Improving Your Web Survey Response Rate

Millar & Dillman recently explored methods for improving the response rate to web surveys, and they tested some common methods in web survey work (offering a choice of response modes; providing mode options in sequence rather than all-at-once; email augmentation of postal contacts; token cash incentives; and postal invitation contacts). Their paper makes the following points, among others:

1. “Their [internet surveys] response rates are typically lower than those of mail surveys…In this article, we explore utilizing mail methods to improve Web response rates. We examine multiple techniques that may be used when surveyors can contact potential respondents by both e-mail and postal mail, as well as when only postal addresses are available…We conducted two experiments within a population [students at Washington State University] that has complete access to the Internet and is believed to be highly Web literate…” [p.250]

2. “The response rate for the choice group is slightly lower than the response rate for the mail treatment (47.7 vs. 51.3, p = 0.093). This provides modest support for hypothesis 1, that offering a choice of modes produces a lower response rate than offering only mail, even in this highly Internet-literate population with complete Internet access. Although this effect is not substantial, it nevertheless provides strong evidence that offering a choice of modes is not superior to using only mail, which is commonly assumed…” [p. 259]

3. “…results suggest that the primary benefit of a postal invitation letter is the ability to deliver a token cash incentive in advance…” [p. 266]

4. “Our study also confirms that delivering token cash incentives in advance is critical for establishing the survey’s legitimacy and increasing the benefits of survey response. These incentives dramatically improved Web survey response (by 17 percentage points)…” [p. 267]

5. “Experiment 1…results suggest that the mail response option is more successful at drawing response when postal contacts are used. However, it is notable that in this experiment, using postal contacts to offer Web response, followed by a later mail response option…, produced a response rate that is equivalent to a mail-only survey…while obtaining a high proportion of Web respondents…” [p. 261]

6. “…our study’s results suggest that combining an advance cash incentive [a $2 bill in this case], the email augmentation strategy with multiple postal and email contacts, and a switch to a mail response option in the final contact is a viable method for producing a Web survey response rate that is equivalent to a traditional mail-only approach…” [p. 267]

This study will interest institutional researchers because it should help them in their survey operations. Morgan M. Millar (doctoral candidate in sociology, Washington State University) and Donald A. Dillman (professor, Department of Sociology, Washington State University) provide details in an article (“Improving Response to Web and Mixed-Mode Surveys”) published in the peer-reviewed Public Opinion Quarterly (Summer 2011, Vol.75, No.2, pp. 249-209). 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, 8/6/2011]