

WAYS TO INCREASE MAIL SURVEY RESPONSE RATES - BASED ON OVER 20 YEARS OF PRACTICAL AND EXPERIMENTAL EXPERIENCE

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Importance of High Response Rates

A high response rate is key to the success of all surveys, including mail surveys. One of the basic tenets of surveys is that the persons interviewed should represent the underlying population. In order to obtain a representative sample, completed surveys must be obtained from a high percentage of targeted respondents. Individuals who are more likely to respond to surveys may differ from those who are less likely to respond. However, steps can be taken to avoid this potential non-response bias.

A benefit not to be ignored when we design surveys to elicit a high response rate is that we protect our natural resource — the goodwill of potential respondents. By making reasonable demands on potential respondents and by offering them appropriate incentives, the researcher can help preserve the future of survey research.

Increasing Difficulty in Obtaining Respondent Cooperation

Respondent cooperation rates are decreasing across all methods of interviewing.

- Door-to-door personal interviews are conducted infrequently now due to the difficulty both of finding potential respondents at home and of finding individuals who are willing to invite an interviewer into their home.
- Telephone interviewing faces many obstacles, including unlisted numbers, answering machines, caller ID, and increased screening within the household.
- Mail surveys have not been spared attrition in response rates. On the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey, which has been conducted for 20 years, we have had to counter a recent attrition rate of about two percent per year. In spite of this obstacle, experiments to uncover ways of increasing response rates have enabled us each year to provide a sample of affluent adults, with a response rate of about 60 percent.

Reasons for the Decrease in Response Rates

Paradoxically, the success of survey research in general has contributed to the problem in getting respondents to complete interviews. Ten or more years ago people would be surprised, if not flattered, that their opinions were being sought. Today, because of the proliferation of surveys of all types, much of the public has come to consider them bothersome.

The hectic pace in modern cities and suburbs, with so much competition for people's time and attention, also tends to lower response rates. Take the situation of the female head-of-house, for example, who, a decade or two ago, was often available during the daytime for door-to-door surveys. Now, with well over half of working-age women working, such interviewing is rarely attempted.

The abuse of potential respondents' goodwill is another cause of reluctance to complete interviews. Researcher abuses include misrepresenting the time an interview will take, asking questions that are irrelevant or too personal, and not thanking respondents properly with an incentive or even a sincere "thank you".

Telemarketers and fund raisers are probably the biggest offenders in generating negative attitudes toward surveys. They call at inappropriate hours, invent ruses to get targeted individuals on the phone, and sometimes disguise their sales and fund raising efforts as surveys. These practices have become so common that the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) and the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR) have invented acronyms that characterize them as "sugging" (Selling Under the Guise of research) and "frugging" (Fund Raising Under the Guise of research).

Ways to Increase Mail Survey Response Rates

There are limits to what we can do to obtain completed questionnaires from a targeted population. Time and money are both important considerations. Multiple mailings, which usually increase the response rates of surveys, can be prohibitively time-consuming and expensive. Incentives, monetary and other, may also be limited by cost concerns. Yet it is important to find ways to counteract the drop in response rates.

Mendelsohn Media Research has used a number of techniques over the years to increase response rates for mail surveys. Some derive from tests reported in the literature, some are simply common sense, and some result from experimental tests we have conducted for the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey and numerous other mail surveys. The Mendelsohn Affluent Survey uses a 16-page booklet questionnaire that obtains information on media habits and purchasing patterns of affluent adults. Each year, a personally addressed letter, a questionnaire, and a monetary incentive is mailed to a sample of potential respondents who have been selected for a high probability of living in an affluent household — in 1997, households with incomes of at least \$70,000.

The techniques we have used for this and other surveys have consistently provided response rates of 50 percent and above among difficult-to-reach groups such as physicians, lawyers, CEO's, partners in major accounting firms, and top-level media executives. Our Mendelsohn Affluent Survey has achieved a response rate of about 60 percent over the past several years.

