

tools of the trade

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Conducting Surveys

Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method. Don A. Dillman. New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1978. 325 pp. \$34.95.

This book is a practical and comprehensive guide to data collection using mail and telephone surveys. As such, it's an

extremely useful tool for the Extension evaluator, neophyte or experienced, in helping to minimize costs and maximize quality and quantity of data.

The Total Design Method (TDM) encompasses the entire realm of data collection from selection of approach to obtaining response. Dillman presents his step-by-step procedures in a clear and easy-to-follow manner, describing in detail not only what to do at each stage of the process, but also why it's important. He identifies potential problem areas, and proposes solutions based on both research and his own wealth of personal experience. He effectively augments his ideas and approaches with numerous examples, most of which can be easily related to Extension evaluation.

The first chapter presents the TDM approach, emphasizing the basic social exchange theory concepts of minimizing costs, maximizing rewards, and establishing trust. These concepts serve as the foundation for the processes delineated throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter Two provides a comprehensive and useful analysis of the relative advantages and disadvantages of mail and telephone surveys as alternatives to face-to-face interviews. The advantages and disadvantages are summarized in table form for easy reference.

The middle five chapters give about equal treatment to the mail and telephone approaches. Detailed attention is given to structuring items to collect specific kinds of information, wording items for reliability, establishing the instrument format, and developing a systematic approach to achieve maximum response. The sections dealing with question wording and maximizing response are particularly comprehensive and helpful.

It's to Dillman's credit that he presents results of his method. For example, for 50 mail surveys, the response rate averaged 74%, and for 31 telephone surveys, it was 91%. This alone should convince most Extension evaluators to seriously consider his TDM procedures.

It's difficult to find fault with Dillman's work. Although the book falls somewhat short in its discussion of sampling in that little is included on sampling bias or error, and ethical considerations of data collection are treated superficially, it remains one of the best resources available on data collection.

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