordance with the purpose of the paper, only data collection method and application of the response rate enhancement techniques are addressed and discussed here. The participants were small firm managers whose firm was engaged in international business. They were picked from the list of 4,109 selected firms generated from a national publication of Indonesian firms.

Indonesia is an archipelago with more than 13,000 islands around the country (Kompas, 2012). Different tribes reside in each island and each tribe represents particular subculture. As this fact may have an impact on internationalization process, the research was thus intended to cover small firms in as many areas in the country as possible. Questionnaire-based survey method was considered appropriate for this purpose (Crowther & Lancaster, 2009), since it can reach as many participants as possible in dispersed area at the smallest.

Email survey

Email survey was considered as the most effective way to distribute the questionnaires to the prospective participants. Assuming email has been widely used by businesses, distributing the questionnaire via email could possibly be highly effective and efficient (Sivo, Saunders, Chang, & Jiang, 2006). Availability of email addresses was thus a determinant to identify prospective participants. Thus, the selected firms with no email address were set aside. Those having email address that might reach the contact person directly (i.e. personal rather than organizational email address) and those using international providers (such as Yahoo mail, Google mail, Hotmail rather than local providers) were prioritized.

A group of 300 firms was selected for pilot test. Another 300 firms were prepared as a back-up group should any problems such as undeliverable email occurred. This way was to increase the probability of reaching the participants and to increase the response rate, which is important in arriving at meaningful results (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975; Paxson, 1995; Templeton et al., 1997).

Since the questionnaire was written in English, translation into Indonesian was necessary as the participants were Indonesian and their English proficiency might vary. Thus, translation was a way to increase understanding of the participants to the questions. Difficulty in translating from one language into another relates not only to language, but also to culture (Chen & Boore, 2009). Therefore, translation had been taken carefully to ensure it has high validation and it was conducted by involving a person whose native language is Indonesian and who is fluent in English. The Indonesian version of the questionnaire was then transformed to Qualtrics.

Email letter and informational letter explaining about the research and its purpose, instruction to completing the questionnaire, assurance for anonymity, and date line were sent and link to the questionnaire was provided. The organizations supporting the research were mentioned to increase validity of the research and trust of the participants and it might enhance response rate (Childlow et al., 2015; O'Rourke, 1999).

On sending the emails, Qualtrics indicated that the emails were all successfully sent to the intended participants. Thus, it could be assumed that all participants had received the emails. Later, five were identified by Qualtrics as having invalid email address. The questionnaires were sent back to them using alternative email address available from the list. In case the alternative email address was not accepted by Qualtrics, the participant was dropped and a new one was selected as replacement.

After the deadline of one week, there were only three responses coming. This resulted in only 1 percent response rate. Considering that acceptable response rate for a mail survey is 10 to 20 percent (Paxson, 1995), this was thus significantly low rate of response. The techniques to enhance response rate were then applied.

Even though a reminder letter was sent to the remaining participants (Paxson, 1995) and extended time for responding was provided (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975), still no responses were received. Further search on how to enhance response rates were conducted. The techniques such as using personal contact and personal recommendation (Walker, 2002), enclosing an endorsement letter from an authorized entity, determining deadlines and providing a written assurance of respondents' anonymity (Syakhrusa, 2002) were revealed. Considering that most of these techniques had been applied and the response rate was still low, other options might be weighed.

Mail survey

After weighing up the options, mail survey was considered as a good alternative. It could reach the prospective participants that were spread around the country and the cost was still considered as relatively low. However, the paper version of the questionnaire was quite long and this might lower propensity to participate in the survey and might cause the respondents to be less likely to take time for responding (Paxson, 1995). To limit the effect of a long questionnaire, the questionnaire was provided in a book-like form of a half size paper.

Participants for mail survey were selected from the same list used in the email survey and 300 small firms were selected. Those who had been invited to the email survey and had not yet responded were chosen. To ensure that the mail reached the targeted participants, the address was checked for its completeness in terms of street and number, city, and zip code. Those having incomplete address were replaced.

The techniques used to enhance response rate were attentively considered. They include providing an introduction and informational letters that were printed on official letter head, sending the questionnaire with an official pre-paid envelope, and providing stamped pre-addressed return envelope. Considering costs that might be different according to the location of the participant, an Indonesian stamp with higher value than estimated cost was applied to reduce the possibility of a participant paying additional costs for sending their response back. Sending the questionnaires was delayed, because it needed time to buy Indonesian stamps and send them to Australia. A contact in Indonesia helped in buying the stamps and sending them to Australia.

