

## Putting a face on market research

By Curt Dommeyer

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People often wonder why it's necessary for companies to conduct marketing research. Simply put, marketing research helps companies make better decisions. Intuition and sound reasoning will not always yield the expected results.

For many years, I have been trying to determine what factors will increase the response rate to mail surveys.

I designed an experiment where I mailed a survey to a nationally representative sample of people in the United States. All of my mailings were identical except for one element: In some, I included a small black-and-white photo of the person supposedly doing the survey next to my name on the cover letter. I assumed, when I used a photo, the enhanced personalization would increase the response rate to the survey.

When I used the photo, I did not use a photo of myself. I wanted to see if varying significant features of the person in the photo would have an effect on the response rate.

There was a control group, i.e., a cover letter with no photo, and four photo conditions - attractive female, unattractive female, attractive

male and unattractive male. Five hundred people were randomly assigned to one of the five conditions.

Previous studies have shown that physically attractive people are more likely than their unattractive counterparts to have requests for help fulfilled. Other studies have shown that females are more likely than males to get higher survey response rates, especially in telephone and personal interviews.

I would have predicted from these previous studies that a photo of an attractive female would not only outperform a cover letter with no photo, but also would outperform any other photo condition.

Did my results come through as predicted? Well, not exactly.

I found that the cover letter with no photo got a survey response rate that was just as good as any of the photo conditions.

Among the photo conditions, the physically attractive feature had no effect on the results. The physically attractive photos, as a group, did no better than the unattractive photos. In fact, the physically attractive male photo pulled the lowest response rate of all photos.

Gender did make a difference though. The female photos, as a group, pulled a higher response rate than the male photos. The moral of the story is we must test our strategies before investing a lot of money in them.

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Intuition and sound reasoning will not always lead to the best result.

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