Understanding the Decision to Participate in a Business Survey

Ger Snijkers¹, Barbara Berkenbosch², and Martin Luppes² *
Statistics Netherlands and Utrecht University¹
Statistics Netherlands²

Abstract
In 1998, Groves and Couper defined a framework for survey cooperation. This framework identifies aspects of the survey process that are under and out of the researcher’s control in order to get survey cooperation. Willimack et al. (2002) transformed this framework to business surveys. They indicated that surveys have no priority to businesses. Why then are businesses willing to pay attention to a request for participation in a survey in the first place? In this paper we will try to answer this fundamental question. In 1992, Groves, Cialdini and Couper described a number of basic compliance principles underlying the decision of social survey participation. We will use these compliance principles to understand the decision businesses make to participate in a business survey. As a starting point we will use the Willimack framework.

Keywords: survey participation, compliance principles, communication strategy, response

1. Introduction
The heart of every communication is the perception of messages sent and retrieved. This becomes more crucial when the communication aims to generate compliance with a request to participate in surveys. This issue has been given some attention within the conceptual framework of survey methodology. Where social surveys already have a longstanding tradition in optimized communication strategies, the crucial role of appropriate communication to generate survey compliance is not yet fully recognized within business surveys.

In this paper we will address this issue by looking at the fundamentals underlying the decision to participate in a business survey. Willimack et al. (2002) indicated that surveys have no priority to businesses. Why then are businesses willing to pay attention to a request for participation in a survey in the first place? What arguments lead to a positive outcome, i.e. a response?

We will discuss this issue from two perspectives: the survey organization and the business. Firstly, we will list the arguments the survey organization (in our case Statistics Netherlands) uses, i.e. the arguments which will – according to the survey organization’s perception – lead to survey compliance. Secondly, we will list the arguments businesses are receptive to. Finally, we will confront these two perspectives. This comes down to the question whether the communication strategy is effective with regard to survey compliance. The conceptual framework for the effectiveness of the communication strategy is based on the compliance principles as discussed by Groves, Cialdini and Couper (1992), and Cialdini (2001). These principles will be used in qualitative checklists for different channels of communication.

In section 2 we will outline the conceptual framework of compliance principles. Section 3 addresses the methods used to research the communication strategy of Statistics Netherlands and the arguments used by businesses. In section 4 we present the results of the study, followed by a literature review in section 5. Section 6 concludes this paper with recommendations for an effective communication strategy.

2. Survey compliance: a response model
Traditionally, data for business statistics are collected using paper forms. These forms are characterized by detailed items to be answered by the business respondents, a lot of technical terms, long instructions and many definitions. Many businesses complain more and more about the completion of these forms given the burden it imposes upon them. Even if a survey is mandatory or is conducted by a government, businesses no longer comply willingly, as they used to do. Completion of surveys has the least priority within their everyday activities. This affects the level of response, the timeliness of the response, as well as the data quality.

These two sides, the business and the survey organization and their interests, are represented in the response model described by Snijkers (2007) and used by Statistics Netherlands (SN), See figure 1 (appendix) for an outlay of this model. This model is based on the framework for business survey participation as...
presented by Willimack et al. (2002), which in itself is based on the response model as defined by Groves and Couper for social surveys (1998). Another response model is presented by the statistical offices of Sweden, Norway and the UK (Hedlin et al., 2005; Haraldsen & Jones, 2007). These models differ slightly in emphasis on various aspects. The SN model contains the same elements as these models, but focuses on people, people in businesses, and their response behaviour.

Our study concentrates on a key element of this model, i.e. the motivation of a respondent to comply with a request to participate. The basic idea is that any communication aiming at cooperation or gaining compliance (such as responding to a survey) is based on social norms. The respondent, confronted with a request, will use heuristics because of little personal interest, and “...consequently, is not inclined to devote large amount of time or cognitive energy to the decision of whether or not to participate...” (Groves & Cialdini, 1991). This heuristic decision about whether or not to comply with a request is made according to the compliance principles that inform individuals as to when it is appropriate and adaptive to comply. Six compliance principles are distinguished (Groves, Cialdini & Couper, 1992):

1. **Reciprocity**, the tendency to participate if a reward is given (with regard to this principle we also refer to the social exchange theory as discussed by Dillman, 2000);
2. **Commitment & Consistency**, the tendency to behave in a similar way over situations that resemble one another, and to commit oneself to that position;
3. **Social validation**, the tendency to behave according to the norms and values of the social group to which one belongs (or thinks one belongs);
4. **Authority**, the tendency to be more willing to comply if the request comes from an authority;
5. **Scarcity**, the tendency to comply because the respondent or prospect gets the feeling of being in a unique position;
6. **Liking**, the tendency to comply with requests from attractive requesters.

