
What accompanies a postal questionnaire and why does it matter?

The letter accompanying a postal questionnaire is usually the first and only point of contact between the researchers and the recipient. These letters are vital to increasing response rates and this paper will outline the key strategies for producing a perfect letter based on the literature and my experience gained from several large studies. Two systematic reviews focus on increasing response rates to postal questionnaires but most of the studies have come from social or market research (Edwards et al. 2002; Fox et al. 1988). Questionnaire design and layout has received most attention and was summarised recently (Boynton 2004). Monetary incentives can successfully increase response rates but caution is needed as the level of incentive may be deemed coercive for medical and epidemiological research by ethics committees (Edwards et al. 2002; Fox et al. 1988).

Letter layout

Dillman (2000) describes a frequently cited method for increasing the response rates for postal questionnaires which I have modified for use. The letter should be one page in length with a maximum of five paragraphs. The content should be clear, precise and simple without being patronising and printed in a reasonable font size. Each paragraph should preferably start with the most important sentence and key phrases can be highlighted in bold.

Letter content

The letter should be personalised (Dillman 2000) and in one mailing I used “Ms” instead of “Mrs” or “Miss” which resulted in several telephone calls to correct the title and may have deterred others from completing the questionnaire. The first paragraph should explain why the study is important and why the recipient’s answers are vital to the research (Dillman 2000). Next is a promise of confidentiality and an explanation of any study identification numbers used in the letter

or questionnaire. A telephone number (preferably a “free-phone” number) should always be provided for queries. Telephone enquiries should be documented as they can be used to modify the letter if the same queries occur regularly. The letter concludes with a thank you from the researchers for contributing to the study. An offer to communicate the results of the research if requested is also recommended (Dillman 2000) but a recent update of one of the systematic reviews indicates weak evidence for this strategy in increasing response rates (OR for giving research findings 0.92, 95% CI 0.75, 1.11) (Edwards & Cooper 2004).

The letter should be signed (usually a scanned signature) by the member of the research team most recognised and respected by the recipient such as a local family doctor or hospital consultant. Weak evidence from one systematic review supported this strategy in increasing response rates (odds ratio OR for more senior or well-known person vs less 1.13, 95% CI 0.95, 1.35) (Edwards et al. 2002). A study letterhead and possibly a logo with the research sponsors placed in a footer in small print are also useful in confirming to the recipient that the questionnaire is a valid and important document. A university as the origin of the letter vs. another organisation increased response rates in both systematic reviews (OR for university origin 1.31, 95% CI 1.11, 1.54) (Edwards et al. 2002; Fox et al. 1988). The sponsor’s approval should always be obtained prior to use of a logo in study correspondence.

Envelope and delivery methods

White envelopes were recommended by Dillman (2000) to distinguish questionnaires from “junk” mail but there was weak evidence that brown envelopes were more successful in raising response rates (OR brown vs white 1.52, 95% CI 0.67-3.44) based on two studies (Edwards et al. 2002). I always use the cheaper brown envelopes franked or printed with the originating organisation to potentially distinguish

them from “junk” mail. First class mailing as recommended by Dillman (2000) slightly increased the response rate (OR first class vs other 1.12, 95% CI 1.02, 1.23) which has to be balanced against the additional costs. There was very little difference between postage methods (OR for stamped vs franked mail 0.95, 95% CI 0.88, 1.03) or the type of stamps (OR commemorative vs ordinary OR 0.92, 95% CI 0.78, 1.09) (Edwards et al. 2002; Fox et al. 1988). There was strong evidence for “recorded” delivery methods (the postal service obtain a signature upon delivery) increasing response rates (OR for recorded delivery vs standard: 2.21, 95% CI 1.51, 3.25) (Edwards et al. 2002). However, in the UK recorded delivery is about four times more expensive and labour intensive as each address requires the completion of a postal form. I use recorded delivery for follow-up when other methods have failed as it frequently only identifies that an individual is no longer resident at an address rather than resulting in the completion of the questionnaire.

