ABSTRACT: Survey research of top managers is critical to addressing many contemporary research questions in the field of strategic management. Yet, the threat of low response rates has discouraged many researchers from attempting this type of work, steering the field of strategic management away from issues related to strategic process. This article provides an empirical examination of factors that determine the likelihood and quality of response to top management surveys. More generally, we advance a theoretical perspective on survey response rooted in social influence theory that should help researchers make better choices about the design of their survey questionnaires.
Questionnaire surveys of top management have historically suffered from very low response rates, which increase the risk of sample selection bias (Heckman, 1979; Fowler, 1993). Sample selection bias, in turn, threatens the internal and external validity of statistical tests performed on the data (Berk, 1983). Thus, for those interested in studying top executives, survey research is perceived to be a risky endeavor and many researchers are deterred from attempting this type of work. Yet, questionnaire surveys, especially aimed at top executives, are critical to addressing many contemporary research questions in the field of strategic management. Many topics of interest simply cannot be addressed with available archival data and top executives are often the only individuals with the necessary knowledge to answer questions concerning organizational-level phenomena, especially issues related to strategic process (Zajac, 1990; Pettigrew, 1992). The aversion to survey research directed at top executives has thus limited the types of questions that strategy scholars have asked, and steered the field of strategic management towards macro and content oriented research that can be examined with more easily accessible archival data. Some have lamented that issues relating to strategic process and the human side of strategy have been greatly underexplored (Hambrick, 2004). For example, more fine grained phenomena among top managers including various social and cognitive processes involved in the formulation and implementation of strategy remain largely understudied.

There are many reasons why executives do not respond to questionnaire surveys. Executives are exceedingly busy individuals who often lack sufficient time to perform critical job demands, let alone respond to an academic survey. In addition, some surveys call for potentially sensitive data about the firm that executives are reluctant to reveal,
despite promises of confidentiality. Some executives may not respond due to lack of interest in the study or a company policy against returning questionnaires (Baruch, 1999). Despite these obstacles, however, some research demonstrates that executives can be successfully surveyed with adequate response rates to yield valid measures of theoretically important constructs (Zajac, 1990; Westphal, 1998; Westphal, 1999; Steensma, and Corley, 2001; Christmann, 2004). Nevertheless, most survey research of executives suffers from very low response rates with the authors citing previous studies with similarly low response rates as a justification. Perhaps more importantly, the prospect of low response rates has discouraged researchers from attempting surveys of corporate elites, and has ultimately helped steer the strategy field away from empirical research on micro-behavioral processes.

The purpose of this chapter is to take a first step towards understanding how specific survey characteristics affect not only the rate of response among executives, but also the quality of the responses. We hope that this chapter will serve as a practical guide for researchers interested in conducting survey research on the corporate elite. In addition to practical guidance about specific techniques for increasing survey effectiveness among executives, more theoretical grounding is needed to guide our survey research practices. The literature on survey practices is generally not theory-driven (see Groves et al, 1992 for an exception). In this chapter, we draw on theory from social psychology to provide a better understanding of why executives may or may not fill out questionnaire surveys, and what factors may influence the quality of responses. We develop a theoretical framework that suggests how social influence theory, including the well-established principles of reciprocity, social proof, and legitimacy and authority,
can be applied by strategy researchers to improve survey response rates and the quality of responses among the population of corporate elites. We test our theoretical framework with a large scale executive survey and conclude by discussing the implications of this study and the prospects for future survey research on top managers.

DETERMINANTS OF SURVEY RESPONSE AND RESPONSE QUALITY

From a purely rational perspective, individuals who receive a survey must analyze the costs and benefits of participation. To encourage participation in a survey, researchers should seek to minimize the costs of completing the questionnaire (Dillman, 1991). For example, lengthy surveys require more time and effort to complete and would generally be perceived as more costly to potential respondents than shorter questionnaires. Research on survey methods generally shows that longer questionnaires prompt lower response rates (Yammarino, et al., 1991; Jobber, et al., 1993). Given the time constraints facing executives, we expect that survey length will be an especially important determinant of response rates for corporate elites. Longer surveys may also decrease the quality of response. We speculate that individuals tend to devote a fixed amount of time and effort to filling out a questionnaire, regardless of its length (e.g. an executive may decide to spend five minutes on a survey and will spend that amount of time whether the questionnaire is one page or 5 pages). Hence, as the survey increases in length, executives may give hurried, less reliable answers in an attempt to finish in the predetermined amount of time, resulting in less reliable responses.

