

## respondents, a resource under stress

by Michel Rochon



No conference of the survey research industry in the last 10 years has been complete without at least one panel discussion, speech or/and research presentation showing that the prime resource of survey research (respondents) is woefully overexploited. Much hand-wringing goes on, forceful entreaties to mend our ways are uttered, and dire consequences are predicted. This is all for naught. We are facing a "tragedy of the commons".

One thing is certain, despite all the terrible consequences of the destructive be-

haviour, individual decision makers, acting as rational economic decision makers, are incapable of stopping the race to self-destruction. Garrett Hardin, in his extraordinary powerful short article in *Science* in 1968, dubbed this process *the tragedy of the commons*.<sup>1</sup>

He gave us a way of thinking about free goods that contain their own seeds of destruction. In brief a "free good" will always be used to excess, leading to its depletion. The important factor is that even though all those who are responsible for the overexploitation, are aware of the consequences of their action, they are individually incapable of affecting the outcome. Think of air pollution, water pollution or cod over fishing as examples. In short, that is what I think we are facing with the "free" resource of respondent cooperation. In Hardin's words, "freedom in a commons brings ruin to all".

Freedom in a commons brings ruin to all. These are strong words. But who is willing to restrain freedom? If we even come to the conclusion that it is desirable, with whom do we entrust the task? If we find someone, how will he police the activity? How much stick and how much carrot will we permit him to use?

### TAKING A STEP BACK FROM THE BRINK

1. First and foremost, we must admit that we are facing a crisis. Response rates are diminishing and cooperation is declining. When not denying the evidence, the survey research industry has responded by casting wider nets, using more powerful tools buying more sample, calling more

potential respondents, bothering more people. More shamefully, some researchers have responded by lengthening the questionnaires on the premise that respondents are so hard to find that once they get one they should milk him/her for all they can get.

2. This exploitation of the resource means only that it will disappear over time. The public will not disappear, the phone lines will not disappear, the public will not ask to have its phones disabled. Rather, pressure upon politicians will bring about legal restraints on an industry, that cannot restrain itself. That is how society dealt with air and water as public goods. The polluters were fined out of existence. Closer to home that is how legislators have dealt with the inconvenience of telemarketing polluting the telephone.

3. So far the survey research industry has resisted the entreaties of the public and the threats of legislators by lobbying furiously and convincingly. We have made the case that the industry is well able to police itself and that strong codes of ethics are in place. We have insisted on the need for survey research in economic and social planning. Where everything else failed, we convinced politicians by explaining to them that political polls would be threatened by any impediment put in the way of survey research... that did it ... until the next wave of protests! The fact of the matter is we are not policing ourselves and could not if we wished to do so.

4. We all know what is needed. Fewer phone calls, more sensitive approach to respondents' needs, shorter questionnaires,

fewer stupid questions, fewer intrusive personal questions. That would be a good beginning.

5. We have been told, we have been cajoled and we have been pressured into the realization that the industry needs more positive public relations with respondents. We should tell them, write to them, and publish in their newspapers: "Your Opinion Counts".

All of this is not working because although we know the cause of the problem, and we know how it could be solved, the rational economic man says: "why should I foot the bill and let all the Free Riders profit from it." At this point, the inherent logic of the commons remorselessly generates tragedy.

6. The whole point of a "public (free) good" or a commons is that the freedom of all to use it by all thwarts any effort by the wise to husband it.

## THE PROBLEM OF THE FREE RIDER

The problem of "why should I foot the bill when all these others will benefit free of charge" has been studied and a recent article on gaming theory, expanded to many players, fills some of the theoretical void about the problem of Free Riders.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Kurzban and Daniel Houser posit that an individual's type is stable, and a group's cooperative outcomes can be remarkably well predicted if one knows its type composition.

"In any given group of people, you find three kinds of people: Cooperators, Free Riders, and what we call Reciprocators. Cooperators do the most work and Free Riders do as little as possible, but most of us are Reciprocators. We hold back a bit to determine the chances of success before devoting our full energy to a project," said Robert Kurzban, an assistant professor in Penn's Department of Psychology. "We found that these traits remained fairly stable among people, and you could reliably predict how a group might perform if you know the percentage of each type of person in that group."

"Our findings show that the vast majority of people, about 63 percent, are Rec-

iprocators, and in any group you are likely to have a substantial number of Reciprocators," Kurzban said. "The simplest way to make use of a Reciprocator potential is to keep everyone apprised with information about the successful contributions of others within the group. This way you show them that there is something to gain from their efforts."

"If people are stuck working with a bunch of Free Riders, even the most highly cooperative among them will tend to take the 'wait-and-see' approach."

Any solution to protecting the respondents' "commons" must take into account the problem of Free Riders. If not, the Reciprocators will rightly ask: "what's in it for me? why should I pay while these people get a free ride?" The Cooperators will wonder why all their efforts and preaching are not bringing about change and tangible results and will continue to feel a bit miffed that their good will and personal sacrifice is not recognized.

## SAVING OUR FUTURE: A FEW INDIVIDUAL STEPS

In the spirit of the statements above, I propose a very limited list of practical steps that could be carried out by all survey research organizations. You may add as many as imagination and practicality permit. The main criterion should be that these steps are valuable in and by themselves and do not require the cooperation of others to be effective. The payoff should be tangible for any organization taking these steps. Free Riders will benefit somewhat but very indirectly and very late in the game.

1. Say **NO** to the temptation of long questionnaires; you can't use much of the extra data anyway. Your clients will thank you for not being a conventional profit maximizer. Your added profit will come with repeat business from satisfied clients. Even if you are alone doing it, your total costs will decrease as your cooperation rate goes up and abandonment goes down.

2. Say **NO** to stupid and/or redundant questions. Your judgment in this field should prevail over that of the recent MBA graduate directing the research on the client end. Your interviewers will thank

you for helping to decrease the abuse they are subjected to and as a bonus, your questionnaires will be shorter and your final report will be easier to prepare and appear more intelligent.

3. **DO** make sure that your interviewers have a polite, friendly "good manners" attitude at all times. Respondents don't owe them anything.

4. **DO** identify your company properly and politely at the start of each interview. Review those standard scripts. Does your script help respondents understand who is calling. If your name contains the words 'market' or 'marketing', consider adding the words 'survey research' in your presentation identifier.

5. **DO** identify the final client wherever the situation and research protocol permit.

6. **DO** offer different times for a call back if the present time is not convenient.

7. **DO** say how long the questionnaire will take to complete and **DON'T** cheat on this evaluation. Consider making a statement such as "no more than x minutes" and stick to it.

8. **DO** make sure that your interviewers are familiar with the code of ethic of your professional association and can explain in what way the confidentiality of data will be maintained.

9. **DO** thank cooperative respondents and let them know that their cooperation is helping their community (county, state, province, country) plan for a better future for all. Tell them their help was essential and you appreciate it. Make sure that interviewers mean it when they offer thanks. After all their jobs depend on it.

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## References

<sup>1</sup> *Science*, Vol 162, Issue 3859, 1243-1248, 13 December 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Kurzban, R. & Houser, D. (2005), An experimental investigation of cooperative types in human groups: A complement to evolutionary theory and simulations. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 102(5), 1803