

The effect of covering letter personalisation in mail surveys

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It is generally assumed that personalising mail survey covering letters increases the response to mail surveys. However, most of the studies that support this assumption were conducted in the 1970s, when personalisation was novel and relatively difficult to achieve. This paper reviews the evidence for the effect of personalisation on mail survey response and reports the results of a study of personalisation in a mail survey of the general public. The study found little or no effect of personalisation on response rate, response speed, item non-response, or social desirability bias. This suggests that personalisation may no longer be effective in mail surveys. Nevertheless, with the survey-processing technology now available it is often more difficult not to personalise survey correspondence than to personalise it. Thus, unless there is a good reason to avoid personalisation, survey researchers should use it. At worst, it will have no effect, but it might have a positive effect.

Introduction

Personalisation of mail survey covering letters may involve one or more of the following: including the respondent's name and address in the letter; using a salutation that includes the respondent's name (i.e. 'Dear ...' rather than 'Dear respondent' or 'Dear householder'); an individually typed letter; an original rather than a copied signature; a handwritten note in the covering letter.

There are two justifications for personalisation, both drawing on the theory of social exchange. The first argues that, if potential respondents recognise the extra effort required to personalise the researcher's correspondence with them, they will be more likely to respond because of the social obligation to reciprocate the expended effort (Dillman 1978). However, this seems a rather tenuous rationalisation since it assumes that respondents are aware of the trouble the researcher has taken to personalise the survey correspondence. Why this should be so is by no

means obvious; after all, as far as each respondent is concerned, only one letter has had to be personalised.

The second argument is that personalisation creates the impression that respondents are receiving the researcher's special attention and that their answers are singularly important. Thus personalisation reinforces respondents' self-image and, according to the theory of social exchange, making respondents feel more important should increase the likelihood of them responding to the survey request. While this argument seems more plausible than the first, on closer examination it is only slightly more convincing. If respondents understand anything at all about survey research, they will know they are only one of perhaps several thousand people contacted. Thus they or their answers are hardly unique.

Nevertheless, 'personalisation', transparent as it may be, could create a norm of reciprocity. The researcher has gone to the trouble of addressing the respondent individually – paid them the courtesy of taking the time to individualise their correspondence – and this may create a sense of obligation on the part of the respondent to repay this social courtesy with the reciprocal courtesy of responding to the survey. Alternatively, personalisation may simply make it more difficult to refuse a survey request by reducing the anonymity of this action.

This paper reviews the literature on personalisation of mail survey covering letters, then describes a study designed to re-examine the effect of cover letter personalisation on the response to a mail survey of the general public. The study compares the 'standard' approach used in mail surveys conducted by the Department of Marketing, Massey University, with Dillman's 'personalised' approach.

Covering letter personalisation

Whatever the explanation for the effect of personalisation, the general assumption has been that personalising survey covering letters should enhance the response to a mail survey. But most reviews of personalisation studies report that the effect of personalisation in survey covering letters is varied and sometimes contradictory. One of the reasons for this ambiguity is the fact that the reviews have simply taken the results at face value and have not considered the different populations involved, the topic concerned or the expected direction of the effect for different populations. Furthermore, the effect of the passage of time on the impact of personalisation has rarely been considered; studies conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, when personalisation was difficult to implement and to some

extent 'novel', are given the same weight as studies in the 1980s and the 1990s when personalisation was much easier to achieve and much less novel.

To examine properly the effect of personalisation on mail survey response it is important to divide studies into those using samples of the general public and those directed at commercial populations, or 'elite' populations, such as doctors and lawyers. Within these categories the expected direction of the effect also needs to be considered. It is often assumed that personalisation is more important in 'industrial' mail surveys than in surveys of the general public because of the need to identify correctly the appropriate respondent in an organisation. It is also assumed that, if personalisation has an effect on response, it will be positive (because the correct person in the organisation has been identified). By contrast, in surveys of the general public it can be argued that the effect of personalisation may be positive or negative. The arguments for a positive effect have been elaborated above. The argument for a negative effect is that, where respondents desire anonymity, personalisation may decrease response rates because it emphasises the lack of such anonymity.

The effect of personalisation

Table 1 summarises studies on the personalisation of covering letters conducted since 1970. The summary does not include studies before 1970 because, for a technique like personalisation, results more than 30 years old have little relevance to current survey practice.