While the length of the survey is extremely important to induce quality responses, the decision to complete a questionnaire does not simply involve a rational calculation of
costs and benefits. From a social influence perspective, the decision to fill out a survey is an act of compliance, which can be affected by social norms. Researchers can use their knowledge of these social norms to increase the likelihood that executives will respond to their surveys and that they will make the necessary effort to produce high quality responses.

Norm of Reciprocity

The norm of reciprocity is a nearly universal code of moral conduct wherein individuals perceive an obligation to reciprocate a received benefit in some manner (Gouldner, 1960). Individuals who receive favors, gifts, concessions, or other favorable treatment often experience a psychological sense of indebtedness. Because the sense of indebtedness is unpleasant for most people, they typically seek opportunities to reduce its psychological burden through reciprocation (Greenberg, 1980; Cialdini, 1993; Uehara, 1995; Settoon, et al., 1996; Cialdini, 2001). In short, when we receive something, there is typically a powerful perceived obligation to give something in return. There is also theory and evidence to suggest that the norm of reciprocity can be initiated by unsolicited favors (Befu, 1980; Cialdini, 1993) and that the substance and value of what is exchanged between parties can vary somewhat (Deckop, et al., 2003; Molm, 2003). Thus, small favors can potentially induce greater favors in return.

The norm of reciprocity can prompt exchange between parties in situations where exchange does not seem likely from a purely rational or economic perspective. There is evidence that the norm of reciprocity persists even in situations where the recipient has no expectation of receiving further benefits from the giver, as in exchanges between
strangers (Hoffman, et al., 1998; Whatley, et al., 1999; Perugini, et al., 2003). The powerful nature of this norm is further highlighted by research suggesting that individuals often incur significant economic costs to return a favor (Fehr, and Gachter, 2000) and sometimes reciprocate favors from individuals whom they dislike (Regan, 1971; Cialdini, 1993).

Individuals who are familiar with the norm of reciprocity can exploit their knowledge of the norm by rendering favors to powerful individuals who have the potential to benefit or harm them. In fact, personal favors aimed at powerful actors in organizations can result in a variety of positive outcomes including improved performance evaluations, higher pay, and increased likelihood of promotions (e.g., Yukl, and Tracey, 1992; Westphal, and Stern, 2005) while decreasing the likelihood of negative actions such as firings, demotions or pay cuts (Westphal, 1998).

It is important to note that the norm of reciprocity can break down if the initial favor, gift, or concession is viewed by the other party as a bribe or as a measure to apply pressure to coerce compliance with the request (see Brehm, and Cole, 1966; Weiner, and Brehm, 1966; Groves, et al., 1992). In fact, if the initial behavior is viewed as a bribe, then subsequent compliance to the request may actually be less likely. While there is a strong norm to respond to a genuine gift, no such action is required in response to a sales trick, gimmick or bribe (Cialdini, 2001).

In survey research, the norm of reciprocity provides a theoretical basis for including monetary and non-monetary incentives with a questionnaire. Research has shown that the inclusion of even a small amount of money or other incentive with a survey can significantly increase response rates, even if the reward is not made
contingent upon completion of the survey (Church, 1993). Individuals who receive a small gift from the researcher should feel an obligation to reciprocate this treatment by filling out the survey. In addition, potential respondents who receive a gift or a promise of some favor may increase the amount of time and effort they devote to completing the survey, thus resulting in more considered responses and ultimately higher reliability.

Some may ask whether the inclusion of a small monetary incentive can influence the behavior of executives who often earn very high salaries. As mentioned, the norm of reciprocity transcends rational consideration of costs and benefits, such that even small gifts can induce large favors in return (Cialdini, 2001). Due to the pervasiveness of this norm, we would not expect executives to be exempt from its influence.

Social Proof

Individuals often rely on others as a standard of comparison before making decisions about an appropriate course of action (Festinger, 1954). In their studies of bystander intervention, Latane and Darley (1970) found that bystanders to a possible emergency were influenced by the actions of those around them. When others failed to act in a concerned manner, individuals were less likely to respond to the emergency. Other studies have similarly found that the actions of groups of people can greatly influence the behavior of others. Milgram and colleagues (1969) conducted an experiment in which a researcher would stop in a busy street and look up at nothing in particular. When just one individual looked up, the action did not garner much attention, but when five individuals engaged in the behavior, the research team found that over 80%
of those passing by would stop to look up as well. These examples illustrate the powerful principle of social proof. Cialdini asserts that we tend to

“view a behavior as correct in a given situation to the degree to which we see others performing it. Whether the question is what to do with an empty popcorn box in a movie theater, how fast to drive on a certain stretch of highway, or how to eat chicken in a restaurant, the actions of those around us will be important guides in defining the answer (Cialdini, 1993: 95).”