Within the context of business surveys we asked ourselves whether the communication or contact strategy as used by SN is effective, i.e. whether the arguments used by SN will result in survey compliance by businesses (see figure 1). This question is of interest both from the survey organization (data quality and efficiency) and the business respondent (compliance costs) point of view (see also Burnside, Bishop & Guiver, 2005). We believe that when business respondents are better motivated to comply with a survey request, this will result in a better response in terms of the level, the timeliness, and the quality of the response. This affects the efficiency positively, since less respondent chasing and data cleaning is needed. This also reduces the actual as well as the perceived respondent burden, since respondents are less contacted. They also will have a more positive attitude towards surveys, which in itself will have a positive effect on the motivation to comply.

Based on the social psychological theory of Cialdini (Groves, Cialdini & Couper, 1992; Cialdini, 2001), we carried out a study to identify the compliance principles used in the different communication channels of SN with its business respondents. We investigated the arguments used by SN to get businesses to respond (Berkenbosch, 2007a). Also, we investigated the arguments businesses are sensitive to in the context of a survey request (Berkenbosch, 2007b).

### 3. Methods to investigate survey compliance

In this section we will describe the various channels of communication SN uses to contact respondents and to get survey compliance. We will describe the methods used to analyze these channels within the framework of compliance principles. Also the methods used to find out about the businesses’ arguments will be described.

#### 3.1 The perspective of Statistics Netherlands

To inform businesses that they have been sampled and to motivate them to participate in a survey, SN uses a number of communication channels. In our study, the following channels have been analyzed:

- Advance and reminder letters
- The website of SN (www.cbs.nl)
- The Helpdesk: letters, e-mails, telephone calls
- Interviewer protocols of Fieldwork officers and CATI interviewers
- Protocols of the Enforcement Department

These channels have been analyzed within the context of compliance principles.

The first contact a sampled business usually has with SN with regard to a survey request is an advance letter. This letter introduces the survey, but is also used to motivate and stimulate businesses to respond. In case the business does not respond in time, the business will get one or more reminder letters. In our study, we analyzed 26 letters for three different surveys: 8 advance letters, 15 reminder letters, and 3 letters giving postponement for providing the data.
To analyze these letters, we developed a checklist with items related to the six principles (Luppes, 1995). E.g., when in a letter was referred to the SN-act or the mandatory character of the survey, this was defined as an indicator for the authority principle. Thanking the respondent in advance was seen as an indicator for liking. The indicators for the six compliance principles are listed in table 1. We analyzed the letters by counting the indicators in each letter.

Table 1. Indicators for compliance principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principle</th>
<th>Indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation (Rec)</td>
<td>• Referring to statistical results,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Providing statistical information based on the survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment &amp; Consistency (Com)</td>
<td>• Listing the name of the survey,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Explaining the goal of the survey,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority (Aut)</td>
<td>•Referring to the SN-act,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentioning the mandatory character of the survey,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentioning Statistics Netherlands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social validation (Val)</td>
<td>• Indicating that the survey results will be used by the Dutch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Indicating that response is due before a certain data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity (Scr)</td>
<td>• Indicating that SN for its output is dependent of the cooperation of the respondent,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Indicating the importance of the respondent’s cooperation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking (Lkg)</td>
<td>• Enclosed return envelope that needs no stamps,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Trying to be friendly in the tone of voice,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Explaining confidentiality of the data,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Explaining reminders and apologizing in reminder letters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Mentioning helpdesk</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Indicating that others questionnaire options (paper or email) are available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thanking the respondent in advance</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After receiving one or more letters a respondent might check the website of SN (www.cbs.nl) for additional information on the survey or SN. The web pages that were included in our study, contained information with regard to the content and design of the survey, getting help (the Helpdesk), the SN-act, the mandatory character and enforcing this status, business frames, news letters, frequently asked questions (FAQ’s), and information on response burden. The checklist that was used to analyze the letters (table 1), was also used to analyze these web pages.

