Re-designing respondent communication: a respondent centred approach

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"I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter. I didn't have time to write you a short one." (Blaise Pascal)

Motivating respondents to participate in a survey is not an easy feat. National Statistics Offices and private research institutions have always struggled to find and hone the most effective instruments, such as invitation and reminder letters, to increase participation rates and minimise bias. In Austria, the Labour Force Survey (LFS) is part of the so-called Micro Census (MC) and participation is compulsory by law. This might lead to the conclusion that instruments that boost participation are not instrumental in the survey. In this paper, we argue that respondent communication should always be centred around the respondent's needs and that it is pivotal for respondents to be able to understand what is asked of them.

A case for accessibility

Grotlüschen et al. (2012: 19ff.) have studied reading faculties of German speaking persons in Germany aged 18 to 64 years and found that functional illiteracy is a phenomenon more wide-spread than one would expect in the German context. According to Hartig & Riekmann (2012: 110ff.), the study works with five categories of literacy. Alpha 1 means people are able to read and write single letters (0,6 % of participants), in Alpha 2 people can read and write single words (3,9 %), in Alpha 3 one can read and write short sentences but not a cohesive text (10,0 %), and people in Alpha 4 possess a vocabulary on elementary school level but have problems reading and writing cohesive texts (25,9 %). The fifth and highest level, > Alpha 4, unites all people with higher skills than Alpha 4 (59,7 %).

Levels of Literacy	Alpha-Level	Share of adult population in Germany
Functional illiteracy	α 1	0.6 %
	α 2	3.9 %
	α 3	10.0 %
Subtotal		14.5 %
Insufficient reading & writing skills	α 4	25.9 %
Total		**40.4%**

S: Grotlüschen et al. (2012: 20) – leo. – Level-One Study, n=8.436 German speaking persons aged 18-64 in private households

Grotlüschen et al. (2012) define functional illiteracy as pertaining to groups Alpha 1-3. Having said that, it is also difficult for people in Alpha 4 to understand the ramifications that come with a compulsory survey such as the LFS, especially as a refusal to participate entails legal consequences. In short, we expect that four out of ten participants are not able to fully grasp complicated legal or academic texts. Translated to the Austrian Micro Census sample, around 60 000 people are concerned each year.[1] It is thus pivotal to transition to a communication design that ensures accessibility for the majority of participants, preferably for everyone. Inclusive communication design builds on two pillars: language and graphic design.

Plain language as a means to increase accessibility

Plain language is a way to foster understanding in addressees through several key areas, according to PLAIN (2023). In terms of vocabulary, it uses the simplest possible words, a conversational tone, avoids jargons and keeps sentences short and in an active voice. Nonetheless, it is important to not use "too plain" a language as it puts people with good language skills off. To hit the right tone and achieve a maximum of accessibility, Bock (2019: 16) states five areas a good plain text depends on: the reader, the text's purpose, content, the reading situation and the author/client. The big question here is: Is the text adequate for the situation it is published in? It is adequate if it befits the reader's level of reading, doesn't presume too much prior knowledge and doesn't underestimate the reader's capabilities either. It is adequate if the text's purpose is clear and the reader can understand and contextualise the text's contents and intents. A text is adequate if it befits the content in a way that it is as sophisticated as necessary while as simple as possible. It is adequate if it befits the situation the reader finds themselves in when reading it, be it short and concise

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[1] Population of the Austrian Micro Census 2023: 143 458 persons >18 years in private households.

information conveyed in a stressful situation or a longer text that can be read several times. And last but not least, a text is adequate if it befits its sender. It would most probably irritate respondents to receive a letter from a National Statistics Office that is fluorescent yellow and full of jokes (Bock 2019: 18).

In the case of the Micro Census/LFS invitation letters, we collected questions respondents could have when reading the invitation letter:

- Who is the sender?
- What is the message?
- What is the letter about?
- Who has to participate in the survey?
- Why should one participate?
- When should one participate?
- How can one participate?

What is one's benefit from participation?

Additionally, we asked ourselves:

- Who are our readers?
- Where/in which situation will the letter likely be read?

Answering all those questions in short, concise language provided us with the building blocks needed for a good invitation letter. The question-answer-scheme is continued in our letters: readers can pick and chose to read the answer to the question they have and ignore others.

