

THE VIABILITY OF THE LOST LETTER TECHNIQUE*¹

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SUMMARY

The lost letter technique was used to investigate consumer attitudes on two potential pharmaceutical services: taking of blood pressures and performing physical examinations in pharmacies. The methodology consisted of "losing" approximately 500 letters around three pharmacies with addresses that indicated favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward these services. The reliability of the lost letter was gauged through the use of simultaneously administered 300 in-store questionnaires investigating the same issues. Questionnaire respondents were opposed to both services, but only significantly so in the case of physical examinations. However, the lost letter technique results on both issues were nonsignificant; i. e., respondents were neither for nor against such services. In view of the questionnaire results, it may not be possible to replicate the findings of the lost letter technique. A possible problem with this methodology is that it may be insensitive to noncontroversial issues. When this technique is used, special consideration should be given to issues and sample size.

The possibility of biased results and declining response rates have stimulated the use of unobtrusive research methods. Developed by Milgram, the lost letter technique is considered unobtrusive because an individual unknowingly becomes a respondent by mailing a "lost" letter. Previous research has, however, identified methodological weaknesses. It has been suggested, for instance, that this technique is inappropriate for subtle questions, that the rate of return varies for reasons other than attitudinal differences, and that there is a large uncontrolled variance resulting from the return of letters by people who oppose the issue, have formulated no opinion, or are unqualified as respondents (1, 3, 4, 5, 6). The purpose of the present study was (a) to determine whether the lost letter is a viable data collection strategy, and (b) to evaluate its applicability in pharmaceutical socioeconomic research.

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The following techniques were employed: (a) a preliminary questionnaire was utilized to generate one subtle or noncontroversial question (i. e., pharmacists should take blood pressures) and one polar or controversial question (i. e., pharmacists should perform physical examinations); (b) 510 letters were "lost" in the parking lots of three pharmacies, half addressed to the positive side of each issue, half to the negative; (c) concurrently, 100 self-administered questionnaires dealing with the same issue were distributed by field workers in each of the three sample pharmacies.

Sixty-nine percent of the lost letters and 55% of the questionnaires were returned. The lost letters revealed that consumer attitudes were not significantly for or against either question at the .05 level using a chi square test. The questionnaire results supported the lost letters in that they were neither significantly for nor against pharmacies taking blood pressures, but they differed in that consumers in all pharmacies opposed the pharmacist performing physical exams ($\chi^2 = 42.25, 34.13, \text{ and } 20.45$ for the three pharmacies, $df = 1$).

Of the five hypotheses formulated, the first was rejected, corroborating Bolton's conclusion that the ability of the lost letter technique to provide attitudinal measurements reliably appears doubtful assuming that the questionnaire is a reliable method (2). The next three hypotheses could not be rejected, indicating that the technique may not be applicable for noncontroversial questions, or that the results were confounded by the return of letters for reasons other than the addressed issue. The last hypothesis was rejected, which questions the assumption that an unreturned letter opposes the issue to which it was addressed.

In addition to supporting many of the limitations previously associated with the lost letter technique and questioning the assumption that an unreturned letter voices an opinion, this study also suggests that there may be an upper boundary on the number of letters which can be used, raises the question of ethics with respect to this type of research method, and leads to the conclusion that the lost letter technique may be applicable only to very publicized issues.

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