

Effectiveness of ingratiation tactics in a cover letter on mail questionnaire response

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An attempt was made to study ingratiation tactics in a quasifield setting. Four hundred residents of Akron, Ohio, were solicited via mail to complete a questionnaire. The amount of help (effort) requested was either small (one-page questionnaire) or large (seven-page questionnaire). The primary variables of interest were the ingratiation tactics used in the cover letter to encourage completion of the questionnaire. The letter included or did not include adjectives flattering the respondent, and it included or did not include adjectives flattering the solicitor. Thus the ingratiation tactics in the cover letters constituted a 2 by 2 factorial design within both low- and high-effort requests for help. The proportion of returns in each condition served as the dependent variable. The results indicated no differences in return rate due to ingratiation tactics in the low-effort condition. However, solicitor vs respondent ingratiation tactics interacted strongly to determine return rate in the high-effort condition. Return rates were lower when either both tactics (double ingratiation) or neither (standard polite letter) were used. Subsidiary data concerning time required to complete the questionnaire suggested an explanation in terms of norms matching the amount of flattery with the amount of help requested.

Many studies have been reported which are concerned with increasing the return rate in mail questionnaire surveys. The manipulated variables have been pragmatic, including such things as first vs third class mailing, color of the questionnaire, and type of return postage (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963); length of questionnaire and degree of respondent anonymity (Mason, Dressel, & Bain, 1961); and monetary incentives for response (Kephart & Bressler, 1958). Such studies have been directed toward solving the important methodological problem of nonreturn bias in large survey studies. However, return rate per se may be an interesting and unobtrusive conceptual variable (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1966) when theoretically relevant independent variables are manipulated in the mail survey.

The present study was concerned with the latter possibility. In a typical mail survey study, the solicitor wants something from the respondent (e.g., completion of a rating form). Therefore, the solicitor is dependent upon the respondent. In addition, the solicitor may make various types of appeals, usually in a cover letter, to ensure compliance of the respondent. The elements of this social situation are conducive to various types of ingratiation attempts (Jones, 1964) by the solicitor to increase return rate of the respondents. In the present study, different types of ingratiation attempts were made in a solicitation cover letter requesting completion of a questionnaire, and return rate served as the major dependent variable. The

study was viewed as an attempt to extend Jones's (1964) work on ingratiation in the laboratory to a quasifield setting.

Two classes of ingratiation tactics seemed appropriate for manipulation in a cover letter: other enhancement (flattery), and self-presentation of the solicitor (Jones, 1964, p. 24). In a request for help, one may insert descriptive adjectives and phrases which flatter the respondent, appealing to his goodness, kindness, generosity, etc. One may also insert terms referring to the solicitor, expressing his sincerity, need for help, gratitude, etc. These two tactics may be called respondent ingratiation and solicitor ingratiation, respectively.

Both tactics were used in four versions of a cover letter. The four versions constituted a 2 by 2 factorial design which included all possible combinations of ingratiation and no ingratiation with the two tactics. A third variable, length of questionnaire, was also manipulated. Length was conceptualized in terms of effort required of the respondent. Ingratiation tactics might have differential effects on response only within reasonable limits of the amount of help requested. If the respondents were asked to complete a 500-page questionnaire, perception of the magnitude of the task would probably override any effects of variation in the cover letter. The reverse argument might also apply to a very short questionnaire. Thus, length of the questionnaire could interact with variation in ingratiation tactics in determining return rate.

METHOD Cover Letter

The cover letter is reproduced below. The words or phrases that are italicized denote solicitor ingratiation terms. The words or phrases in parentheses denote respondent ingratiation terms. One version of the letter omitted both types of expression, creating what was judged to be a standard polite letter. A second version included both types of terms (both solicitor and respondent ingratiation). A third version included the terms referring to the respondent but omitted terms referring to the solicitor (respondent ingratiation). The fourth version included the terms referring to the solicitor but omitted terms referring to the respondent (solicitor ingratiation).

Dear Friend:

We are *earnestly* asking for your (generous) help in completing two questionnaires which are enclosed. You are one of a randomly selected sample of people from the Akron area which we are asking to complete the questionnaires. We realize that this request for your (kind) help is something of an imposition *on our part*. However, we *sincerely* hope that you will take the time to complete the questionnaires and return them. The questionnaires are for research purposes, and we *genuinely* feel that the final results will be well worth your (generous) efforts. Therefore, we *respectfully* ask your (gracious) support in this endeavor.