Apart from checking the website, business respondents may contact SN directly when they have specific questions. These questions concern e.g. general information of the survey, the necessity of the survey, and the mandatory character of the survey. Also respondents may ask postponement to provide the data, or ask for assistance with completion of the questionnaire (i.e. ask for fieldwork officer). Other respondents may contact SN to complain about the survey, and the response burden, or may indicate that they do not have the time to participate. In these cases, when SN is contacted directly, businesses will get into contact with the SN Helpdesk. The mode of contact may be a letter, an e-mail or a telephone call. Reply letters and e-mails of the helpdesk are standardized as much as possible, since frequently the same questions are posed. These letters (6) and e-mails (7) have been analyzed in our study using the checklist in table 1.

The way to answer telephone calls is not pre-scripted. Therefore, this mode was investigated by means of a focus group. Two employees of the Helpdesk participated in this focus group.

In this focus group also 7 fieldwork officers and 4 CATI interviewers participated. Fieldwork officers visit businesses to assist in the completion of a questionnaire. CATI interviewers conduct among others business survey telephone reminder calls. This also includes refusal conversion and motivating business respondents to cooperate. Because of their job, the fieldwork officers and CATI interviewers have build up a lot of experience with business contacts within the context of surveys. The participants of the focus group were asked about their practices and experiences, especially which arguments they use to motivate business respondents to cooperate. Also they were asked to indicate which arguments are persuasive, and their experiences with regard to the arguments they hear from business (see section 3.2). A separate debriefing session was organized with the CATI interviewers, to discuss their practices and experiences in more detail.

In this last focus group one member of the Enforcement Department participated. If a business does not respond after a number of predetermined reminder calls, the last step is enforcement by law. In that case a business will receive an official final
warning that they will be under penalty to comply. This communication is twofold. The first letter will inform the enterprise on the forthcoming official warning (so the business has a last chance to respond). The second letter is in fact the official proof of default, which also states the fine. A leaflet with background information is enclosed with these letters. This procedure results in intensive communication of the enterprises with the Enforcement Department, amongst others to ask for clarification. The letters, the leaflet and the handling of the telephone calls have been investigated as combined files in the light of survey compliance. All together 2 letters and 1 leaflet have been analyzed. The telephone calls have been investigated by means of the focus group.

3.2 The perspective of the business respondents

It will be clear that in all contacts SN has with its business respondents, these respondents provide information on their views on surveys and the requests to participate. To get information on why businesses are willing to pay attention to a request for participation in a survey, different sources of information on the use of compliance principles have been analyzed. These include:

- A focus group with:
  - Helpdesk: 2 employees
  - Interviewers: 7 business fieldwork officers, and 4 CATI interviewers
  - Enforcement Department (1 employee)
  - Data Cleaning Department (2 employees)
  (This is the same focus group as discussed in section 3.1.)
- Contact items from the Helpdesk and Enforcement Department (HD&ED Ci’s)
- Customer Satisfaction Inquiry (CSI)
- Inquiry on image of SN (II-SN)
- Literature review.
These sources revealed information on the arguments businesses are sensitive to with regard to a request for survey participation. They include arguments used by businesses that do respond, as well as arguments from non-respondents.

As was said before, employees of the Helpdesk, the Enforcement Department and Fieldwork officers and CATI interviewers, as well as, the Data Cleaning Department have a lot of contacts with business respondents. Since no pre-scripted protocols and no records of these contacts are available, we organized a focus group, as was described in section 3.1. The participants were asked about their practices as well as their experiences, i.e. what arguments they hear from businesses.

Records of these contacts are available in case of non-response. These databases are available at the Helpdesk and the Enforcement Department. A record, or a contact item, provides information on reasons for refusing. Some respondents indicated that would respond on certain conditions. These conditions have also been analyzed. About a 1000 contact items have been analyzed.

In the 2006 Customer Satisfaction Inquiry a number of questions on the reasons for responding were added. This CATI inquiry was, among others, conducted in the winter of 2006 with 1576 business respondents who had participated in the 2005 Annual Structural Business Survey (SBS). In this inquiry, we also investigated the respondent’s knowledge of the importance of the statistics.

In the fall of 2005, an inquiry on the image of SN was conducted (Motivaction, 2006). In this inquiry, among other groups, 2548 business respondents were contacted. Only 20% (501 businesses) were willing to cooperate and expressed their views on different aspects of the image of SN. This database was analyzed with respect to arguments on survey participation.

