Statistics Netherlands

Memorandum

Communication with businesses and response burden

Paper prepared for the European Establishment Statistics Workshop,

Nuremberg, Germany, September 9-11 2013.

Deirdre Giesen & Ger Snijkers[1]

6 September 2013

summary Part of the recently concluded European research programme BLUE-ETS focused on response burden and motivation in official business surveys. The way NSIs communicate with businesses emerged as an important topic in this research. In this paper we provide an overview of the BLUE-ETS research related to the communication between NSIs and businesses. Next we give an overview of what we consider as recommended practices regarding the communication between NSIs and businesses. We conclude with a list of topics for future research.

keywords Response burden, motivation, research

1. Introduction

Collecting high quality data from businesses in an efficient way is challenging for NSIs. The way NSIs communicate with businesses, both in their role as data providers as in their role of data users, may be an important factor in how businesses respond to data requests from NSIs.

2. Overview of findings BLUE-ETS research on NSI communication with businesses

The part of the BLUE-ETS research discussed here focused on response burden and motivation in official business surveys (see www.blue-ets.eu for more information on BLUE-ETS) Several, partly parallel and partly consecutive, studies were conducted.

---

[1] Corresponding author: d.giesen@cbs.nl. The BLUE-ETS project is funded by the European Community's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement n. 244767. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the policies of Statistics Netherlands.

2.1 Literature review

From a literature review on the effect of NSI communication practices on response burden (Giesen & Snijkers 2011) we concluded that communication can affect response behaviour through the (actual and perceived) costs and benefits of responding to a survey request. Most visible to respondents is of course the survey related communication, e.g. the letter that accompanies a questionnaire and introduces the survey. The extent to which this letter states clearly what is expected of the respondent and where to turn to for any questions can impact the time and effort needed to respond. Also, the extent to which this letter convinces respondents that their participation is useful may affect the perceived burden of the response task. More indirectly, all types of NSI communication with the outside world can influence the perceived costs and benefits of responding, as communication can impact the corporate image of an NSI. Whether or not an NSI is judged as trustworthy and its output as useful will affect the perceived costs and benefits of responding. Figure 1 gives an overview of the relations discussed above.

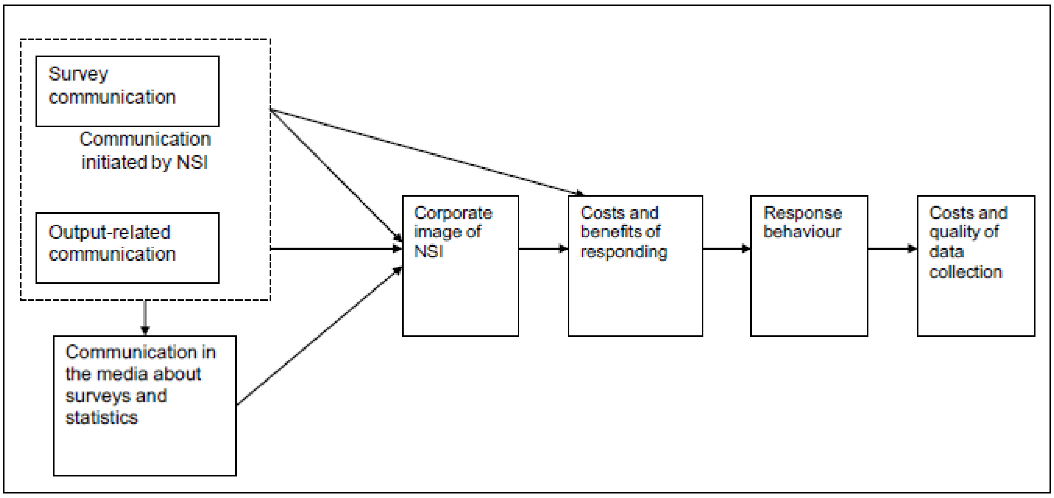

Figure 1: Framework for understanding effects of NSI communication on response behaviour

2.2 Case studies in causes and effects of response burden

From a literature review and survey of NSIs practices regarding the measurement and reduction of response burden (Giesen & Raymond-Blaess 2011, Giesen 2011) and an investigation into the businesses' perspectives on official statistics (Bavdaž, M. 2011a; 2011b) the project team concluded that further, quantitative research was needed into the causes and consequences of response burden. Within the project a start was made with this type of research by conducting a number of related case studies.

