“It’s not what you say, it’s how you say it” – How communication skills can improve recruitment in CATI surveys

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Nonresponse is a major challenge in CATI surveys. Respondents prevented from participating, not being able to contact respondents, and refusals are the main causes of nonresponse. Our most important “tool” for recruiting respondents to participate in CATI surveys, are the interviewers. This article focuses on how to recruit more interviews among those we are able to establish contact with.

In 2018, Statistics Norway’s support service started working on how to improve communication techniques in incoming calls, by increasing self-consciousness about personal vocal communication skills. In this context, vocal communication refers to paralinguistic features and voice characteristics, such as volume, speed, and intonation. The concept and method are created by Oddvar Johnsen[[1]](#footnote-2). The goal is to increase customer satisfaction and efficiency. This work has been valuable to our support service’s self-consciousness about what techniques to use to guide incoming calls more efficiently.

Realizing vocal communication skills are also relevant for our interviewers, we decided to extend the project to also include outgoing calls. Where customer service is the main goal for incoming calls, the focus for outgoing calls is how to persuade respondents to participate in CATI surveys.

As of today, interviewers at Statistics Norway are introduced to the importance of vocal communication skills during their introductory course. With this project, we want to operationalize and systemize a continuous communication training, where interviewers learn to self-reflect on skills. In the long run, our goal is to develop a culture within the interviewer organization, where feedback is accepted and expected. Our hypothesis is that increased knowledge and awareness amongst our interviewers on vocal communication skills will have a positive effect on nonresponse in CATI surveys. While increased focus on vocal skills might also have impact on the interview itself, this article will focus mainly on the introduction phase.

# Interviewer-respondent interaction

Today, one of the major methods of data collection in household surveys is telephone interviewing. With declining response rates, multiple studies have acknowledged the role interviewers play in nonresponse, and that interviewers’ social and vocal skills influence interaction with respondents (O’Brien et.al. 2006, Hox & de Leeuw 2002, Van der Vaart et.al. 2005, Broome 2015). The decision to participate in a CATI survey, results from many factors. While some nonresponse can be ascribed to features of the population, studies have recognized that speech and voice characteristics of telephone interviewers may be of particular importance as visible aspects of communication is absent (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005, Groves & Couper 1992, O’Brien et.al., 2006, Darrant & D’Arrigo 2014, Hox & de Leuuw 2002). Most refusals occur immediately after establishing contact with respondents (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005). As only the auditive channel is available in telephone surveys, interviewers cannot use smiles or gestures when interacting with respondents. This limits interviewers to only use verbal and paralinguistic cues (Hox et.al. 1998, Snijkers et.al. 1999). That means telephone interviewers have less opportunity to keep interaction going. Most refusals happen during the body of introduction. Therefore, voice characteristics is likely to affect the first reaction of the respondent (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005, snijkers et.al. 1999, Oksenberg et.al. 1986)

Some interviewers are more successful than others, which supports theory that what they say and how they say affects the respondents’ decision to participate or not. An interviewer must therefore create a sufficiently attractive impression by only using verbal cues. This implies that voice, speech, and interaction play an important role in nonresponse (Benki et.al. 2011, Oksenberg et.al. 1986).

# How do vocal communication influence interviewer success?

We know that interviewer-respondent communication influence nonresponse, but in what way are vocal communication techniques valuable to the interviewer role? Studies indicate that interviewers having moderate fluent speaking rates, greater loudness, and intonation, tend to have higher response rates (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005, Benki et.al.2011).

These properties convey information regarding the physical and emotional state of the interviewer as well as his or her competency and enthusiasm (Benki et.al.2011). In other words; “it is not *what* you say, but *how* you say it”.

*Volume* is important to how the recipient perceives you. Van der Vaart et.al. (2005) found that interviewers with higher response rates were rated as having greater loudness. Studies also show a correlation between loudness, self-confidence, and perceived competence (Benki et.al. 2011, Oksenberg et.al. 1986). Talking too loudly can be perceived as threatening by the respondent, while using a too soft volume can make you come across as insecure and less competent, in turn making it harder to convince the recipient to participate in the survey (ibid). Thus, the importance of amplitude can also be emphasized, as it expresses interest and enthusiasm that contributes to a positive impression and making the purpose of the call more attractive to the respondents.