Time-Tested Techniques

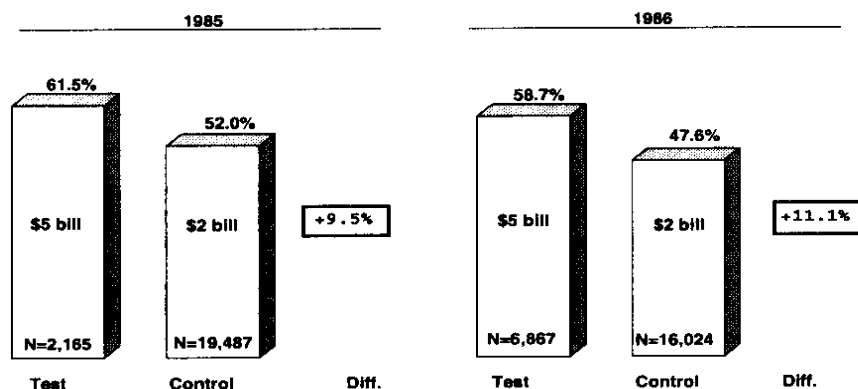
Among the techniques that we have accepted without our own testing are:

1. use of a personalized cover letter enclosed with the questionnaire;
2. a personal signature on the cover letter;
3. use of a first class stamp (not a meter) on outgoing letters;
4. use of an envelope large enough to send the questionnaire without folding it;
5. use of a client's letterhead, and the signature of a senior executive for surveys where the client can be identified (e.g. a subscriber survey).

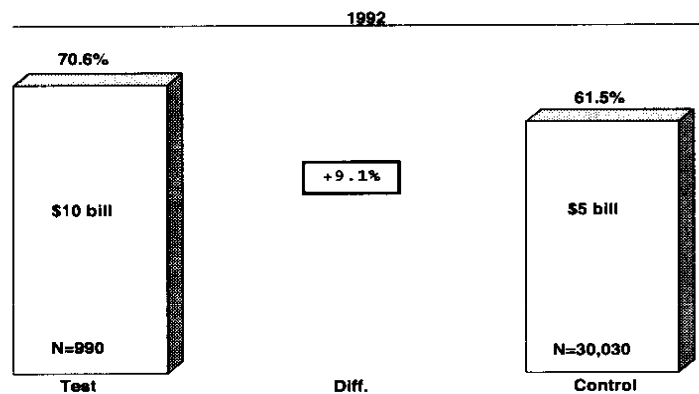
Monetary Incentives

We have conducted a number of tests to measure the impact of monetary incentives on the response rates to mail surveys. Guided both by published survey results and by our own experience, we have always included the incentive with the questionnaire rather than sending it upon receipt of a completed questionnaire. The academic foundation of this practice is based on Alvin Goulder's 1960 observation of a "norm of reciprocity". Goulder asserted that there exists a strong social normative standard that causes many individuals to repay an apparent gift. The money accompanying the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey questionnaire is hardly compensation, particularly to an affluent individual, for filling out a 16-page questionnaire. However, the "norm of reciprocity" — or a feeling of guilt if the gift is not reciprocated — appears to be the main motivating factor for respondents to complete the survey.

One of our earliest tests was conducted in 1985 and repeated in 1986. In both years we tested the use of a \$5 bill vs. a \$2 bill as an incentive. The results of those two tests are presented below:



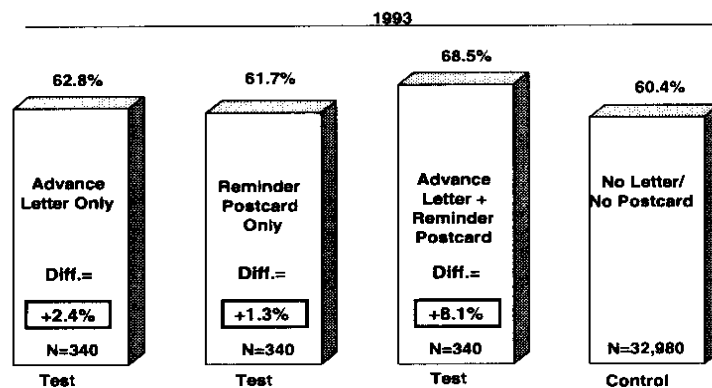
In 1992, we tested the use of a \$10 bill as an incentive compared with a \$5 bill. Not unexpectedly, the \$10 bill increased the response rate significantly.