During preparation of the mail survey, the Qualtrics link was left open in order to give a possibility for new responses to arrive, since the participants might not have a chance yet to respond. Continuous checking of the email survey was conducted regularly while waiting for the stamps to arrive from Indonesia. Two more responses arrived from the email after nearly a month and this resulted in five responses in total. However, one response was incomplete and thus only one could be used. This resulted in insignificant additional response. Even though the email survey link was kept open for another month, no other responses arrived. As the response rate was still significantly low, the decision to switch to mail survey was thus considered valid.

Upon arrival of the Indonesian stamps, the questionnaire, introduction letter, information letter, and pre-paid return envelope were sent to the intended participants. Along with the questionnaire, questions identifying if the participant had received the email survey and reasons they did not respond to it were asked. This was to identify cause of a low response rate in the email survey. In case the participant had received the email questionnaire, they could choose to give the response either via email or mail.

Estimating time for the mail to reach the participants and time needed to respond and return the questionnaire, the expected time to receive the questionnaire back was set. However, no questionnaires were returned after the expected time. Two additional responses were received from the email survey. These might have been from the par-

ticipants who preferred to give a response through email rather than mail. Unfortunately, both responses were incomplete.

Even though Ray and Still (1987) concluded that the use of techniques to enhance a response rate is not only unnecessary, but also counter-productive, an urgent step is still needed to be taken, since no responses from the mail survey arrived. Nevertheless, there was no possible way to detect if the questionnaires have reached the intended participants. No returning ones might indicate they arrived at the addresses. Sending reminding letters was not effective, because it ended up with the same way as the questionnaires. This suggests that techniques or methods other than the response rate enhancement techniques might need to be applied. The choice was on selecting other method of survey, i.e. knocking the door survey.

Survey by knocking the door

Survey by knocking the door might be highly effective in getting the participants as it can reach the participants at their premises. It, however, has limitations. It was very costly and time consuming to address participants in many areas in Indonesia. In other words, it would only be effective to target participants in limited area. The survey thus targeted only on specific areas, i.e. province in which the majority firms in the list were located. Two provinces were identified.

During preparation for knocking the door survey, four responses from the mail survey arrived. One of them was an empty envelope and only one provided reason for not responding to the email survey, i.e. they did not receive it. It, however, might be too early to say that one reason of not receiving the email could be one possible explanation for the low response rate in email survey. The total response of mail survey was thus only three of 300 or 1 percent. Knocking the door survey might indeed be a more effective way to raise the response rate.

Local field workers were used in distributing the questionnaires. As local people, they knew the language, the customs, and the conditions of the area. Thus, they were able to communicate well with the participants. Training was conducted for them to ensure validity in distributing the questionnaires. In the training, the field workers were given information about the purpose of the study, ethical procedures, criteria for selecting participants, and confidentiality. They also were trained in understanding each question in the questionnaire, finding participants in the assigned location, appropriately approaching participants, checking completeness of the questionnaire, and taking necessary action if incomplete questionnaire occurred. With the given information and knowledge, field workers could expectedly contribute in enhancing response rate.

Each field worker had responsibility in covering a particular location that had been identified in prior. Each field worker was provided with a list of participants containing name, address, and contact number of the contact person in each location; an information letter introducing the purpose of the study; an identification letter for the field worker printed in a head letter paper; the questionnaires; small souvenirs for each participant; and costs for travelling to the participants' location. Small souvenir was used as material incentive to improve the response rate, as it can be a means of making participants feel obliged to respond (Kanuk & Berenson, 1975; O'Rourke, 1999; Paxson, 1995).

During the process of distributing questionnaire, continuous communication with the field workers was conducted to help them in finding solutions for the problems they might encounter in the field, such as difficulty in finding participants' address and in dealing with unwillingness to participate. To anticipate any difficulties in reaching participants, the field workers were given longer time than the estimated time so they could reach the number of participants assigned to them.

The longest time for collecting the data from 300 participants was one month. Difficulties in finding participants in the intended address resulted in 92.7 percent response rate, which was considerably very high. This indicated that the method by knocking the door was the effective way. Until this survey was finished, no other responses were coming from both email and mail surveys. Table 1 summarizes the methods and the response rate.

Table 1. Survey methods and the response rate

Method	Enhancement techniques	Number of participants	Length of time & number of responses	Response rate
Email survey – Qualtrics	Informational letter, instruction to completing the questionnaire, assurance for anonymity, date line, reminder letter	300	2 months Responses: complete = 4 incomplete = 3	1.3%
Mail survey	Introduction and informational letters printed on official letter head, official pre-paid envelope, stamped pre-addressed return envelope	300	1 month Responses: complete = 3 empty envelope = 1	1%
Survey by knocking the door	Local field workers, training (on the purpose of the study, ethical procedures, criteria for selecting participants, confidentiality, understanding each question in the questionnaire, tactics to find participants, tips to approach participants, check completeness of the questionnaire, and necessary actions for incomplete questionnaire), communication with field workers	300	1 month Responses: complete = 278 unfound address = 22	92.7%

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The empirical case shows that response-rate enhancement techniques applied in the study were ineffective in leveraging the response rate. This contradicts to Snowball (2010) who experienced increase in response rate after applying each reminder (postal reminder and telephone reminder). It indicates that the same technique may have different effect on the participants according to the location.