The first questionnaire (Form A) is a background information form concerning you and your family. The second one (Form B) is an inventory of your feelings, preferences, and ideas. The inventory deals with several personal issues that are of considerable importance to large segments of the population. The specific instructions for completing Form A are given at the top of the form. The instructions and an answer sheet for Form B are enclosed on separate pages. It is not necessary to record your name on the answer sheet.

We will be *extremely* grateful for your (unselfish) cooperation. Your (generous) assistance will help promote the advance of the behavioral sciences. So, we *humbly* ask you to please complete the questionnaires and return them in the stamped, self-addressed envelope.

We *sincerely* thank you for your (very kind) assistance.

Sincerely,

Committee for the Study of
Population Behavior Patterns

Table 1
Proportions of Questionnaire Returns in the Eight Conditions

| Letter Conditions | | Length of Questionnaire (Effort) | |
|-------------------|---------------|----------------------------------|---------|
| Solicitor | Respondent | 1 Page | 7 Pages |
| Ingratiate | Ingratiate | .23 | .08 |
| Ingratiate | No Ingratiate | .18 | .24 |
| No Ingratiate | Ingratiate | .24 | .29 |
| No Ingratiate | No Ingratiate | .28 | .10 |
| Average | | .23 | .18 |

Chi-Square Analyses of Return Rates
Source

| Source | Chi Square |
|---|------------|
| Length of Questionnaire (A) | 1.46 |
| Ingratiation of Solicitor (B) | 1.01 |
| Ingratiation of Respondent (C) | .02 |
| Length by Solicitor (A by B) | .02 |
| Length by Respondent (A by C) | .00 |
| Solicitor by Respondent (B by C) | 2.56 |
| Length by Solicitor by Respondent (A by B by C) | 6.31* |

* $p < .01$

Note—Each chi square has 1 df. Yates' correction was used for each analysis.

SUBJECTS AND PROCEDURE

A stratified random sample of 400 names was selected from the Akron, Ohio, city directory (Haines & Co., 1970). Packets were prepared and mailed in large manila envelopes which included: (1) one version of the cover letter printed on paper with an official Kent State University letterhead, (2) a self-addressed, return business envelope with a first-class permit number, (3) Form A, a one-page questionnaire asking for marital status, age, sex, number of children, occupation, ownership of home, educational level, birth order, ratings of importance of the project, and length of time to complete the questionnaires, (4) the main questionnaire, which was either one page (24 items) or seven pages (182 items) in length. The questionnaire was labeled Form B. It was in fact the repression-sensitization personality scale developed by Byrne (1964). The same first page was used for both the one-page and seven-page versions. All items were true-false in format, and an IBM answer sheet was included for the respondent's use.

Half of the sample was mailed the seven-page version and the other half the one-page version of the repression-sensitization questionnaire. Length of the questionnaire was orthogonal to type of cover letter so that the full design was a 2 by 2 by 2. Fifty members of the sample were assigned randomly to each of the eight experimental conditions. Eleven of the packets were returned undelivered, so that the final sample included 389 members. A code number on the return envelope indicated the condition that the respondent was in.

RESULTS

The proportions of respondents

returning the completed questionnaires are shown in the top panel of Table 1 for each of the experimental conditions. The proportions for each of the seven orthogonal effects were analyzed by chi square, and a summary of these analyses is shown in the bottom panel of Table 1.

Somewhat surprisingly, the return rate for the low-effort condition (.23) was not significantly greater than the return rate for the high-effort condition (.18). However, the high-effort respondents indicated that it took longer (36.6 min) to complete the questionnaire than it took the low-effort respondents (8.2 min). This difference was significant ($F = 159.16$, $df = 1/72$, $p < .0001$). Thus, the amount of effort required to complete the questionnaire seemed to be independent of the decision to return or not return it.

The chi-square analyses shown in Table 1 indicate that the triple interaction was the only significant effect. Inspection of the return proportions indicates that the locus of this effect was a strong two-way interaction of the two ingratiation factors in the high-effort condition, but there was no similar interaction in the low-effort condition. The chi square for Solicitor by Respondent

Ingratiation (B by C) was 8.90 ($p < .01$) in the high-effort condition but less than 1.0 in the low-effort condition.