A first set of case studies with Swedish (Lorenc, Kloek, Abrahamson & Eckman 2013), Norwegian (Berglund, Haraldsen & Kleven 2013) and Dutch (Giesen 2013a) data showed that response burden is related to response behaviour (e.g. unit response, timeliness, number of data edits needed). The Dutch data also contained information about how respondents feel about the NSI and the usefulness of the produced statistics and it could be established that these perceptions were related to the perceived response burden. The findings from these studies suggest that 1) perceived and actual burden are relevant for the quality and costs of data collection and 2) how respondents feel about the NSI and statistics may affect the perceived burden.

A second set of case studies investigated the effectiveness of concrete actions aiming to influence respondents – namely to reduce respondents' perceived burden and increase motivation for survey participation and accurate and timely reporting – based on different sources of motivation described in motivation psychology. Bavdaž & Bolko (2013) conducted experiments which focused on improving communication with businesses by suggesting value of statistical reporting (for businesses and for society in general) and by inducing respondents' positive emotions. Lorenc, Persson & Berg (2013) also experimented with different ways to communicate the value of statistical reporting. Giesen (2013b) studied effects of a complete questionnaire redesign and Lund, Haraldsen, Kleven and Berglund (2013) experimented with various methods to improve the usability and the data quality by incorporating instructions and tailoring dialogues into the questionnaires.

The experiments focusing on improving the perception of the usefulness of statistics and inducing positive emotions show that it is not straightforward to affect motivation and ensuing response behaviour with the communication strategies. The treatments did produce some but not all of the expected effects. It seems there are at least three common reasons for the lack of effects in these studies. First, many respondents do not notice the intervention (i.e. experimental treatment). This seems to be enhanced by the fact that responding to official business surveys is a routine behaviour for many respondents. They have become used to only quickly scan the materials sent to them for obligations and deadlines. Secondly, the experimental treatment is for many respondents just one of many contacts they have with the NSIs. If an NSI's actions can affect motivation, then any effects of the interventions might be reduced by other types of contact with the NSI. Respondents may also already have an established attitude towards official statistics, which requires a stronger treatment. Thirdly, the motivational tools as offered in the experiments proved not to be very appealing for many respondents. Still, they did produce an effect on response rates in a quite demanding annual survey on industrial production. It also seems that enhancing personal ties and positive emotions (help offered, among others) worked better than suggesting value for the business based on some specific statistics. In general offering help in the Slovenian study (Bavdaž & Bolko 2013) was positively evaluated by roughly half of interviewed respondents, though it was largely not needed (at least among respondents having experiences with the tested surveys). Two different kinds of statistical output offered (some specific statistics and a promise of statistics) seemed not relevant for many interviewed respondents. However, some interviewed respondents valued statistical output, either for themselves or for others in their business. It just seemed that it had to be more prominent, more tailored to their needs and accessible more easily. In communicating statistical feedback or information about the usefulness of statistics for the business, an important challenge is that the persons who complete the questionnaires (who work for example in the accounting department or even in an external accounting firm) often are not the same persons who can use the statistics for the benefit of the firm (who may be working in the marketing department).

The two studies on the questionnaire design showed that improving the questionnaire can affect response burden and response behaviour. A complete redesign of the SBS questionnaire in the Netherlands significantly reduced both actual and perceived response burden. Also, in the new design the questionnaires were returned much faster, although it cannot be determined to what extent this can be contributed to the new design of the questionnaire or to the fact that the questionnaire was sent out later in the year and respondents were given less time to respond. The Norwegian experiment with different ways of offering instructions shows that offering a calculator and using a video clip to explain how it should be used, did not add to the actual response burden and rather had a positive effect on the perceived response burden. Even more importantly, there are reasons to believe that the response quality increased.

Two important conclusions drawn from these case studies were:

1) Affecting motivation and response behaviour by enhancing personal ties and promoting the usefulness of NSI statistics has potential but is challenging.
2) NSI should further improve questionnaire communication design (Haraldsen 2013). Further research should address how exactly this should be done in web-based data collection to utilise the potential and the latest advances of information technology.