At least 15 studies of personalisation in surveys of the general public have been conducted since 1970. In eight studies personalisation increased survey response; in two studies there was no direct effect of personalisation on response, but there were positive interaction effects in combination with other response-inducing techniques; in one study there was no effect; and in four studies the effect of personalisation was either negative or mixed. However, two of these latter studies predicted a negative effect of personalisation on response, and one of the studies was actually a study of anonymity rather than of personalisation. Of the six studies of personalisation in 'industrial' populations since 1970, four reported a positive effect and two a negative effect.

On balance, it appears that personalising covering letters increases mail survey response rates. However, a number of studies used personalisation in only one mailing and had no follow-up procedures, whereas other studies used personalisation procedures in a number of mailings. Results of studies using no follow-ups are, in many cases, not comparable with

Table 1 The effect of personalised covering letters on mail survey response rates: a summary of the literature

Study	Population	Topic	Treatments tested	Effect of personalisation on response rate
Andreason (1970)	Lottery winners	Not mentioned	Mimeographed salutation 'Dear Lottery winner'. Hand-typed salutation 'Dear ...' Hand-typed salutation 'Dear ...' and handwritten postscript.	Decreased response by 3% to 4%. ¹
Kawash & Aleamoni (1971)	University faculty	Audiovisual instructional materials	Handwritten signature. Mimeographed facsimile signature.	Increased response by 1%.
Dillman & Frey (1974)	University faculty	University policies	Individually typed name, inside address, personal salutation, individually signed in blue ink. Pre-printed salutation, black copied signature.	Increased response by 8% and response speed marginally.
Carpenter (1974)	General public	Not mentioned	Computer address label, no inside name and address, non-personalised salutation 'Dear Arizonian', hand-signed signature. Manually typed name and address, printed signature in blue ink, personal salutation, windowed envelope. Typed letter and envelope including respondent name and address, personal salutation, hand signed. Dillman's Total Design Method.	Increased response by 1% to 7%.
Cox, Anderson & Fulcher (1974)	General public	Financial institutions	'Personalised' cover letter. } No specific details 'Non-personalised' cover letter.	Increased response by 8%.
Matteson (1974)	University academics	Academic literature	Hand-typed personal salutation, handwritten signature. Printed salutation 'Dear Colleague', facsimile signature.	Increased response by 10%.
Kerin (1974) and Kerin & Petersen (1977)	Department store credit applicants (all female)	Household products	Mimeographed cover letter. Printed letter, personal salutation, handwritten signature and postscript.	No effect on response rate but family income and wife's occupation biased by personalisation.

Note: 1. These differences were in the direction predicted by the author(s). (continued)

Table 1 The effect of personalised covering letters on mail survey response rates: a summary of the literature (continued)

Study	Population	Topic	Treatments tested	Effect of personalisation on response rate
Houston & Jefferson (1975)	New car buyers	Information sources for car buying	Individual name and address included on questionnaire, all references to anonymity removed from cover letter. No personal reference in questionnaire or cover letter. Confidentiality statement included in cover letter.	Decreased response by 16% and increased item omission. ^{1,2}
Kerin & Harvey (1976)	<i>Fortune 500</i> presidents	Product recall practices	Individually typed letter with president's name and address, personal salutation and handwritten signature. Mimeographed 'form' letter.	Increased response by 13%.
Forsythe (1977)	Business executives	Sources and uses of statistical information	Letter addressed by name. Letter addressed to the 'Chief Officer'.	Decreased response by 8% to 20%.
King & Wilson (1978)	Banking executives	Management practices	Cover letter individually typed, personal inside address and salutation, personally signed. Cover letter mimeographed, personal inside address and salutation, personally signed. Cover letter mimeographed, no inside address, salutation. 'Dear Mr President', copied signature.	Increased response by 11% and reduced number of incomplete questionnaires.
Labrecque (1978)	Boating marina customers	Customer satisfaction	Hand-addressed outside envelope, cover letter with handwritten salutation and signature. Envelope not hand addressed, cover letter without handwritten salutation or signature.	Decreased response by 1%, but not significantly.
Jobber & Sanderson (1985)	Marketing executives	Marketing information systems	Handwritten postscript. Typed postscript. No postscript.	Decreased response by 3% and 4%.

Notes: (continued)

1. These differences were in the direction predicted by the author(s).
2. Though the authors claimed to have tested personalisation the test treatment was actually a guarantee of anonymity.