Participant's willingness to respond is the key for achieving high response rate. Even though the participants had received the questionnaire – as indicated by succesfull sent notification from the email survey and no returning mails from the mail survey – they might be reluctant to respond and this resulted in low response rate. An empty envelop sent by a participant also indicates low willingness to participate.

It can be learnt that to be effective, response rate enhancement techniques must be able to 'touch' willingness of the participants to response. Guarantee of anonimity or any authoritative enforcements such as using head letter paper or mentioning the supporting organization do not effectively deal with willingness of the participants, because the techniques still speak for the interest of the researcher rather than of the participants. The same also applies for any forms of reminder, such as reminding cards, reminding letters, and telephone calls. Understanding motives for participation can be an approach to touch willingness of the participants. Bosnjak and Batinic (2000) outlined the motives can be material incentives, survey related reasons (i.e. curiosity of the participant if their interest in the subject would be important), personal reasons (i.e. participant wants to know their opinions' position compared to the others), and altruistic reasons (i.e. willingness to make contribution to the research).

Willingness to participate relates to perceived benefits of the research for the participants. Participants might be reluctant to participate, because they may find no benefits of the research for themselves or for their firms. There are possibly no direct benefits for participants, since a research is conducted based on the interest of the researcher. It is a challenge for researcher to offer perceived benefits of the research to their prospective participants. If there is no direct benefit, then indirect benefits of the research can be offered. Material incentives such as souvenir, monetary reward, or voucher can be viewed as indirect benefits. Participants may be interested in participating in the survey for getting the incentive. Similar to Kanuk and Berenson (1975), O'Rourke (1999), and Paxson (1995) who stated that material incentives can be a means of making participants feel obliged to respond, Bosnjak and Batinic (2000) also found that material incentive is the motive for participation.

Survey by knocking the door can be the most effective way to enhance response rate, since direct contact between the researcher (or their representative, such as field worker) and the participant can create higher obligation on the participant to give their response. Direct contact is suitable within the context of Indonesia in which people prefer to have personal contact or face-to-face with others. Generally, Indonesians welcome anyone who come to their house and treat them well as their guests. Providing souvenir is viewed by Indonesians as having concern on them. They are very appreciate this. This result supports Childlow et al. (2015) who stated that culture possibly has influence on the effectiveness of the survey method. Even though survey by knocking the door can give high bounding relationship between the participant and the researcher that, in turn, can increase motive to participate, its application needs to consider acceptance of 'foreigner' (the researcher) in a person's house according to a culture context. In the case in which a culture does not allow foreigner to come or enter their premises, application of the method will be less effective.

Telephone call which is perceived as the most effective technique may not be as effective as knocking the door, since it can create direct contact only during the call and it depends on the participant to follow up by filling out the questionnaire or disregard the call. In other words, telephone call gives less bounding relationship between the participant and the researcher.

Survey by knocking the door does not yet gain its popularity and very few IB researchers apply it. This type of survey may be considered as challenging in IB research. Compared to mail survey that can be managed from distance, knocking the door survey requires personal presence to the participants. Knowledge on local culture and local infrastructure is a must in order to connect with the participants well.

Local helps and use of local field workers for collecting data can be an alternative way for the success of data collection. Local people know local culture well. It is, however, imperative to provide training for the field workers prior to the data collection. The training aims to immerse the field workers to the research so that they know the purpose and the nature of the research, contributions to the success of the data collection process. This way can possibly increase the validity of the collected data.

Even though it may be considered as costly and limited number of participants that can be covered, it is relatively efficient based on the effectiveness it can provide for very high response rate. Based on this effectiveness, knocking the door survey can be an alternative for data collection method in IB research if response rate is the consideration. It can reduce significantly non-response error and can possibly reach 100 percent response rate.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank and appreciation to the Rectorate of Soegijapranata Catholic University (SCU) who provided the operational fund for the research; the students of Faculty of Economics and Business, SCU who have helped in distributing questionnaires and being perseverence in finding the respondents; Bulan who helped in buying Indonesian stamps and and sending them to Australia; Rowena and Janice who shared their opinions and advices on overcoming the difficulties in low response rate.

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