3. Recommendations for NSI communication with businesses

Based on the BLUE-ETS research and the literature overview in Snijkers & Jones (2013) we come to the following list of recommendation for communication with businesses in official business surveys.

1) **Promote a consistent and positive image in all types of communication.**
   Show in all forms of communication (e.g. letters, questionnaires, helpdesk, website) that the NSI is
   - trustworthy
   - friendly
   - professional
   - produces valuable output
   - and cares about both response burden and quality.
2) **Build and maintain relationships with the business world**
   - Build and manage relationships with key stake holders in business world (e.g. advisory councils with representatives of business as users and providers of data; contacts with business organisations; outreach activities).
   - Develop and promote dedicated output relevant to target groups in business world (e.g. statistical packages for starting a business, statistical package for market research, quick scan for benchmarking).
   - Communicate about these things
3) **Pre-field survey communication**
   - Know respondents (e.g. record keeping studies, profiling of large businesses)
   - Keep registers and contact information up to date
   - Use survey calendars to help business plan their resources
4) **Field survey communication**
   - Provide clear address information on envelope
   - Indicate Unit / Reporting period / Deadline on letter and questionnaire
   - Be clear about mandatory status, but do not stress immediately
   - Provide appealing reasons for need of the survey request
   - Provide efficient assistance for questions and complaints (e.g. website, helpdesk, complaint procedures)
   - Provide single point of contact for large enterprises
   - Document special arrangements for respondents
   - Indicate changes in questionnaire
   - User-friendly questionnaires
5) **Post field survey communication**
   - Provide feed-back about status of submitted questionnaire
   - Plan follow-up calls as quickly as possible after submission of questionnaire
   - Use information of past response behaviour for design of follow-up strategies / sanctions

4. Directions for future research

Focus on research on communication with SMEs

In a recent workshop on communicating with businesses with representatives from several European NSIs, Eurostat and Business Europe it was concluded that it should be a priority to develop effective strategies for communication with SMEs (Barslund & Snijkers 2013). For the very large businesses NSIs usually have effective tailored strategies (e.g. profiling of the businesses, coordinators for all contacts between the NSI and the businesses). It would be too expensive to use these types of strategies for the large bulk of SMEs. However, their data are also important and if errors in the communication causes problems or irritation for even a small proportion of this large group, this can cause a lot of work for the NSI (e.g. a large number of helpdesk calls and emails that have to dealt with) and it may cause public and political debates which could be harmful for the reputation of the NSIs. Specific questions that came up during the above mentioned workshop:

- What strategy is effective in influencing businesses with regard to their decision to participate and perceived response burden: What strategies work in what situations?
- What motivates businesses to comply with a survey, apart from a survey being mandatory? What processes are behind this, like e.g. getting commitment, as defined in the Compliance principles framework by Cialdini (see i.e. Snijkers and Jones, 2013), or how to deal with resistance?
- How to communicate the data collection strategy? How to communicate that a lot is already done to use e.g. admin data? A lot of these measures are not known to business respondents.
- How to explain the relevance of a survey to businesses in plain simple words?
- If and how to work better with incentives – especially in official business surveys where businesses may multiple (several surveys) and long lasting interactions with NSIs?
- Should we include information in letter on how long it takes to complete?

How to make progress?

Unfortunately, there are not so many opportunities for large research collaborations as in the BLUE-ETS project. But also in the "regular" methodological work conducted at NSIs relative simple things can be done to make progress:

- Collaborate with business organisations as ambassadors to endorse survey participation.
- Involve businesses and business organisations in the design of surveys and other communication aimed at businesses.
- Collect management information in order to monitor the data collection process and to evaluate the results of actions.
- Document the work done, make it available, and share experiences and information.

As for research, priorities include:

- Studying the actual behaviour of business respondents e.g. with regard to how they read letters and process information, the flows of communication in businesses related to surveys (see e.g. Willimack & Snijkers 2013).
- Try to do experiments, embedded in on going data collection.
- If experiments are not possible conduct pilots with new communication strategies with a small part of the samples.
- Bring in theories from various disciplines into the field of business survey methodology. These theories may help to make the communication with businesses more effective. In the BLUE-ETS project a number of motivation theories are studied (Torres van Grinsven, Bavdaž & Bolko, 2013), but probably more are relevant like theories from information processing, dealing with resistance and decision making.