Table 1 The effect of personalised covering letters on mail survey response rates: a summary of the literature (continued)

Study	Population	Topic	Treatments tested	Effect of personalisation on response rate
Worthen & Valcare (1985)	School teachers	Curriculum content	Hand-typed letter, personal salutation, handwritten signature. Mimeographed form letter, salutation 'Dear Teacher', facsimile signature.	Increased initial response by 7% and subsequent response by 9%.
Green & Stager (1986)	School teachers	Classroom testing and grading	Addressee's surname handwritten, letter hand-signed in blue ink. Typed and Xeroxed salutation 'Dear Educator', facsimile signature.	Salutation increased response by 7%, signature reduced response by 5%.
Dodd & Markwiese (1987)	University staff (all female)	Not mentioned	Hand-signed signature in blue ink. Photocopied facsimile signature.	Increased response by 21%.
De Leeuw & Hox (1988)	General public	Education and upbringing	Not personalised, no handwritten signature, third-class mail. Not personalised, reminder by first-class mail. Not personalised, reminder by certified mail. Personalised, reminder by certified mail (Dillman's TDM).	Increased by 10% when combined with certified reminder. Personalisation increased social desirability bias.
Martin, Duncan, Powers & Sawyer (1989)	University students	University attributes	'Dear occupant'. Personalised salutation.	Increased by 5% to 7% when combined with pre-notification.
Clark & Kaminski (1990)	Marketing practitioners	Journal readership	Personalised, handwritten cover letter. Form cover letter, salutation 'Dear AMA Colleague', facsimile signature.	Increased response by 2% to 20%.
Sutton & Zeits (1992)	Business and trade professionals	Energy rebate programme	Business name on survey materials only. Customers' personal names on all survey materials.	Increased response by 1% to 2% but not significantly. Interaction between personalisation and prior notification.
Taylor & Lynn (1996)	Panel of teenagers	Work, school and training experiences	Salutation 'Dear Stephen Taylor'. Salutation 'Dear Sample Member'.	Increased response by 1% and marginally increased response speed.
Dillman (2000)	General public	Not mentioned	Four unspecified personalisation tests.	Increased response by 5% to 11%.

those of studies using multiple follow-ups (Nederhof 1983). There were also large differences in the mode of personalisation employed; some of the studies had flawed research designs, others had small sample sizes and low response rates.

Furthermore, as Taylor and Lynn (1996) have pointed out, many of the experiments showing a positive effect of personalisation were carried out in the 1970s. Subsequent advances in technology have made it much easier to personalise letters, and personalised letters are now used in most forms of direct marketing or advertising. Thus, even if personalisation had an effect 30 years ago, it may not do so any longer, since it is not perceived as requiring any special effort on the part of the sender, or as being in some way 'special'.

Nevertheless, Dillman's personalisation strategy, applied not only in the initial mailing but in three subsequent follow-ups, seems to have been consistently successful, and he quotes four tests of personalising mailings on general public samples that resulted in response rate increases of between 5% and 11% (Dillman 2000, p. 158). Consequently, personalisation of survey correspondence appears to be worthy of further examination.

Dillman's personalisation strategy is based on the guiding principle that the tone and content of a mail survey covering letter should reflect the style used in a business letter to an acquaintance who is not known to the sender. The specific elements of personalisation proposed by Dillman are: specific date (e.g. 1 June 2000); the respondent's name and address; a personal salutation (e.g. 'Dear ...'); a real signature in contrasting ink (i.e. a 'pressed blue ball-point pen signature'); and letterhead rather than copied stationery (Dillman 2000, pp. 159–165). According to Dillman, applying these personalisation elements should produce a collective impact of between five and eight percentage points (Dillman 2000, p. 165).

Method: personalisation experiment

The vehicle for this research was the 2000 International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) survey on the environment, a mail survey of 2000 members of the New Zealand general public, conducted between August and November 2000. The sample was selected randomly from the New Zealand Electoral Roll, with proportional stratification by electorate. The questionnaire comprised 28 pages and included 143 questions, mostly concerned with environmental issues or demographics.

Table 2 Differences between the 'personalised' and 'non-personalised' letters

Feature	Personalised	Non-personalised
Respondent name and address	Mr David Smith 10 Fort Street Dunedin	None
Date	6 September 2000	September 2000
Salutation	Dear Mr Smith	None
Signature	Printed in blue ink	Photocopied in black

After three reminders (and a pre-notification letter), 1112 valid questionnaires had been returned, 54 respondents refused to take part in the survey, 41 had died or were otherwise ineligible, and 166 questionnaires were returned 'Gone/no address'. This represents a response rate of $[1112/(2000 - 207)] \times 100 = 62.0\%$.