Apart from these sources, also a limited literature review on response burden in the Netherlands and other experiences was carried out. This literature contains a number of arguments that are used by businesses in the context of a survey request.

4. Results

In this section the results of the various analyses will be presented. It would be too detailed to describe the results of every analysis separately. Therefore, we have summarized the results and categorized the arguments used by SN and the business respondents into the compliance principles.

4.1 The perspective of Statistics Netherlands

Table 2 summarizes the results of the communication channels used by SN. For every channel it is indicated what compliance principles are used and to what extent. Below, the perspective of SN will be described for each compliance principle.
Table 2. Use of compliance principles by SN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication channel</th>
<th>Compliance Principles (see table 1 for abbreviations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters surveys</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website SN</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters HD</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-mails HD</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls HD</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CATI</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fieldworkers</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters ED</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calls ED</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reciprocation

The principle of reciprocation is used in about half of the communication channels. In these channels references are made to the SN website as the site with relevant statistical information. In personal contacts fieldworkers sometimes gave a small incentive in the form of the Statistical Yearbook. It was confirmed that SN does not give any feedback information about the surveys. A compensation for the costs in euros is not applicable.

The way this principle is used is not considered very convincing by the SN employees who participated in this study. They indicated however, that when used properly, it is a very powerful principle. The CATI interviewers e.g. mentioned that offering tailored tables on the branch of industry is very well accepted as a compensation for compliance costs (see section 4.2).

Commitment & consistency

The commitment principle is used in all channels of communication except for the e-mails from the Helpdesk. However, the persuasive power is rated low by the focus group participants. Mentioning the name of the survey, the meaning of the survey and its importance is described in the letters and the website. These items are also used in telephone and face-to-face communication. Other ways to get commitment are not used.

Social Validation

Social validation as a principle is hardly used by SN. Only the website and the fieldworkers refer sometimes to this principle, but this reference is restricted to mentioning the name of the branch to which the enterprise belongs.

Authority

Authority is by far the most used compliance principle. The type of reference depends on the mode of communication. Mentioning SN as an independent research organization is used frequently in the telephone and face-to-face communication. The letters and the website refer often to the Law on Statistics Netherlands and the mandatory character of the survey. In these communication modes SN is often referred to as an independent government institute.

This principle is also indicated as very persuasive by the focus group participants, but in a negative way. Authority is, in the way it is implemented, a negative stimulus to comply, in contrast to other principles which are positive in nature. Ultimately, it comes down to: ‘If you don’t do what I want you to do, you will be punished.’

Scarcity

This principle occurred in some letters, the website and field interviews. It refers to the fact that SN is dependent on the response of a specific enterprise and emphasizes that the response of this specific enterprise is very important for making reliable statistics.

Liking

Statistics Netherlands tries to be a likable organization, through the use of the items in the letters and website such as ‘envelopes that needs no stamps’, ‘mentioning Helpdesk’, ‘trying to be friendly in the tone of voice’ and ‘explaining reminders’. The interviewers and the Helpdesk employees use the liking principle very frequently. They try to be friendly, and try to stay calm and friendly, even when an angry and frustrated respondent calls in. They try to give adequate attention to all people who call SN, and try to help as much as possible. “This is all we can do”, they told us in the focus group, “We have no other positive means to get compliance.” As said above, also the commitment principle is used in these situations by explaining the importance of the survey, and as indicated above, this is not considered a very convincing compliance principle. The friendly, personal contact is much more powerful.

The compliance perspective of SN

Table 3 concludes this subsection with a summary of the compliance principles used by SN.

Table 3. The compliance perspective of SN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliance principles</th>
<th>Used by SN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment &amp; consistency</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social validation</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.2 The perspective of the business respondents

The analysis of the communication perspective of the business respondents gave answers on two questions:

1. Which principles have actually influenced the enterprise to participate in the last years?
2. Which (set of) compliance principle(s) generates maximum compliance?

The answers on the first questions came from the Customer Satisfaction Inquiry (CSI). Table 4 gives the percentage of the sample which answered on 4 questions regarding the reason to participate in any survey carried out by Statistics Netherlands. Basically, the mandatory participation is by far the reason to cooperate. Considerations with respect to personal or societal usefulness are hardly made.