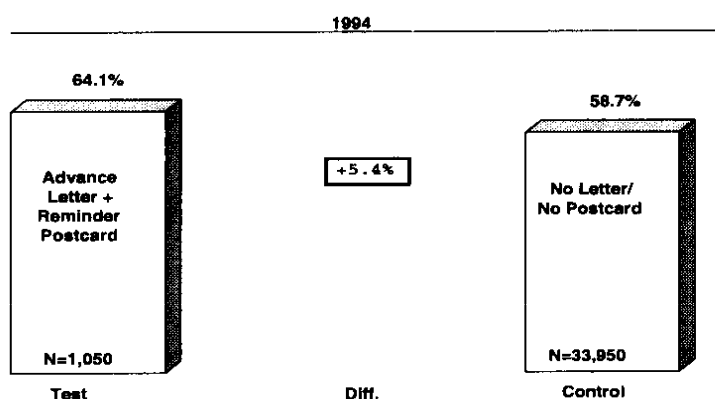
An Advance Letter and a Reminder Postcard

In the 1993 Mendelsohn Affluent Survey, we tested the effect on the response rate of an advance letter alone, a reminder postcard alone, and both in combination. In 1994, we retested the combined effect of the advance letter and reminder postcard.

The results of the 1993 tests, shown below, bear out the maxim that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The advance letter alone raised the response rate 2.4 percentage points, while the reminder postcard alone raised the response rate 1.3 percentage points. However, the advance letter and reminder postcard in combination achieved an increased response rate of 8.1 percentage points — higher than the 3.7 percentage point sum of other two tests.



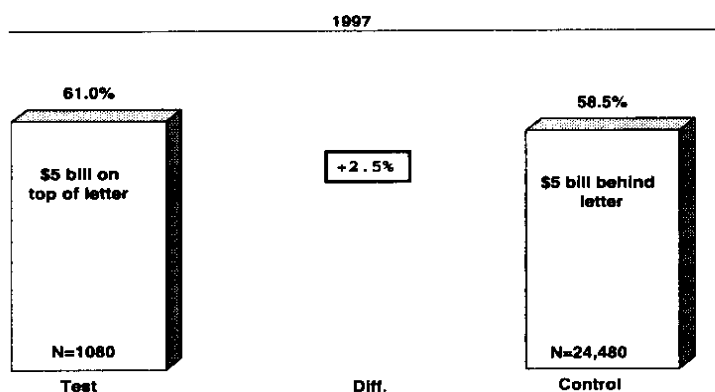
When the combined cell was repeated the following year, the response rate increase was 5.4 percentage points; lower than the previous year's level, but again higher than the combined increases of the previous year's individual treatment cells.