References

Barslund, M. & Snijkers, G. (2013) (Eds.). Proceedings from the workshop "Serving businesses better? Communicating with businesses: lowering response burdens and increasing motivation". BLUE-ETS report.

Bavdaž, M. (Ed.) (2011a). Business use of NSIs' statistics based on external sources (NSIs, publications, expert opinions).BLUE-ETS Project Report (deliverable 3.1).

Bavdaž, M. (Ed.) (2011b) Final report integrating findings on business perspectives related to NSIs` statistics. BLUE-ETS Project Report (deliverable 3.2).

Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (2013). Two Slovenian experiments to increase motivation. Pp. 47-58 in Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds.). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (Deliverable 8.1).

Berglund, F. Haraldsen, G. & Kleven, Ø. (2013) Causes and consequences of actual and perceived response burden based on Norwegian data. Pp. 29-35 in Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (Deliverable 8.1).

Giesen, D. (2013a). Causes and consequences of actual and perceived response burden based on Dutch data. Pp. 37-43 in Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds.). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (Deliverable 8.1).

Giesen, D. (2013b). Reducing response burden by questionnaire redesign. Pp. 71-77 in Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds.). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (Deliverable 8.1).

Giesen, D. & Snijkers, G. (2011). Communication Strategies. Pp 50-56 in Giesen, D. & Raymond-Blaess, V. (Eds). Response burden measurement and reduction in official business statistics. A literature review of national statisttical institutes' practices and experiences. BLUE-ETS Project Report (deliverable 2.1).

Giesen, D. (Ed.) (2011). Response Burden in Official Business Surveys: Measurement and Reduction Practices of National Statistical Institutes. BLUE-ETS Project Report (deliverable 2.2).

Giesen, D. & Raymond-Blaess, V. (Eds.). Response burden measurement and reduction in official business statistics. A literature review of national statistical institutes' practices and experiences. BLUE-ETS Project Report (deliverable 2.1).

Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. and Bolko, I. (Eds.). (2013). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (deliverable 8.1).

Haraldsen, G. (2013), Questionnaire Communication in Business Surveys. Pp. 303-357 in: Snijkers, G., H. Haraldsen, J. Jones, and D. Willimack, Designing and Conducting Business Surveys, Wiley, Hoboken.

Lorenc, B., Bavdaž, M., Giesen, D., Seljak, R., & Torres van Grinsven, V. (2012). Businesses as users of official statistics. Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Establishment Surveys (ICES-4), Montreal, Canada, June 11-4 2012.

Lorenc, B., Kloek, W., Abrahamsson, L. & Eckman, S. (2013). Description of actual response burden and response behaviour with Swedish register. Pp 11-27 in: Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. Deliverable 8.1 BLUE-Enterprise and Trade Statistics.

Lorenc, B., Persson, A. & Berg, S. (2013). An experiment with reminders to boost responding in a business survey. Pp. 59-63 in Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (Deliverable 8.1).

Lund, K., Haraldsen, G. Kleven, Ø. & Berglund, F. (2013). The usability of web functionality. Pp. 79-89 in Giesen, D., Bavdaž, M. & Bolko, I. (Eds.). Comparative report on integration of case study results related to reduction of response burden and motivation of businesses for accurate reporting. BLUE-ETS Project Report (Deliverable 8.1).

Snijkers, G., and Jones, J. (2013). Business Survey Communication. Pp 359-430 in: Snijkers, G., Haraldsen, G., Jones, J., and Willimack, D., Designing and Conducting Business Surveys. Wiley, Hoboken.

Torres van Grinsven, V., Bolko, I. & Bavdaž, M. (2012). Sources of Motivation in Business Surveys. Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on Establishment Surveys (ICES - 4), Montréal, Canada, June 11-14 2012.

Willimack, D. & Snijkers, G. (2013), The Business Context and its Implications for the Survey Response process. Pp. 39-82.in: Snijkers, G., H. Haraldsen, J. Jones, and D. Willimack, Designing and Conducting Business Surveys Wiley, Hoboken.