

Survey communication in business surveys: optimising the efficiency of web survey response

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Abstract

At Statistics Netherlands (SN) a project was started to optimise response for both social and business surveys. In particular, this project is aimed at increasing web response rates, and improving the efficiency, quality, and costs of the data collection process. Unit response rates for most of the web business surveys are between 70 and 95%, while for social surveys response rates are below 50%. In this presentation, we will provide a short overview of measures taken. After that, we focus on business surveys.

Achieving the final unit response rates for business surveys takes a lot of effort, including many communication actions like pre-due date reminders, reminders, and enforcement. To improve the efficiency of the business survey data collection process a plan was developed aimed at improving the communication with businesses in order to get timely, accurate and complete responses. This approach is based on Deming’s plan-do-check-act cycle, as well as considering all communication actions and interventions to be part of a coherent strategy.

The measures in this plan are based on four principles:

- Invest in good relationships with the businesses responsible for providing information. A major difference with social surveys is that business respondents are multi-surveyed. Research shows that response behaviour in the past is a very good predictor for response behaviour in the future.
- Reward good behaviour (timely survey participation, and providing accurate and complete data) and discourage unwanted behaviour (non-response or late response). Hence behaviour is most adjustable in an early stage, it’s important to get commitment from the start.
- Tie in with the existing procedures in the businesses: use tailoring and target group differentiation to optimize communication.
- Adapt the plan-do-check-act cycle in which all of the above is tied together for individual surveys, including the development of good designs, effective communication with surveyed

businesses, monitoring the response processes based on key performance indicators, costs, evaluation and adaptation of the designs.

The plan includes the improvement of our website, our letters, our incentives, our monitoring and our enforcement strategies. These components of a new strategy will be established in stages.

Apart from what is known from international studies and experiences, input for this plan came from the redesign of the Survey on International Trade in Goods. This survey results in about 50% of the total response burden caused by Statistics Netherlands. The redesign included two major differences as compared to the previous design: 1. The introduction of a specially designed web-based questionnaire and 2. The reduction of reporting frequency from monthly to yearly for small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs) to report import and export data. During the redesign we involved businesses and branch organisations, we analysed the course of response rates of previous years and used best practices within and outside SN. Both changes were aimed at reducing response burden for SMEs as well as large companies. To inform the businesses in a proper way, we developed a communication strategy according to the 7-step approach as discussed by Snijkers and Jones (2013). Activities were planned during pre-field, field and post-field phases.

Analyses of previous' years response rates have shown that SMEs responded poorly. To improve response rates, it was decided to pay extra attention to this group of businesses, resulting in a new design and a new communication strategy. To establish the efficiency of these actions response progression was measured, generating new insights to improve future designs.

In the presentation, we will discuss the developments for business web survey response improvement, including a brief overview of communication measures for social surveys. We will illustrate this with the results from response analysis for the survey on International Trade in Goods.

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