Sample members were randomly assigned to one of two groups, and each group received either a 'personalised' or 'non-personalised' covering letter on a university letterhead. The four differences between the two letters are illustrated in Table 2. These differences between personalised and non-personalised letters were replicated in the pre-notification letter and the two reminder letters used in the survey.¹

The non-personalised control was the covering letter normally used in mail surveys conducted by the Department of Marketing at Massey University for the ISSP. The non-personalised nature of this letter was a product of times when the surveys were processed by hand and personalisation of large-scale mail surveys such as the ISSP was more difficult. The letter had no inside name and address, which meant that there was no need to match a particular letter with a particular questionnaire or outer envelope, and the signature was photocopied. The letter could have included a general salutation (e.g. 'Dear respondent') but, as this seemed to draw attention to the fact that the letter was not personalised, it was omitted. To increase flexibility in the timing of surveys, the letter included a month and year date, but not a specific day date. Thus, while the ISSP survey covering letters incorporated all the other elements Dillman (2000) suggests are important, they were not personalised.

¹ Each survey 'package' consisted of an A4-size questionnaire, covering letter and reply-paid envelope, plus an addressed cover sheet, which acted as the outer envelope. The whole package was shrink-wrapped in clear plastic.

Results: personalisation experiment

The response rates for the personalised and non-personalised covering letters were identical (62%). Personalisation had no effect on response to the survey (see Table 3).

The cumulative response rates for the personalised and non-personalised treatments are shown in Figure 1. Response to the personalised letter was marginally quicker than to the non-personalised letter. After seven days the cumulative response to the personalised treatment was 2% higher than to the non-personalised treatment (29% vs 27%); however, this difference had disappeared after 12 days and thereafter the cumulative response for the two treatments was virtually identical. Consequently, personalisation appears to have had little effect on response speed.

Table 3 Response rates for personalised and non-personalised covering letters

Outcome	Covering letter	
	Personalised	Non-personalised
Valid	558	550
Gone/no address	72	91
Ineligible	22	19
Refused	26	26
Not returned	322	314
Total	1000	1000
Response rate (%)	61.6	61.8

Note: Response rate = Valid/(Total – (GNA + Ineligible))

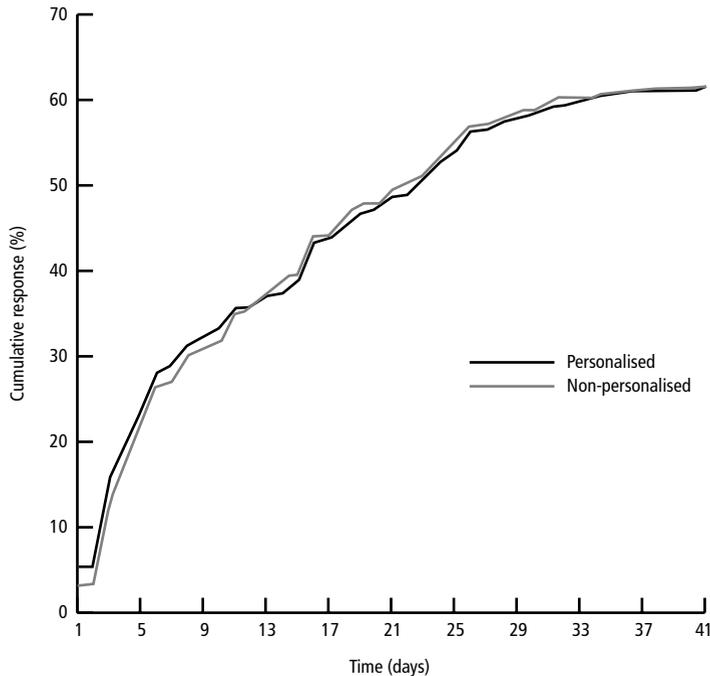


Figure 1 Cumulative response rates: personalised vs non-personalised covering letters

To test the effect of personalisation on item omission within returned questionnaires, the proportions of missing cases for 12 variables in the Environment survey were analysed. The variables selected for analysis were a set of 'personal' variables (mainly demographics). If personalisation did have an effect on item omission, these are the types of variable that would be expected to be affected.