He further states that

“if a lot of people are doing the same thing, they must know something we don't. Especially when we are uncertain, we are willing to place an enormous amount of trust in the collective knowledge of the crowd (Cialdini, 1993: 131).”

Social proof is derived from the idea that most individuals are followers rather than initiators and seems to work best when the proof is provided by the actions of many other people (Cialdini, 2001). Advertisers often use this idea to their advantage by claiming that a product is the best-selling or fastest growing. If lots of people are already using a certain product, we often infer that it must be a quality product.

Although the idea of social proof is often associated with inefficient outcomes, as in the bystander intervention studies, the use of social proof as a decision making tool is not necessarily maladaptive. Very often, many people engage in a behavior because it is the appropriate thing to do, such that looking to others before deciding how to act can lead to effective solutions. Thus, the tendency to rely on the actions of others is a natural decision making tool in many situations (Cialdini, 2001).
The principle of social proof is consistent with organizational scholars’ explanation for why firms often imitate others in response to uncertainty in decision making (Cyert, and March, 1963; Rao, et al., 2001). The idea of mimetic isomorphism from institutional theory for example, suggests that under conditions of uncertainty, organizations will look to others and mimic their behavior (DiMaggio, and Powell, 1983). Through the imitation of others, firms can gain legitimacy that is often an important antecedent to survival.

An understanding of social proof can be applied by survey researchers to increase the likelihood that executives will complete a questionnaire and to increase the quality of responses. According to social proof, to the extent that executives believe that similar others have already completed a survey, they should be more willing to do so. When surveying executives, researchers can include information in the instructions or on the cover letter indicating that many other executives have already participated in the same survey (or similar surveys conducted by the same researchers). Based on this information, some executives should make the assumption, consciously or otherwise, that if many other top managers have filled out the survey, it must be important and worth the time to complete. The fact that similar others have participated in the survey gives it credibility and suggests that taking the time to respond would not be counter normative. If the survey is viewed as credible and important, respondents should devote more time to each question resulting in more considered, accurate, and reliable responses.

Legitimacy and Authority
People are typically more willing to comply with a request if it is made by an individual or organization perceived as having legitimate authority (Cialdini, 2001). From birth, we are socialized to respond to requests from individuals in positions of authority. Research has demonstrated that this norm of responding to perceived legitimate authority is extremely powerful in affecting behavior. For example, Milgram’s famous study demonstrated just how far individuals were willing to go when asked to do something by a person in a position of authority. In his study, Milgram found that individuals were willing to inflict great amounts of pain on others if a “scientist” in a position of legitimate authority made the request to do so (Milgram, 1963).

As with the principle of social proof, responding to requests from individuals in positions of authority is often a beneficial decision-making heuristic. People with legitimate authority can often supply access to valuable resources and information. Generally, individuals in positions of authority have satisfied certain requirements pertaining to their education, work experience or professional certification to obtain their position and in the process, have accumulated a wealth of knowledge or expertise. Research from the literature on persuasion demonstrates that individuals possessing expert power, or relevant knowledge and information not possessed by the influence target, are more successful in their attempts at persuasion (Porter, et al., 1981; Raven, 1999). In fact, research suggests that we often take for granted the appropriateness of requests made by legitimate experts (Eagly, and Chaiken, 1993; Ziegler, et al., 2004).

Individuals often look for cues concerning the authority or legitimacy of others when responding to requests. For example, titles such as educational degrees or professional certification are indicators of legitimate expertise. Requests made by high
status individuals or organizations should also be viewed as more legitimate. For this reason, survey researchers sometimes include reference to a sponsoring institution or include an endorsement of the survey from prominent executives. Research on survey methods suggests that the inclusion of a university sponsor can significantly increase the expected response rate in surveys (Green, et al., 1998; Jobber, and O'Reilly, 1998; Greer, et al., 2000). Sponsorship of the survey by a prominent university should be an important signal to potential survey respondents about the legitimacy and importance of the survey and should provide assurance to the respondent that the survey will be conducted in a professional manner. Endorsement by a prominent executive should also legitimize the survey in the eyes of the potential respondent, increasing the likelihood of response. In addition, respondents who perceive the survey to be legitimate may increase the amount of time and effort they devote to the survey, thus increasing the quality of response.