Table 4. Results from the Customer Satisfaction Inquiry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason to participate</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major reason for participation</td>
<td>Mandatory</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results of survey are useful for my business</td>
<td>Not / Somewhat</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Results of survey are useful for the society</td>
<td>Not / Somewhat</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How important is your input</td>
<td>Not / Somewhat</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When relating these results to the compliance principles, we could conclude that the authority principle is dominant in generating compliance. Based on these results, one could also conclude that in the current situation, the other principles hardly play a role. However, the analysis of the other sources shows that this is not the case. This brings us to the second question. Table 5 provides an overview of the various analyses. When analyzing the data, it appeared that not all principles could be rated due to missing data. In table 5 this is indicated with NI: no information. In the second section of the literature review are summarized. This review is discussed in more detail in the next section.

Table 5. Sensitivity of businesses for compliance principles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data source</th>
<th>Compliance Principles (see table 1 for abbreviations)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rec</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSI</td>
<td>NI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HD&amp;ED Ci’s</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II-SN</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus group</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lit. review</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reciprocity

Businesses are highly sensitive for this principle. They are more willing to comply with a request when an incentive is provided. Some businesses regard surveys only as a nuisance: it only costs money and time, and they get nothing in return. Some remarks of the businesses are: “What is in it for me?”, or “I want you to repay me for the costs I have made to complete this questionnaire”. Most statements heard from businesses for non-participation in the survey are: “It only costs money and time!”, “The costs outweigh the added value”, “There is no added value”, “It only costs me”. The CATI interviewers indicated that offering a small gift in a reminder phone call, in the form of tailored statistical information, would be very helpful in getting businesses to respond.

In general, the effectiveness of reciprocation is confirmed in the literature (see section 5).

Commitment & Consistency

Businesses try to be consistent in their beliefs and actions. This is an internal factor affecting the decision to participate (the response behaviour). In some businesses it is felt that they should comply, e.g. because they see this task as a responsibility towards society, or because the survey results are useful for the business. Other businesses are proud to be represented in SN statistics correctly and consistently. They even might say that estimates are not good enough. Also administrative staff may see the completion of a questionnaire as part of their job and they take professional pride in doing this accurately. However, the CSI (see table 4) shows that in general businesses do not rate surveys as useful for society nor for themselves. It turns out that many business respondents have no idea why they have to fill in the questionnaire or what is going to happen with their information: “Explain to me why this is useful”. In other cases the business is not interested in the topic: “I will not participate unless the topic is of my interest”, “There is no connection with my business activities.” As a result, they feel not committed to participate.

However, as was indicated during the focus group, when the usefulness of the survey is explained, businesses are more likely to comply. Also, as is reported in the literature (see section 5), when the relationship with businesses is enhanced and when they are involved in the survey design, commitment is improved.

Social validation

The fact that ‘one should be more willing to comply with a request to the degree that one believes that similar others would comply with it’, has no influence,
according to the participants in the focus group. The businesses seem not to be that sensitive to this principle. However, this conclusion is in our study only based on one source (the focus group), since the other sources revealed no information on this compliance principle. Also, we have to take into mind that this source is an internal source, which means that the information it provides on this principle may not be very reliable.

Discussions in the Netherlands on response burden, however, show that this principle is effective (see section 5).

**Authority**
The mandatory character of business surveys is the most important argument to participate. Many businesses indicate that they respond because of this reason (see table 4): "The survey is mandatory. So I cooperate. If I don’t, I will be fined." This is a negative reason, as was discussed in section 3.1. This is also felt by businesses as a negative stimulus. One respondent said the following about this reason (Vroenhoven, 2006): "What irritates me the most is the tone of voice. Instead of emphasizing the why of surveys, SN poses threats of penalties or managerial fines in her correspondence." Other entrepreneurs tell us irritably: "Yes, yes, I know that it is mandatory, but tell me why I need to do this." These entrepreneurs would like the commitment principle to be used in stead of the authority principle.

This is also what the participants of the focus group indicated: they rather use other principles, like reciprocation, liking and commitment, than authority. They feel that the other principles are more positive ways to get compliance. In a face-to-face or telephone conversation, they use the mandatory character as the final argument, because this turns the conversation into an unpleasant one. Yet, they also feel that the authority principle is very effective as the ultimate argument to get response. This is shown by a study on the effect of enforcement on the response rate (see section 5).