When it comes to *pitch*, we talk about two extremes; high(bright) and low(deep). High pitch can be used to show understanding and empathy and is also perceived as being more likable and submissive. Low pitch can make you seem more competent and convincing; thus, it is also linked to having authority and dominance (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005, Benki et.al. 2011, Oksenberg et.al. 1986). Respondents tend to be more willing to agree with people they like and people they consider an authority figure (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005). Although different studies have not been able to conclude that either high or low pitch have positive effects on response rates, multiple studies conclude that successful interviewers have a higher variation in pitch, or intonation, as they can convey information more efficiently, and are perceived as more enthusiastic (Van der Vaart et.al. 2005, Benki et.al. 2005, Oksenberg et.al. 1986). Intonation also makes the interviewer sound more vivid and not robotic, making it easier to hold the interest of the respondent.

The use of *pauses* affects the talking speed in a conversation. Conrad et.a.(2010) suggest, adding a natural small pause (2-3 secs) will give the respondent time to comprehend the message and confirmation of understanding. Such breaks will make the conversation more comfortable and allow time for *backchannels* (verbal affirmations) such as “ok” and “I see”. Allowing for this engagement have proven to increase likelihood of agreeing to be interviewed (Conrad et.al. 2010). Studies conclude that a moderate number of pauses correlates with higher response rate (Benki et.al. 2011, Van der Vaart et.al. 2005)

To avoid silent pauses, one tends to use *fillers* such as “um”, “er”, and “uh”. Fillers are often used when a speaker is anticipating a delay in his or her speech, but don’t want to give up the floor. These utterances often go unnoticed by the respondent and their presence does not necessarily harm ratings of the interviewers’ persuasiveness (Benki et.al. 2011, Conrad et.al. 2010). The presence of fillers, if used correctly, may be viewed as a characteristic of thoughtful and relaxed speakers. Several studies have found that interviewer speech that contained a moderate amount of fillers was more successful in recruitment than both perfectly fluent speech (without fillers) and slow speech with too many fillers (Benki et.al. 2011, Conrad et.al. 2010). Benki et.al. (2011) speculate that the absence of fillers may sound scripted, while too many will be perceived as less competent. Conrad et. al (2010) emphasize that the absence of fillers can be viewed as fluent and competent when focusing on intonation, loudness and clear pronunciation.

Multiple studies have shown that *rapid speech* is perceived as more credible, intelligent, and objective, thus rapid speech has positive effects on persuasiveness and higher response rates (Benki et.al. 2011, Oksenberg et.al. 1986, Van der Vaart et.al. 2005). However, Oksenberg et.al. (1986) stresses the importance of clear speech and distinct pronunciation. By talking too fast, one risks swallowing words, making it harder for the respondent to understand the message. However, talking too slowly and using too many fillers can make the conversation feel protracted.

Seeing as these techniques have value for the interviewer role and nonresponse, Statistics Norway have started working to increase the competence of vocal skills among our interviewers. The implicit assumption is that increased knowledge and awareness on own communication skills, can contribute to reducing voice characteristics that lead to nonresponse. E.g. make fast speaking interviewers slow down, reduce fillers, increase loudness and emphasize the importance of pitch variation to avoid sounding monotone.

For the interviewers to improve on vocal communication skills, it is not enough to simply introduce the different techniques and ask them to practice it. How we communicate is, to some extent, a subconscious process (Cyna et.al. 2011). Hence, our goal is to make the interviewers able to reflect on own skills and become self-conscious on their speech. To improve skills and change behavior, one needs to be aware of inherent characteristics. This is when observation and feedback become valuable.

# How do we improve vocal communication skills among interviewers?

After looking at how the different vocal communication skills may affect nonresponse, the question becomes how to train interviewers in vocal techniques. Interviewers can be trained to engage in some of the behaviours that seem to be associated with more successful contacts (Benki et.al. 2011). Although many factors of nonresponse cannot be attributed to internal factors of the interviewer, Groves & McGonagle (2001) acknowledge *tailoring* and *maintaining interaction* as two important strategies that interviewers use to seek cooperation from the respondent. These strategies can be learned, and experienced interviewers more easily adapt to behaviours of the respondent. Communication skills are important aspects of tailoring and maintaining interaction (Groves & McGonagle 2001, O’Brien et.al. 2006). Thus, we can look at vocal communication skills as something that can be taught.