Of the 12 variables examined, seven had a higher proportion of missing cases for the personalised treatment, four had more missing cases for the non-personalised treatment, and for one of the variables there was no difference (see Table 4). The maximum difference was 1.4 percentage points for the variable age, and this difference is significant at the 5% level. However, the number of cases involved is very small, only nine ages missing out of 558 for the personalised treatment (four men and five women) and one out of 550 for the non-personalised treatment, and the absolute average difference between treatments over all 12 variables was only 0.5%. On the basis of this analysis there is little evidence, with the possible exception of age, that personalisation increases or decreases the proportion of missing items in returned questionnaires.

To examine the effect of personalisation on social desirability bias, the 12 questions in the Environment survey that seemed most likely to be susceptible to this source of error were selected and the responses of the alternative treatment groups to these questions compared. Mean scores for each treatment group for each question are shown in Table 5.

Table 4 Proportion of missing cases: personalised vs non-personalised covering letters

Variable	Proportion of missing cases (%)		
	Personalised (n = 558)	Non-personalised (n = 550)	Difference
Personal income	6.2	5.8	0.4
Voting behaviour	4.8	4.6	0.2
Social class	3.4	3.5	-0.1
Hours worked per week	2.1	3.1	-1.0
Household size	2.0	2.6	-0.6
Religion	2.1	1.3	0.8
Age	1.6	0.2	1.4
Marital status	1.4	0.7	0.7
Trades union membership	0.9	1.3	-0.4
Education	1.4	1.1	0.3
Sex	0.4	0	0.4
Computer use ¹	1.1	1.1	0
Average	2.3	2.1	0.1

Note: 1. This was an optional question.

Table 5 Mean scores for socially desirable questions: personalised vs non-personalised covering letters

Questions	Mean score		Significance of χ^2
	Personalised letter	Non-personalised letter	
To protect the environment, how willing would you be to:			
pay much higher prices ¹	2.78	2.88	0.03
pay much higher taxes ¹	3.26	3.36	0.17
accept cuts in your standard of living? ¹	3.19	3.28	0.62
It is just too difficult for someone like me to do much about the environment ^{2,6}	3.59	3.62	0.19
I do what is right for the environment, even when it costs more money or takes more time ²	2.53	2.57	0.29
How concerned are you personally about the environment? ³	1.90	1.91	0.98
How often do you make a special effort to sort glass or tins or plastic or newspapers and so on for recycling? ⁴	1.87	1.95	0.15
How often do you cut back on driving your car for environmental reasons? ⁴	3.32	3.42	0.04
Are you a member of a group whose main aim is to preserve or protect the environment? ⁵	1.90	1.88	0.29
In the last five years, have you:			
signed a petition about an environmental issue ⁵	1.52	1.57	0.16
given money to an environmental group ⁵	1.71	1.69	0.60
taken part in a protest or demonstration about an environmental issue? ⁵	1.95	1.97	0.17

Notes:

1. Where 1 = Very willing; 5 = Very unwilling.
2. Where 1 = Strongly agree; 5 = Strongly disagree
3. Where 1 = A great deal; 4 = Not at all.
4. Where 1 = Always; 4 = Never
5. Where 1 = Yes; 2 = No.
6. Higher score denotes more socially desirable.

There is some weak evidence that personalisation may increase social desirability bias. For six of the 12 variables examined the difference in mean scores in Table 5 is in the direction expected if the personalised approach produced more socially desirable answers. However, the differences are very small and only two of the six are significant. Four of the six differences are for attitude-type variables and only two for (self-reported) behavioural variables. This suggests that, if personalisation does increase social desirability bias, it may have more effect on variables that

attempt to measure attitudes than on those that attempt to measure behaviour. However, this is speculation and the overall conclusion is that, in this case at least, personalisation had little or no effect on social desirability bias.

Discussion

The 95% confidence interval for the difference between the personalised and non-personalised treatments tested is $-4.5\% < p_1 - p_2 < 4.1\%$, thus the possibility that personalisation might increase mail survey response cannot be discounted, even though there was no evidence of such an effect. The power of the study for an effect size of 5%, the lower end of the expected effect size range suggested by Dillman (2000), is between 0.71 and 0.73 (depending on the response rate expected for the control treatment). That is, despite the relatively large sample sizes involved, the power of the study, the probability of detecting an effect, is a little lower than desirable.