The authority principle can be also be used in a positive way. Then we are referring to the fact that SN is an independent governmental organization in stead of a commercial institute. We assume that this influences the business’ decision to participate in the survey positively: the better the image of a survey organization, and the more respondents trust that institute, the more likely businesses are willing to cooperate (see also Liking, below).

**Scarcity**
The scarcity principle hardly has any effect on survey participation. It almost never occurred that a respondent decided to participate because he is unique, or because he feels that his input is important for the survey (see table 4). Instead, businesses are rather fed up with the fact that they are in the survey sample. In general, they have negative ideas about scarcity. "Once CBS has located you, it will not let you go", "I am not unique. Take another one", "I am not relevant for you", is what we hear from businesses.

**Liking**
Especially in the analysis of the Inquiry on image of SN, the importance of a customer-friendly organization was stressed. Most businesses reported the significance of a friendly, helpful and sympathetic research organization that is sensitive towards the outside world. The respondents would be more willing to participate if the research organization had this image. From the respondent’s perspective, SN should make a greater effort to think along with the businesses and use the language of the business in their surveys and communication channels.

Apart from the image of the organization, a second dimension of Liking can be identified: liking at the personal level. Having competent contact persons is also very important to get compliance. They are the face of the organization to the outside world. Interviewers, field officers, Helpdesk employees, etc. may do their utmost to be customer-friendly, understand the respondent’s point of view and try to help him, that doesn’t make the organization liked. Although, businesses may respond because they liked the friendly person at the other end of the line, what is more important to them is that SN is viewed upon as a not very sympathetic organization.

**The compliance perspective of businesses**
The combined results for an estimate of the most appropriate compliance principle in the communication with businesses are entered in table 6.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliance principles</th>
<th>Businesses are sensitive to</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment &amp; Consistency</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social validation</td>
<td>++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
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<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5. Literature review and discussion

Apart from the findings in our study, the literature also provides a number of arguments that can be related to the compliance principles. These arguments are supplementary to our results. In this section we discuss a number of these arguments (without being complete in our overview) and link these to the use and effectiveness of the compliance principles. The issues discussed in the literature have been summarized in table 5.

Reciprocation
In 2002 Willimack et al. (2002, p. 225) discussed the decision to participate. They indicated that “survey participation is considered a non-productive activity, resulting in a cost to the business that does not generate profit.” As a result, participation in a survey has no priority to the business, and “in order to reduce costs, businesses seek efficiencies in the response task.”

What is central to businesses is reduction of compliance costs. The compliance cost is associated with the completion of questionnaires. An often heard argument in the Netherlands is that completion of questionnaires, like the Annual Structural Business Survey questionnaire, is very time-consuming and burdensome, and that they get nothing in return. This can be concluded from many pre-test studies (see e.g. Snijkers, Onat & Vis-Visschers, 2007; Giesen, 2007; Snijkers & Luppes, 2000). Many aspects of the questionnaire are involved in the response burden, like mismatch in definitions, and poor layout. For a more detailed discussion on response burden and questionnaire design we refer to Haraldsen and Jones (2007), and Dowling and Stettler (2007) (see also Commitment & Consistency, below).

When reduction of compliance costs cannot be arranged, businesses want to be compensated for those costs (as discussed in section 4.2). Recent experiences in a number of countries with improved contact strategies show that reciprocation plays an essential role in these strategies. In Spain e.g. providing feedback to providers of information is an essential pillar in a contact strategy of a voluntary survey conducted by the Central Bank (Ortega, 2007). This is also the case for the communication strategy as carried out by the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (Gruber, 2007).

The actual number of studies on improving compliance by incentives in business surveys however is very limited, which is in contrast to the attention given to this issue in the area of social surveys (see e.g. Groves, et al, 2004; Biemer & Lyberg, 2003; Singer, 2002). A meta-analysis carried out by De Leeuw et al. (2007) on the influence of advance letters on response in telephone household surveys, shows that reciprocation is effective. They conclude that using a reciprocity argument in the advance letter improves both the cooperation and the response rate.

A study on the effectiveness of incentives in business surveys has been carried at the Australian Bureau of Statistics (Burnside et al., 2005). In this study, the incentive was a secure download of the publication to which providers had contributed. This study showed a positive effect on the response rates.