Johnsen put great emphasis on the importance of feedback – a structured and guided self-reflection - as a valuable tool to teach communication skills. Other studies have also acknowledged that self-reflection has positive effects on vocal skill training (Sterling et.al. 2016). Johnsen’s feedback structure is the method we now are implementing in our training. The assumption is that structured feedback as a tool will help Statistics Norway systemize our communication training and implement a culture that encourages interviewers to think critically about their work and reflect on how they can improve their skills. Note that a feedback is not a “one-time” exercise, but each interviewer should get a feedback on a regular basis, minimum twice a year.

The main aim of the feedback process is to make the interviewer self-conscious on own behavior. To make the interviewer willing to change their communication, we have to make sure that they feel ownership to the feedback they are receiving. That is why we follow a structured dialogue where the observer guides the interviewer (participant) through self-reflection.

To make sure that the feedback structure is followed, the interviewer is first informed about the method. The observer and interviewer then agree upon a few focus points, e.g. volume and pauses, that the interviewer want to focus on during the feedback. Allowing the interviewer to decide the focus points contributes to the interviewer getting ownership of the outcome.

Following the introduction, the interviewer will make one call while being observed. Whether the call results in a refusal or an interview, is not relevant to the feedback. When the call is ended, the observer and interviewer spend a few minutes reflecting separately on the focus points.

During the next step, the observer will steer the reflection by asking questions, allowing the interviewer to reflect on how he or she performed during the call. During this phase, the observer makes sure that all observations have been reflected upon by the interviewer before moving on to the next step. This is a very important step of the feedback process as the self-reflection gives ownership of the outcome of the feedback (Harford 2008). By creating ownership, we increase likelihood of the interviewer agreeing on observations made by the observer and willingness to set goals and practice in between feedbacks (ibid). This will reduce the risk of the interviewer being defensive or not understanding observations that were made. After allowing the interviewer to reflect, the observer shares observations made during the call.

Finally, the observer and interviewer agree upon a plan. The interviewer chooses focus points based on the feedback and creates an action plan until the next feedback, e.g. practicing self-reflection after one phone call every day, or hanging a post it on their computer as a reminder.

For the feedback to be successful, it is important that the observer has the necessary qualifications. In order to create a safe environment where feedback is welcomed, it is imperative to create a trusting relationship between the interviewer and the observer. Therefore, Statistics Norway is now working on certifying more observers in Johnsen’s feedback method.

As of now, we are working to make the interviewers familiar with the different techniques. In order to create ownership and enthusiasm around structured feedback and communication training, we will start by giving feedback to a selected group of interviewers. This group will then act as motivators when implementing structured feedback among the rest. In the long run, they should be able to give each other constructive feedback. Regularly feedback will help us achieve continuous learning by allowing interviewers to see their learning in new ways and gain increased satisfaction from it. In order for the interviewers to accept feedback as a training method, they must feel ownership to the project as a whole. Therefore, we will make sure to regularly give updates on process, best practices, experiences and challenges. We will also have fora’s where they can share ideas and thoughts of their own.

# Concluding thoughts

As shown, vocal communication skills can be valuable for recruiting more respondents in CATI surveys. As we are still in the early stages of the project, we are yet to measure how interviewer communication training impact nonresponse. However, we plan to measure the effects by studying results of 1st contact with respondents, interviewer satisfaction, and respondent satisfaction.

Although we are yet to conclude on long term effects, our preliminary findings suggest that teaching communication skills has positive effects on the interviewers. Many of the interviewers find it motivating to gain more knowledge about how to communicate with respondents and recognize that the course has provided them with increased awareness of vocal communication skills[[2]](#footnote-3). The interviewers we, so far, have had feedbacks with, also seem happy to get input on how they can improve and get conscious on their own performance in the various techniques.

The long-term goal is to implement vocal communication skills as an integral part of the continuous training of our interviewers, and using feedback, both structured and between the interviewers themselves, as a tool in the process to achieve this.

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1. All references to Oddvar Johnsen are retrieved from personal communication. This includes both oral and written material from his course: “Communication techniques in customer service”. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Personal communication with interviewers [↑](#footnote-ref-3)