Helping Norm

In most societies, a norm of helping, often referred to as a norm of social responsibility, exists wherein people feel a moral obligation to help those in need and who are dependent upon them for aid (Berkowitz, and Daniels, 1964; Groves, et al., 1992). For example, an interviewer standing at a doorstep may be more likely to get into homes on a rainy day than on a sunny day because people feel a greater obligation to help under such circumstances. Researchers can appeal to this norm to potentially increase the rate and quality of response. For example, Mowen and Cialdini (1980) found that response rates in interview surveys increased dramatically simply by adding the phrase “it would really help us out” to the end of the request. Survey researchers are entirely
dependent on the potential respondents for the success of the survey. Making this point salient with a plea for help could induce increased participation due to the helping norm. Similarly, respondents may be willing to devote more time and effort to the survey in order to help out the researcher, potentially resulting in higher quality responses.

METHOD

The preceding discussion outlines principles from the social influence literature that can inform our understanding of executive survey response rates and the quality of their responses. We tested these ideas in a large-sample survey of top executives. Specifically, we sent survey questionnaires to top managers at 500 companies randomly selected from the Reference USA index of mid-sized companies. Companies in the sample frame were between $50 million and $100 million in total revenues. We selected up to seven senior officers from each company with the title of Vice President or higher. If the firm had more than seven senior officers, seven were randomly selected. This resulted in a sample frame of 2,632 top managers. To assess how features of the survey questionnaire affect the likelihood and quality of response, different versions of the questionnaire were randomly assigned to managers in the sample frame. The survey response rate was 36%, resulting in a sample of 958 top managers from 387 companies.

We randomly assigned surveys to recipients based on the following characteristics.

Survey Length – The length of the survey may be an especially important determinant of response rates and quality of responses from executives. Shorter questionnaires require less time to complete, thus reducing the perceived cost of
response. To test this idea, we developed four versions of the survey, which were randomly assigned to executives in the sample frame. The first version included questions about board monitoring of top management (Westphal, 1999), the provision and seeking of strategic advice from other managers (McDonald, and Westphal, 2003), and friendship and advice ties to outside directors (Westphal, 1999). The second version of the questionnaire included survey scales to assess task conflict and relational conflict among members of the top management team; these scales were based on measures developed by Jehn (1995). The third version of the questionnaire included all the questions from version 1 followed by questions from version 2, and the fourth version of questionnaire included questions from the second version followed by questions from the first version. Pre-testing indicated that the first version required about 10 minutes to complete, the second version required about 7 minutes to complete, and the third and fourth versions required about seventeen minutes to complete.

Reciprocity – The norm of reciprocity suggests that individuals should be more likely to fill out a survey, and produce higher quality responses after receiving a favor or gift. We tested this idea in several ways. Two different types of monetary incentives were included in the survey. Some individuals were given a dollar while others were given fifty cents. This manipulation was used to determine how the amount of the monetary incentive affects response. We also sent surveys in which respondents were promised to receive a summary report of the results of the study. To examine whether the conditionality of a gift affects the likelihood or quality of response, we made half of the promised reports unconditional on the response while telling the other recipients that they would only receive a report upon the successful completion of the survey.
Social Proof – To test our theoretical arguments about the affect of social proof, in one manipulation of the survey, we included a line in the cover letter indicating that many of the executive’s peers had responded to prior surveys by the same researchers. Specifically, the cover letter states that “over 5000 top managers and directors have responded to our prior surveys [on corporate governance and strategy].”

Legitimacy and Authority – We included appeals to legitimate authority in two ways. First, in some surveys we included an endorsement of the survey by a prominent executive. The cover letter notes that the survey is endorsed by the executive, and his/her signature is included at the bottom of the letter. Second, some surveys were printed on official letterhead from the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas at Austin and enclosed in envelopes that contained the university name and printed symbol.

Helping Norm – We tested for possible effects of the helping norm in one condition by including a plea for help from the researchers to the potential respondents. After describing the topic of the survey, the cover letter states: “our knowledge about corporate governance depends on information from top executives such as yourself. Please help us learn more about this important subject by responding to this survey.”

