Lotteries as Aids to Surveys

Laguilles, Williams, & Saunders (LWS) ran four survey experiments on the effectiveness of lottery-based incentives with a population of American college students. They make the following points, among others:

1. “…across all four experiments, the lottery incentive group had a significantly higher response rate than the control group. This consistent result is particularly compelling because our experimental surveys were on different topics, of slightly different lengths, and employed different prizes. Our evidence suggesting that lottery incentives can positively ‘boost’ web survey response rates flies in the face of most of the existing research on the effectiveness of post-paid material incentives in traditional mail surveys…However, our finding that lottery incentives can positively impact response rates is consistent with several recent web-survey experiments…” [pp.548-549]

2. “The differences in response rates between our treatment and control groups ranged from five percentage points for the dining survey, to ten percentage points for the election survey. These are not negligible differences in the language of response rates…Secondly, across all four surveys, respondents in the treatment groups were less likely to drop out of the survey than respondents in the control groups. Thus, it appears that lottery incentives can positively impact both survey response and survey completion rates…” [p. 549]

3. “Perhaps our most interesting finding…is that for three of the four experiments, the lottery incentive exerted a differential effect by gender. For all four of our surveys, female students in both the control group and the incentive group were significantly more likely to respond to the survey than their male counterparts…” [p.549]

4. “…leverage/salience theory (LST) offers a more elaborate take on the process of survey participation than social exchange theory. LST proposes that for any given survey, sampled individuals will assign different levels of importance to each of the various aspects of the survey request (e.g. survey topic, survey length, sponsoring organization, whether an incentive is offered, how confidential the survey is perceived to be). A person’s decision whether or not to participate in a particular survey is conceptualized as hinging on the importance the individual assigns to particular aspects of the request, and is influenced by how prominently the survey invitation highlights each of these particular components of the request…” [p.540]

LWS used data they collected via “four separate web-survey experiments conducted during spring 2008, fall 2008, and spring 2009 at a 4-year, public, research university in the Northeast with a predominately White (approximately 80%) undergraduate enrollment of approximately 20,000. The four survey topics were as follows: (1) information technology services on-campus (IT), (2) on-campus dining services (dining), (3) the 2008 presidential election (election), and economic climate (economic)…For each survey, researchers randomly assigned sampled students to either a treatment group or a control group. Students in the treatment group received an e-mail invitation that described a lottery incentive offer, whereas students in the control group received an invitation that was identical, minus the incentive offer…conducted within the existing social and surveying context of the university…not within a controlled setting…” [p.544-545]

This study will interest researchers because it can help them to conduct better surveys. Jerold S. Laguilles (Springfield College in Springfield, Massachusetts), Elizabeth A. Williams (University of Massachusetts, Amherst), and Daniel B. Saunders (also of U.Mass.Amherst) provide details in an article (“Can Lottery Incentives Boost Web Survey Response Rates? Findings from Four Experiments”) published in Research in Higher Education (August 2011, Vol. 52, pp. 537-553). Readers with a background in survey research will find the content and style of the paper accessible.

Additional abstracts of research can be viewed at our website at:

[Abstract by Willard Hom, Director of Research, Analysis & Accountability, Chancellor’s Office, California Community Colleges, 9/26/2011]