Return of the questionnaire

Stamped addressed, franked or business-reply envelopes saves the respondents time and reduces incorrectly addressed mail with stamped addressed envelopes increasing response rates more than franked or business reply envelopes (OR for stamped envelopes 1.26, 95% CI 1.13, 1.41) (Edwards et al. 2002; Fox et al. 1988). Business-reply envelopes do have additional advantages as they are more efficient to prepare, postage costs are only incurred if an envelope is returned and postage stamps are sometimes removed resulting in excess postage costs on the return of the questionnaire.

Prenotification and follow-up

Prenotification by letter before the questionnaire is posted can increase response rates but generates additional workload so piloting this strategy would be advisable for a large study (OR for prenotification 1.54, 95% CI 1.24, 1.92) (Edwards et al. 2002; Fox et al. 1988). Most studies use postcards, reminder letters, or letters with a questionnaire which are strongly endorsed by Dillman (2000) to achieve the highest response rates. Follow-up increased response rates by over 40% in one systematic review (OR 1.44, 95% CI 1.22, 1.70) (Edwards et al. 2002). I am involved in a study collecting seven day diet diaries from men in the community aged 50–69 years nested within a randomised trial of treatments for clinically localised prostate cancer. The initial response rate was 40% with all the diaries fully completed but the addition of a reminder letter which encouraged participants to return the diary even it was incomplete raised the response rate to 60%.

Conclusions

The letter accompanying a postal questionnaire can undoubtedly increase response rates against a background of declining rates in health-related research across Europe. The correct layout and content of the letter can enhance response rates by up to 20% in conjunction with attention to the envelope, delivery methods and follow-up.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr S. Oliver, University of York for permission to use unpublished data. The Department of Social Medicine of the University of Bristol is the lead centre of the MRC Health Services Research Collaboration.

Table 1 Checklist for preparing the letter accompanying a postal questionnaire, the delivery methods and follow-up

Check	Items
	One page letter 5 paragraphs maximum, starting with the most important sentence Clear font with bold text used sparingly Contents easily comprehended but not patronising Personalise letter, not “Dear Sir/Madam” or “Ms” if possible State importance of the research question in the 1st paragraph Emphasise the value of respondents’ answers to the study in the 1st paragraph Explanation of study number Promise of confidentiality of results Telephone number for queries Consider communication of results if requested to respondents Well known research team member to sign letter with scanned signature University letterhead and/or logo on the letter but obtain permission for logo Brown or white envelope marked with study name or organisation Recorded delivery has highest response rates but cumbersome and expensive First class postage slightly increases response rates but balance extra cost Stamped return envelopes better than business reply or franked envelopes Evaluate benefits of prenotification before the questionnaire Follow-up by postcard, and/or letter and questionnaire

What accompanies a postal questionnaire and why does it matter?

References

Boynton PM (2004). Administering, analysing and reporting your questionnaire. *BMJ* 328: 1372–5.

Dillman DA (2000). Mail and internet surveys: the tailored design method. 2nd ed. New York: Wiley.

Edwards P, Cooper R (2004). Previous trials of dissemination were identified. *JECH* 58: 354–5.

Edwards P, Roberts I, Clarke M, DiGiuseppe C, Pratap S, Wentz R (2002). Increasing response rates to postal questionnaires: systematic review. *BMJ* 324: 1183–91.

Fox RJ, Crask MR, Kim J (1988). Mail survey response rate: a meta-analysis of selected techniques for inducing response. *Public Opinion Quart* 52: 467–91.

Address for correspondence

J. Athene Lane, PhD
Department of Social Medicine
University of Bristol
Canyng Hall
Whiteladies Road
Bristol BS8 2PR
UK
Tel.: +44 117 9287335
Fax: +44 117 9297292
e-mail: athene.lane@bristol.ac.uk



To access this journal online:
<http://www.birkhauser.ch>