In 2006-2007, Statistics Netherlands has carried out a pilot providing benchmark information to business respondents of the Quarterly Short Term Survey (Boschma, 2005; Boschma & Snijker, 2006). A mailing was sent out one week after the questionnaire for the last quarter was received. The mailing contained a chart with time series information on the reported data by the establishment and was enriched by information of the branch of industry. As such, the mailing served as an incentive as well as a reminder. The pilot lasted for a year (July 2006 - July 2007), in which four benchmark mailings have been sent out. A qualitative analysis (Waninge, 2007) showed that businesses liked the mailing: they get something in return. A quantitative analysis, to research the actual effects on the response rates, has not yet been completed.

Commitment & Consistency
The commitment principle can be related to research carried out with regard to response burden. The Dutch research institute EIM Business & Policy Research has done research into this issue. They conclude that, although in the Netherlands the actual response burden caused by SN is very low (0,12% of the total as caused by government regulations; Snijker, 2007), businesses are irritated by surveys from SN and other organizations like the Chambers of Commerce (Vendrig, 2005). The EIM states (Ibid.: pp. 9-10; see also Boog, Jansen & Nijsen, 2004): “The statistical obligations are considered as THE administrative burden that irritates entrepreneurs the most. The statistical obligations are not even mentioned in the summary of the main causes for the administrative burden. (...) Businesses want to get rid of the obligations that are most removed from their own business processes.” They have to fulfill obligations “for which they have not been consulted and which they consider pointless. As soon as they do see the value of these obligations and/or there is a connection with their business activities, the irritation decreases immediately.”
As the three main irritations the EIM lists (Vendrig, 2005): the supply of pointless and double information, the general usefulness of surveys, and the number of obligations. Also the Dutch committee for the reduction of the administrative burden for businesses, the Stevens Committee, discusses this and calls “irritating compliance costs a result of unnecessary information obligations and interpretation differences about definitions” (Stevens Committee, 2005) the second most annoying obligation in the top ten of irritating obligations. It seems that these conclusions not only hold for the Netherlands. Haraldsen and Jones (2007) indicate that in Norway and the UK response burden is also caused by perceived uselessness of surveys, and mismatch between questions and available information.

In other words, what the EIM institute and the Stevens Committee indicate, is that -as for surveys- no ground for commitment has been established. When the reason for conducting surveys would be better explained, and when it would be better tailored to the businesses’ processes, and when businesses would be involved in the design process, compliance would improve because of better commitment. This is also concluded from pre-test studies at SN (Giesen, 2007): “… respondents should be informed about what happens to the data.” This would influence their decision to participate and their answering behaviour.

Experiences around the world provide evidence that this is indeed the case. In Austria (Pfeiffer & Walter, 2007), Finland (Jeskanen-Sundström, 2007), Spain (Ortega, 2007), the USA (Gruber, 2007), and New Zealand (Barrow, 2007) open and active contact strategies have been implemented in order to reduce response burden and improve survey compliance. According to these experiences, improvement of the relationship with providers of information has a positive effect on survey participation.

**Social validation**

In our study we did not find many data on the effectiveness of social validation in the context of business surveys. According to Cialdini (2007) its persuasive impact is underestimated, and as a result is underemployed. And other sources do in fact provide some evidence that this principle is effective.

In the discussions on response burden in Dutch politics, in the news papers and by business organisations, the focus is on the burden of official surveys in stead of the necessity. In these discussions the usefulness of statistics to society is hardly mentioned. We may assume that this affects the survey climate in a negative way. Entrepreneurs will agree with the arguments mentioned in these discussions, and as a result are reluctant to comply with survey requests. Eventually, they will respond, because otherwise they will be fined.

On the business level, social validation is also effective. From businesses organisations we know that they get many telephone calls from businesses to ask about the compliance with survey requests. This includes survey requests from SN, as well as requests from other organisations like the Chambers of Commerce and the businesses organisations themselves. Businesses call to ask for which surveys they have to cooperate. Then, they are told that they have to comply with the SN surveys at all times, since these are mandatory. Thus, businesses cooperate because organisations they identify with tell them to do so. (However, we are wondering what would happen when the surveys would not be mandatory.)

**Authority**

The authority principle has been discussed above in great detail. It was stated that this principle is effective. This is confirmed by an analysis on the effect of enforcement on the response for the Short Term Statistics in the Netherlands (Smeets, 2006). This study shows that the response rate was increased by almost 7% because of enforcement. Also it was concluded that the timeliness of the response was improved.