Because we had data from multiple executives at the same company, we could test for inter-rater agreement among executives at the same firm. We used inter-rater agreement as a measure of the quality of the survey response. To the extent that executives make an effort to carefully respond to survey items, the level of agreement between executives should increase. Moreover, inter-rater agreement is an indicator of the validity of the survey measures. Thus, if a particular survey characteristic increases inter-rater agreement of a survey measure, it increases the validity of that measure. We
measured inter-rater agreement as the average difference between the focal manager’s standardized responses to survey items about board monitoring and task and relational conflict and the responses of another manager from the same company to the same set of questions. When there was more than one other respondent from the same company, one respondent was randomly selected.

We used logit regression to estimate the likelihood of responding to the survey, and we used a Heckman selection model to estimate inter-rater agreement. The Heckman model is a two-stage procedure in which the first-stage model estimates the likelihood of responding to the survey with probit regression and the second-stage model incorporates parameter estimates from the selection equation to predict inter-rater agreement using multiple regression (Heckman, 1979). This procedure ensures that regression estimates are not biased by unmeasured differences between managers who responded to the survey and managers in the larger sample frame.

RESULTS

Results of the logit and heckman selection models are presented in table 1.

The results show that the length of the questionnaire significantly influenced responses to the survey. Managers who received the long version of the questionnaire were less likely to respond than managers who received the medium-length version. Moreover, inter-rater agreement was lower for the long version of the survey, suggesting that the length of
the survey lowered the quality of responses. Individuals receiving the short version were also significantly more likely to respond than individuals receiving the medium length survey. However, the quality of the responses to the short version was not significantly different from the quality of responses to the medium condition. The comparison of the medium-length survey vs. the short survey is a highly conservative test of the effect of survey length on the likelihood of response and inter-rater agreement, as the medium-length version is only 3 minutes longer than the short version. Evidence that an increment of 3 minutes in survey length has a significant effect on the likelihood of response suggests that survey length is a very important determinant of the response decision for this population. In fact, based on the estimated coefficients in the logit analysis, the odds of receiving a response to the short survey were 72% greater than with the medium version. Compared to the medium length version of the survey, using the longer version decreased the odds of a positive response by 65% for version one and 55% for version two.

The results also provide evidence that the norm of reciprocity influences response to executive surveys. The inclusion of monetary incentives of either one dollar or fifty cents was associated with increased likelihood of response. Individuals receiving either type of monetary incentive were approximately 50% more likely to respond than those not receiving the incentive. Inter-rater agreement was also higher for individuals receiving either type of monetary incentive. Interestingly, the size of the incentive did not seem to matter: the magnitude of the incentive effect on the likelihood of response and inter-rater agreement was not significantly greater for one dollar vs. fifty cents. The results suggest that the inclusion of monetary incentives is an effective means of invoking
the norm of reciprocity, and that even very small favors can prompt a response. This finding speaks to the strength of the norm of reciprocity and the obligation that individuals feel to reciprocate a gift or favor. Some may be surprised to find that an unsolicited gift of fifty cents to an executive, to whom the money is materially insignificant, significantly increased the likelihood of response. It also appears that the gift elicited more considered and accurate responses, as evidenced by the effect on interrater reliability.

The promise of a summary report also increased the likelihood of response. Those promised a report conditional on their completion of the survey were over two and a half times more likely to respond than those not promised a report. Similarly, for those receiving an unconditional promise of a report, the odds of responding increased by 96%. As for the quality of response, when the report was promised regardless of whether or not the survey was completed, inter-rater agreement was higher than in cases where no promise was given. Interestingly, when the report was made conditional on the completion of the survey, the quality of response actually decreased. Cialdini (1993) suggests that incentives are helpful to the extent that they are seen as gifts and not as bribes. Perhaps in the conditional case, the incentive (i.e., the report) was viewed by the respondent as a bribe to induce compliance and the individual was less likely to devote the effort necessary to produce a quality response. Alternatively, whereas the unconditional case may induce respondents to devote extra effort to filling out the survey by triggering the norm of reciprocity, the conditional case may trigger a rational exchange mindset in which respondents do the minimum required to receive a report.
Social proof also appears to have had an effect on the response rate. Indicating on the survey that similar others had responded to the questionnaire had a positive effect on the likelihood of response, increasing the odds of response by 40% compared to surveys with no such inclusion. It seems that the reassurance that many similar individuals had participated in surveys by the same researchers made managers more likely to respond. However, it did not affect inter-rater agreement.