When editing the texts for these building blocks, it is pivotal to make sure the sentences are not too long and that the texts are not too complex. At the same time, the degree of detail chosen must not lead to a loss in information or meaning, lest the information becomes misleading. Additionally, some respondents might wish to know more than the basics, such as the data protection policy or a more detailed description of the survey and (preliminary) results. We therefore included a possibility to access those pieces of information for the reader.

Graphic design is vital

Solely using plain language is not enough to render a letter accessible for most people. Graphic design and its rules regarding to typography, imagery and layout on the page do not only play a supporting role in making texts comprehensible but are a vital part.

The probably smallest but most used tool to enhance accessibility of a letter is typography: which font to use and how letters are to be arranged in relation to each other. Alexander (2019: 30f.)

states that it is best to use fonts that are simple with well distinguishable characters, especially if they resemble each other, such as the upper-case *i*, the lower-case *L* and the number *1*, as illustrated in figure 1.[2]

Figure 1: Recognizability & distinguishability of fonts (Fontsmith 2016)

The layout of the text on the page can serve as a means to enhance the legibility of texts. In the case of the LFS invitation letters, we made sure that elements like line spacing, the structural construction of the page and the relationship between images and text have a positive impact on cognitive perception, stimulus processing and recall, as proposed by Alexander (2019: 40). When it comes to graphic elements like images and icons, we followed Christmann (2017:45) who advocates for a frugal use of graphics that foster motivation and attention. Alexander (2019:51) reports that text memory increases by 44% in people who do not read fluently if pictures are used in a way that supports the text rather than complete it. Images do not serve the purpose to entertain but are a means to increase the motivation to read and to decrease the fear of reading. For the LFS invitation letters, we decided on using an array of icons that ensure that the key medium present is the text and the reader can profit from a complementary relationship between the text and the icons.

Invitation letters that work

After a thorough textual and graphic redesign of Statistics Austria's invitation letters according to the principles outlined above, several survey projects implemented the new respondent communication. The response rates show, that a more accessible communication has a direct impact on respondent participation, be it in enterprise surveys or personal surveys. The following two examples illustrate this trend: After several years of declining response rates, the survey on information and communication technologies (ICT) usage in enterprises has experienced an increase in

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[2] Note that the standard font *Calibri* does not differentiate between i and L: I vs. l. While customary in texts such as this article, it is not well suited for respondent-centred communication.

response from 46.8 % in 2022 to 63.5 % in 2023. The Austrian Tourism Demand Statistics have reached a participation of 24-25 % after several years of fluctuating between 17 % and 9 %.
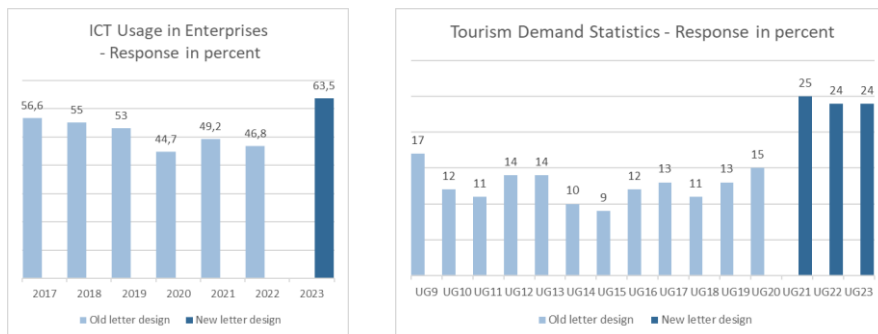
S: Statistics Austria: Response rates of ICT Usage in Enterprises and Toursim Demand Statistics

While it is clear that response rates are not a determining factor in a compulsory survey such as the Labour Force Survey, an increase in the willingness to participate in voluntary surveys at such a scale – especially in times of overall decreasing participation – indicates, that respondent communication that is tailored to the respondents' needs, adds to the degree of acceptance of the survey project and the NSO in the population. A compulsory survey imposes an especially high burden on respondents, which in turn should increase scrutiny of NSOs to assume their responsibility to make their survey projects as accessible as possible for everybody who is asked to participate. Invitation letters are the first step respondents have to take in the survey participation process. They should be a tool of support, not a hurdle.

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