However, in section 4.2, we also discussed that enforcement is a not very positive stimulus to get compliance. These experiences are confirmed by experiences in Austria. Pfeiffer and Walter (2007) state that in a contact strategy the survey organisation should stress the service orientation towards providers of information, and use the fact that is mandatory as little as possible.

On the other hand, business staff who complete the questionnaires, is not always negative about the mandatory character of surveys. They use this argument to convince their boss that it was indeed necessary for them to spend time on the questionnaire (Giesen, 2007).

**Scarcity**

In our confined review we could identify issues related to scarcity. There is, however, one issue we would like to discuss under this heading. This is the fact that for business surveys not all units are of equal importance to get reliable estimates: larger businesses are more important than smaller ones. Therefore, we assume that this principle is more effective for large companies. Those companies are aware of the fact that their contributions are crucial to get reliable statistics.
Liking
When reviewing the experiences in other countries, as discussed with the commitment principle above (Barrow, 2007; Gruber, 2007; Jeskanen-Sundström (2007), Ortega, 2007; Pfeiffer & Walter, 2007), it becomes clear that these survey organisations try to be sympathetic. A lot of effort is put in building up a good relationship with businesses. Both a good relationship and a positive image are very helpful in getting survey compliance (see also Dowling & Stettler, 2007).

5. The decision to participate
We started our study by asking ourselves why businesses are paying attention to a request for survey participation, even if they see no interest in this action for their business. We researched this question by a concise qualitative study giving insights in the arguments used by SN, as well as looking into the arguments that count for businesses. The answer to our question is summarized in table 7.

Table 7: Compliance principle used by businesses and Statistics Netherlands

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compliance principles</th>
<th>Business are sensitive to</th>
<th>Used by SN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reciprocation</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment &amp; Consistency</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social validation</td>
<td>++</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scarcity</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liking</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+++</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The striking conclusion from table 7 is that the arguments used by SN do not match the arguments that count for businesses. In other words, the current persuasion strategy is not very convincing, due to differences in perspective.

Two principles seem to be in accordance with each other: authority and liking. The current strategy is almost solely based on authority, and it works, but at the cost of sympathy. The other principle that seems persuasive is liking. However, we have seen that we can distinguish between two dimensions: liking at the personal level and liking at the organisational level. SN does it utmost to be friendly at the personal level, which is effective. But, businesses do not like survey organisations that do not take their position into account.

Many businesses participate because the survey is mandatory. However, our analysis shows that a strategy that is based on more positive principles, like reciprocation, commitment, social validation, and liking would be more preferred by businesses. Authority, in the sense of enforcement, may be used as a last remedy.

A strategy based on these principles would include:
- **Reciprocation:**
  - Making outputs that are immediately useful to businesses;
  - Providing incentives and feedback (benchmarking).
- **Commitment:**
  - Involving businesses in the survey design;
  - Explaining why the survey is useful;
  - Looking for equal interests for both the survey organization and the businesses.
- **Social validation:**
  - Looking for equal interests among businesses and stressing those interests;
  - Cooperating with businesses organizations and having them involved in the survey process.
- **Liking:**
  - Using the principles above;
  - Using the language of the businesses;
  - Not treating business respondents as numbers but with respect;
  - Not stressing authority that much.

As for scarcity we suggest to tailor the contact strategy to business size: for large companies the scarcity principle is effective, for small and middle-sized companies it may backfire. Also we recommend making a difference in the contact strategy for newly sampled businesses and businesses that are trained respondents. To newly sampled businesses the survey and its context has to be introduced in a more detailed way. Businesses that have been sampled before for the same survey know the context and the questionnaire. Taking into account that people read badly, a shorter, straightforward introduction will do for those businesses.

Although, there is hardly any quantitative evidence on the effectiveness of this communication strategy, we believe that it is effective in both motivating businesses to comply and the reduction of (in particular) the perceived response burden (see figure 1). This will in its turn affect the decision to participate and the answering behaviour in a positive way, and thus yields improved business survey response (the level, timeliness, item non-response, accuracy). Our assumptions are based on a number of experiences around the world, as well as the fact that such a communication strategy is based on accepted social norms for human interaction.
Acknowledgements

We’d like to thank Wout Slotegraaf, Hans van Oostrum, and Lia Kempkens who assisted us in this project, as well as the colleagues who participated in the focus group. Also, we are grateful to Robert Cialdini for reviewing the draft version of this paper.

References


Figure 1. A response model for business surveys