Endorsement by an executive was associated with an increased likelihood of response, although inter-rater agreement was unaffected. The coefficient from the logit regression suggests that an endorsement by an executive increased the odds of getting a response by a factor of 2.71. In other words, surveys with an executive endorsement were almost three times more likely to be completed and returned. This result is consistent with Cialdini’s idea that individuals are more likely to respond to a request from an individual or group perceived to be a legitimate authority figure (Cialdini, 1993). The presence of University letterhead had no statistically significant impact on the likelihood of response or inter-rater agreement. Moreover, the inclusion of a plea for help on the survey also did not affect the response rate or the quality of response. In this case, it does not appear that the norm of helping was an important determinant of survey response.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE
CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have sought to invoke principles of social influence to suggest how certain features of surveys are more likely to elicit a response from top executives. In addition, we have provided initial evidence of how these principles can affect the quality of response, a subject that has received scant research attention in the past. This chapter suggests that survey researchers can use principles of reciprocity, social proof and appeals to legitimate authority to obtain better response rates and higher quality responses from top executives. Consideration of these principles can aid in survey design by indicating what characteristics are important to response rates and quality of response, and what characteristics are not.

Thus, in addition to providing a theoretical framework to enhance our understanding of responses to survey questionnaires, our study may serve as a practical guide to researchers who are interested in conducting surveys of corporate elites. The first finding suggests the importance of keeping executive surveys short in length. Long versions of the survey were less likely to be completed and the quality of response suffered as well. It is important to note that even the long version of the survey in this study, which took only 17 minutes to complete, is rather short in comparison to most surveys conducted in psychology or organizational behavior. Based on the empirical findings of this chapter, it seems that surveys of top executives must include only essential questions.

Results from this study further suggest that the use of incentives is a viable option for increasing response rates from executives. Even small amounts of money, as little as fifty cents, increased response rates significantly. Some research budgets may limit the
extent to which monetary incentives can be used. Our results suggest that non-monetary incentives such as the promise of a summary report of the findings can be used to increase response. To ensure the quality of response, such promised incentives may be more effective when they are given unconditionally (i.e., regardless of whether a survey is returned). These findings suggest that survey characteristics which invoke the norm of reciprocity can be effective in enhancing the rate and quality of survey responses by corporate elites.

Executives also responded to cues about the legitimacy of the survey. Following the logic of social proof, they were more likely to return a survey when it was noted that many peers had already filled out the questionnaire. This information sends a strong signal to the executives that the survey must be worthwhile if others are participating. Researchers can increase executive response rates by including information in the cover letter or instructions about peers who have also responded to the survey. This finding points to the importance of having a meaningful stream of survey research, and may suggest that success begets success when working with executives. Noting that peers have responded is essentially costless, and yet it had a strong impact on the likelihood of response.

Executive endorsement also appears to be a very useful tool in increasing response rates. Endorsement by a prominent executive is a powerful signal about the legitimacy and importance of the research. Survey researchers will benefit by establishing ties with executives who can endorse their work. Although some investment is required to develop and maintain such ties, the returns are considerable: endorsement by a prominent executive increased the likelihood of response by a factor of 2.7. Of
course, researchers must be able to explain the potential importance of their work to executives if they hope to receive such an endorsement.

Two attributes of surveys studied here did not produce a significant increase in response rates for this sample. Specifically, the use of university letterhead and a plea for help did not have a significant effect on response rates or the quality of response. Perhaps affiliation with a university does not send a strong signal of legitimacy and importance to business executives on a par with endorsement by a prominent executive. Alternatively, the use of letterhead may have less impact than an official endorsement. Researchers may be better served by focusing their resources on the other survey attributes mentioned previously.

It is useful to compare our theoretical framework and empirical results with previous research on the total design method, a popular survey design and administration system used by some researchers to increase survey response rates (See Dillman, 1978; 1991 for a review). The total design method provides detailed recommendations for the entire process of survey research. For example, the method gives guidance about the layout and ordering of questions, the size of the survey booklet, the type of return envelope to be used, the timing of follow-up responses, and many other practical suggestions for administering a survey. When the total design method is strictly followed, research has shown that response rates can be significantly increased (Dillman, 1991). The method is based on the idea that respondents will be most likely to respond to a survey when the perceived costs of participation are less than the perceived benefits. Thus, the recommendations advocated by the total design method represent an attempt to increase the perceived rewards of participation, decrease the perceived costs, and increase
the participant’s trust that the rewards will be realized (Dillman, 1991). These principles are consistent with many of the theoretical ideas presented in this chapter although we have not attempted to empirically test the value of the total design method for an executive population. It seems that survey researchers interested in studying top managers would be well served by incorporating aspects of the total design method that reduce costs and increase the perceived benefits of participation for managers.