These results indicate that within the high-effort condition, the ingratiation tactics used in the cover letter had a strong impact on return rates. Both the standard polite and double ingratiation letters yielded low return rates of .10 and .08, respectively. However, when ingratiation terms were included which applied either to the solicitor or to the respondent, the return rates more than doubled to .24 and .29, respectively.

Analyses of the background information the respondents provided on the one-page Form A yielded some interesting differences on ratings of how worthwhile the respondent thought the research was and on time required to complete the questionnaires. The mean ratings for each of these measures are shown in Table 2. Besides the main effect of effort for the time measure, there were also two significant interactions, the B by C and A by B by C. The interesting aspect of the triple interaction was the relationship of time to return rate. First there were no time differences among the low-effort conditions. However, in the high-effort conditions, the standard polite condition required 42.5 min to complete the questionnaire and the double ingratiation condition also required 42.5 min, but the solicitor-only and respondent-only conditions required 30.1 and 31.1 min, respectively. This time pattern was inverted relative to the return rate pattern in the high-effort conditions shown in Table 1. Apparently, the standard polite letter and the double ingratiation letter made completing the questionnaire more difficult, required more time, and resulted in lower return rates.

The importance ratings yielded four significant effects (B, A by B, A by C, B by C). The project was judged more important when the solicitor ingratiated than when he did not ($F = 5.72$, $p < .02$). Both the A by B and A by C effects were due to the fact that importance ratings were higher in the high-effort/ingratiation cell than in any of the other three

Table 2
Mean Rating of Importance and Completion Time

| Letter Conditions | | Time | | Importance | |
|-------------------|---------------|--------|---------|------------|---------|
| Solicitor | Respondent | 1 Page | 7 Pages | 1 Page | 7 Pages |
| Ingratiate | Ingratiate | 8.8 | 42.5 | 4.3 | 7.0 |
| Ingratiate | No Ingratiate | 7.3 | 30.1 | 3.4 | 3.6 |
| No Ingratiate | Ingratiate | 7.8 | 31.1 | 3.9 | 4.3 |
| No Ingratiate | No Ingratiate | 8.8 | 42.5 | 5.1 | 3.9 |

cells. The B by C effect was due to a higher importance rating in the double ingratiation cell than in the other three cells.

DISCUSSION

The results indicated that ingratiation tactics in a cover letter had little effect on return rate when the task required minimal effort, as in the one-page questionnaire. However, such tactics had a powerful effect when the effort required was substantial, as in the seven-page questionnaire. In this case, the results indicated that either the solicitor's self-flattery or the flattery of the respondent were substitutable in enhancing return rate.

Why, in the high-effort condition, solicitor flattery or respondent flattery enhanced return rate, while both kinds of flattery combined or no flattery at all depressed it, poses an interesting interpretative question. One clue may lie in the reported times required to complete the questionnaires. The relatively long times (in excess of 40 min) reported in the double ingratiation and standard polite conditions suggest that respondents found the task more difficult, and perhaps more irritating, than did respondents in the other two conditions. It is also possible that such irritation led to an exaggeration of time required rather than an increase

in actual time, perhaps as a way of expressing hostility.

It is suggested that in mail surveys there is a norm concerning how much cajoling and pleading the solicitor should do. It is further suggested that this implicit norm stipulates a positive relation between the amount of sacrifice asked of the respondent and the amount of pleading for his cooperation in the cover letter. It may well be that for the seven-page questionnaire the standard polite letter undershot the norm, while the double ingratiation letter overshot it, creating the appearance of excessive dependency of the solicitor on the respondent. Inferentially, the excessive completion times reported by those respondents in the double ingratiation and standard polite conditions who did return the questionnaires is evidence of the discomfort and difficulty created when the matching norm was violated. Presumably, the strength of the solicitation was just right in the solicitor ingratiation and respondent ingratiation conditions. It is interesting to note that the return rates for these two ingratiation conditions were actually somewhat higher in the high- than in the low-effort condition.

This interpretation is presented with considerable caution. It is post hoc and is, in addition, not supported by the importance ratings, which were

difficult to interpret. The study does demonstrate the feasibility of translating the laboratory concept of ingratiation into a field setting in a well-controlled way. Although the present study was concerned with ingratiation, there is no reason why hypotheses concerning persuasion could not be tested in a similar manner, using return rate as the index of effectiveness of various types of persuasive appeals.

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