There was relatively little difference between the two letters tested in this study, although one was certainly more 'personalised' than the other. Given Taylor and Lynn's (1996) argument that 'personalised' mail is no longer perceived by members of the general public as special, there may have been little or no difference between the letters in the eyes of potential respondents. Consequently, the fact that there was no difference in response to the two letters is probably not surprising.

However, the personalised letter tested did not have the 'real signature in contrasting ink' recommended by Dillman (instead it had a copied signature in contrasting blue ink). While it is possible to hand-sign 2000 covering letters (plus reminders) this is not practical or cost-effective for large-scale mail surveys. Furthermore, the efficacy of a handwritten signature is not supported by the results of previous studies (see Kawash & Aleamoni 1971; Carpenter 1974; Green & Stager 1986). In fact, although Dillman recommends a 'pressed blue ball-point pen signature', he concedes that this may not be a realistic alternative in large surveys and suggests that a pre-printed signature in a contrasting colour is an acceptable substitute. It is hard to imagine that, by itself, this feature would significantly improve the response to a mail survey – nevertheless, it is a possibility that cannot be completely excluded.

Some studies have shown interaction effects of personalisation with other factors, such as pre-notification (see Matteson 1974; de Leeuw & Hox 1988; Sutton & Zeits 1992). However, the evidence of interaction

effects is mixed and mostly non-existent. In this particular experiment a pre-notification letter was sent to all respondents, but there was no evidence of any interaction between personalisation and pre-notification. Similarly, it is also possible that personalisation may be effective for different survey populations, with different survey sponsors or for different survey topics, but this cannot be determined from the experiment reported here.

On the question of salutations, Gordon notes that the word 'Dear' in the opening formula of a letter means absolutely nothing (Gordon 1997, p. 70). 'Dear' in a letter's salutation has become what linguists call 'frozen'. In certain contexts it can still carry connotations of love, respect and regard, but as the opening word of a letter it now seldom conveys anything about the writer's attitude to the recipient. It has simply become part of a meaningless and non-intimate letter opening formula.

Thus, the assumption that a personal salutation is more intimate and friendly than no salutation at all may be over-emphasised by those who argue for personalisation in mail survey covering letters. There is also the problem that it is often impossible to determine gender from a name. For women in particular, it is increasingly difficult to determine the appropriate salutation (Mrs, Ms or Miss?). Consequently, even Dillman suggests that the salutation should be omitted from a covering letter when there is a risk of offending the recipient (Dillman 2000, p. 160).

Finally, the level of personalisation tested in this study could best be described as 'quasi-personalisation', or 'personalisation through technology'; in other words, personalisation that recognises the individuality of survey respondents but does not establish a personal link between the researcher and the respondent. However, in surveys of the general public (or in other groups where there is no prior relationship between researcher and respondent) any attempt to be more personal than the approach tested in this study would mean adopting a level of intimacy that some people would find unacceptable (e.g. 'Dear Phil').

Despite this, there are situations one can imagine where what might be called 'intimate personalisation' would be appropriate and possibly effective – for example, a survey of members of a club or association where the covering letter is signed by the president, a survey of employees in an organisation where the covering letter is signed by the manager, or a survey of regular customers of a small business where the letter is signed by the owner. This is consistent with Harvey's conclusion that the advantages of personalisation are heavily dependent on the target population and the aims of the survey (Harvey 1987). But the circumstances that make

personalisation seem likely to be beneficial in these cases do not apply to surveys of the general public conducted by a university researcher.

Conclusions

The conclusion from this study is that, in mail surveys of the general public, personalisation of an otherwise appropriate covering letter has little or no effect on response rate, response speed, item non-response or social desirability bias. This is contrary to the findings of a number of previous studies, at least as far as the effect of personalisation on response rates is concerned.

In this case, this survey sponsor was a well-known university in a small country, a sponsor that would have been familiar to virtually every respondent. This may explain the lack of any personalisation effect and would be consistent with the notion that personalisation, like all elements of mail survey research design, may be more or less relevant in a particular situation (the features of which include the survey population, topic and sponsor).

With the survey-processing technology now available (and used in this study) it is often more difficult not to personalise survey correspondence than to personalise it. Thus, from a practical point of view, unless there is a good reason to avoid personalisation, survey researchers should use it. At worst, it will have no effect, but it might have a positive effect.

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