Our study complements the total design method in several ways. Consistent with the total design method logic, we consider the effect of reducing perceived costs to respondents (i.e. shortening the questionnaire length). However, we also provide evidence that the decision to respond to a survey goes beyond a rational calculation of costs and benefits and that invoking social norms and applying other social influence processes can encourage participation and increase response quality. While the total design method focuses on increasing response rate, we examine the effect of several survey characteristics on both response rate and response quality. Moreover, we have included in our study survey characteristics that seem especially pertinent to executives such as endorsement of the survey by a prominent executive and the promise of reports detailing the survey results. Thus, our study is directly applicable to researchers interested in studying executive populations. In addition, while the total design method does not explicitly address the role of incentives in survey research, we have evidence suggesting that several types of incentives can effectively increase the likelihood that executives will respond to questionnaires. Finally, we test social influence mechanisms such as pleas for help and social proof that are not addressed by the total design method.
Through an improved understanding and application of the principles outlined in this chapter, we hope that scholars of strategic management will be better equipped to engage in surveys of corporate elites. We realize that executive surveys will always be perceived by some as overly risky, especially in comparison to archival methods, and thus many will be deterred from attempting this type of work. However, we believe that the potential returns to survey research of top executives are extremely high—both to individual scholars and to the field of strategic management as a whole. The effective use of survey methods could significantly broaden the kinds of research questions that scholars investigate. Surveys of corporate elites are critical to the development of cognitive and micro-social perspectives on the formulation and implementation of strategy. More generally, such research is essential to the study of strategy process phenomena, or what Hambrick (2004: 94) called “the human element” of strategy formulation and implementation. Similarly, executive surveys could accelerate progress in addressing a variety of understudied topics in organization theory, including institutional entrepreneurship, symbolic management, and the interface of politics and institutional processes. We hope that the theoretical and practical guidance offered in this chapter will be a first step in that direction.

Acknowledgements:

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### TABLE 1

**Models of Response Likelihood and Interrater Agreement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent variable</th>
<th>Logit Regression Model of Survey Response</th>
<th>Heckman Selection Model of Interrater Agreement</th>
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<tr>
<td>Length: short version vs. medium version</td>
<td>0.542***</td>
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<td>(0.216)</td>
<td>(0.036)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length: long version (1) vs. medium version</td>
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<td>-0.109***</td>
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<td>(0.156)</td>
<td>(0.024)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length: long version (2) vs. medium version</td>
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<td>-0.067***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.145)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UT letterhead</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.111)</td>
<td>(0.015)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endorsement by executive</td>
<td>1.000***</td>
<td>0.020</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.150)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Fifty cents included with survey</td>
<td>0.404***</td>
<td>0.060***</td>
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<tr>
<td>(0.123)</td>
<td>(0.017)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dollar included with survey</td>
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<td>0.089***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.127)</td>
<td>(0.016)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise of summary report (if respond)</td>
<td>0.974***</td>
<td>-0.064*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.217)</td>
<td>(0.028)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise of summary report (no strings attached)</td>
<td>0.674***</td>
<td>0.070**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.165)</td>
<td>(0.023)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plea for help</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.093)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Note that peers have responded</td>
<td>0.292***</td>
<td>-0.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.098)</td>
<td>(0.013)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.366***</td>
<td>0.129***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.230)</td>
<td>(0.031)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald $\chi^2$</td>
<td>237.16***</td>
<td>160.86***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**N = 2632**

* $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$; *** $p \leq .001$; z-statistics are one-tailed for hypothesized effects, two-tailed for control variables. Standard errors are in parentheses.
TABLE 2
Summary of Advice about Conducting Surveys of Top Executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Advice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limit the number of items on the survey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get an endorsement from a prominent executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Include some type of incentive (i.e. small amount of money, promise of summary report)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If you promise a summary report, do so whether or not they respond</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform respondents that others have responded to similar surveys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleas for help and using university letterhead have no effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>