Achieving high response rates in business surveys: Communication practices and field monitoring
Ger Snijkers (Statistics Netherlands)

Abstract
A question that is often raised in business survey is: how do we get good response rates at low costs? And how do we monitor the response to make sure that response targets are met? Among other components in the survey design (e.g. questionnaire design), these questions can be dealt with by means of communication and the usage of adequate process indicators. This includes e.g. contacting businesses in the pre-field stage to inform them about an upcoming survey, or informing them about changes in a survey; in the field stage it concerns the timing of dispatching questionnaires and reminding; and in the post-field it includes re-contacting businesses e.g. in an enforcement procedure or for reasons of data-validation.

Descriptive overviews of these practices are quite rare. This inquiry aims to study the business survey communication practices across Europe and other statistical agencies worldwide, and their effectiveness. During the workshop the following issues can be discussed:

- What practices are applied to get response, and in what order?
- What indicators are used to monitor the response, from a management perspective: are response targets achieved, at what costs?

As to the practices to get response, the following issues are investigated:

- What arguments and measures are used to get survey participation, e.g. the fact that the survey is mandatory, or the usage of incentives? Is feedback provided to business respondents and are statistical outputs used in the business survey communication strategy to get survey participation?
- In what ways are businesses supported, e.g. by use of a helpdesk, or a website (with background information on the survey and FAQs).
- How are businesses re-contacted in the post-field stage (e.g. for data validation).

See the background information on the next page to illustrate this.

We envision an interactive set-up of a session on this topic, involving active participation of all participants. Prior to the Workshop, participants may be asked to collect information on these practices.

Background
To set-up an effective business survey communication strategy, the strategy needs to take into account both the business context as well as the NSI context (see e.g. Snijkers et al., 2013).
As Lynn and Sala state (2004) with regard to a mixed-mode business survey (involving a paper questionnaire in stage 1 and telephone follow-ups in stage 2): “To achieve a good response rate, considerable effort and a flexible approach were required. It is necessary to make contact with the organisation, to overcome gatekeepers (usually receptionists or secretaries), to make contact with respondents, to persuade them to cooperate, and to encourage and allow them to retrieve information that may be held by other persons within the organisation.” They describe in detail the applied communication measures, the results of each measure (in terms of response rates), as well as costs. More examples include Jones et al. (2008) and Ramirez & McCarthy (2007): Jones et al. describe the survey communication practices at UK ONS, and Ramirez & McCarthy (2007) provide an overview of practices used by statistical agencies in the US (based on IGEN, 1998).

Snijkers & Jones (2013) provide an overview of currently applied practices of communication methods, but they conclude that more should be known about the effectiveness of these practices in terms of resulting response rates and costs. To monitor the effectiveness, they list a number of process indicators. Among other things this list includes (per survey):

- Number of advance letters, reminder letters, phone calls, etc. used at what moment in time (on the survey timeline),
- Total number of communication actions relative to the net sample (number of eligible units)
- Response (or return) rate for each action, taking the relevance of some units into account.
- The costs of all communication actions to get response, in total and per communication measure,
- The costs per responding unit, per communication measure,
- The number of actions needed per responding unit.

To illustrate this, Lynn & Sala (2004) conclude that many actions are needed to obtain an acceptable final response rate of 71.5% (181 businesses). In total 686 actions were needed to obtain this result, with 595 letters in stage 1 (initial mail-out stage) and 91 businesses contacted by phone in stage 2 (reminding). On average, this yields 4.6 mail contact attempts per responding business (129 businesses), at a cost per respondent of 5.56 euros on average (with a total cost of 717 euros). Phone follow-ups in stage 2 contributed to almost 30%, making this stage vital in the communication strategy. In this stage, a total of 553 calls were made to 91 employers, yielding an average number of attempts of 10.6 per responding business. The distribution of call attempts was skewed: two thirds of the sample (64%) required at least four telephone calls and one third (33%) required at least seven calls. The maximum number of attempts was 30. The average cost per respondent in the telephone stage was 60.62 euros (total 3152 euros). Although the phone stage was vital, it was at a high cost; about 2.3 times more attempts per respondent were needed at 11 times higher cost rate than for stage 1.

References