Position of Incentive in the Questionnaire Packet

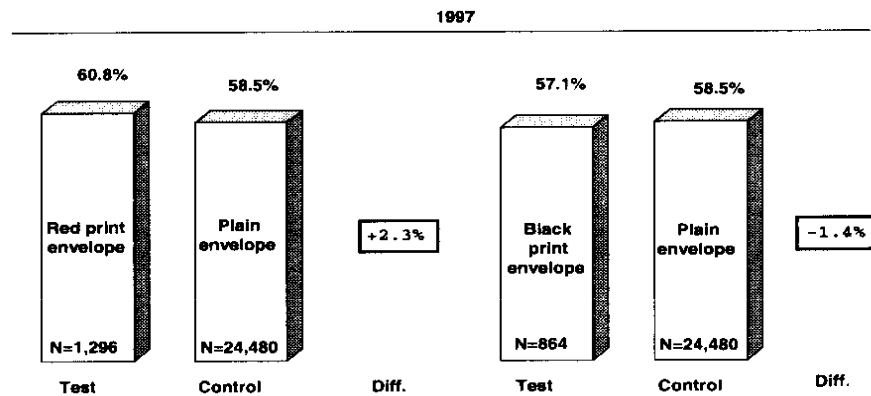
Something apparently as simple as the position of the monetary incentive in the mail-out package can be reconsidered. Our practice for the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey has been to attach the incentive (e.g. a \$5 bill) to the back of the cover letter that was placed in front of the questionnaire. This was intended to prevent the money from being seen through the envelope.

It was recently hypothesized that some recipients may have been throwing out the envelope or deciding not to complete the survey without even being exposed to the \$5 bill incentive. To test this hypothesis, we developed a test cell in 1997 in which a \$5 bill was clipped to the front of the packet, which was mailed in a completely opaque envelope. An increased response rate of 2.5 percentage points, while not statistically significant, is sufficient encouragement to consider continuing the practice.



A Banner Announcement on the Questionnaire Envelope

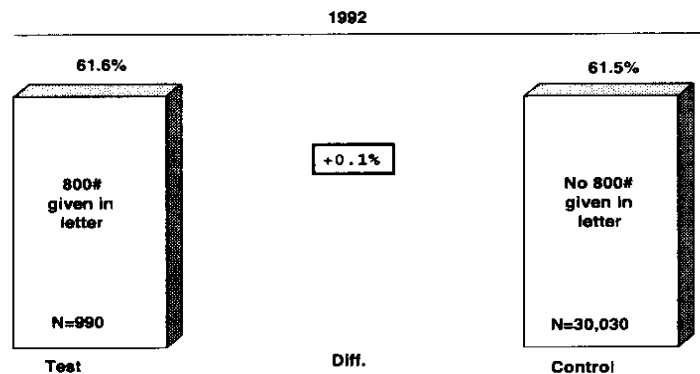
Another test conducted in 1997 involved the use of a diagonal banner announcement — “Here’s the survey we wrote to you about” — printed on the envelope containing the survey packet. One cell of potential respondents got a banner printed in red and another cell got a banner printed in black. The red banner cell had an incremental response rate level of +2.3 percentage points. Again, even though the increase was not statistically significant, the small additional cost of printing the envelopes will cause us to consider this option in the future. Interestingly, the black banner cell did not show an incremental response rate. In fact it had a numerical decrease of -1.4 percentage points.



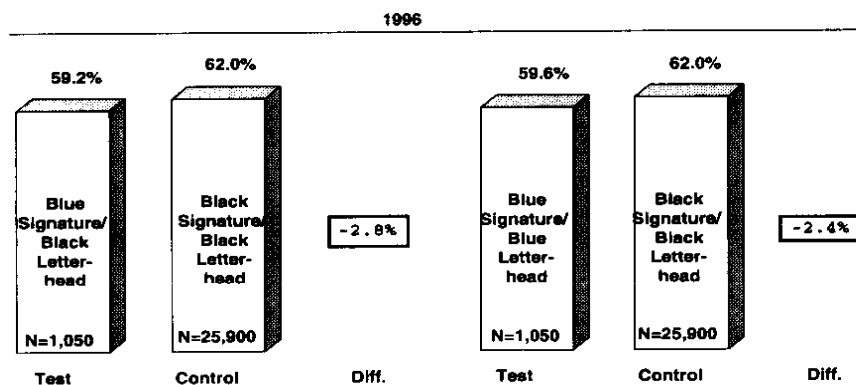
Test Treatments that Did Not Have a Positive Effect on Response Rates

Over the years, we conducted a number of tests that had no positive effect and some that had a negative effect on response rates.

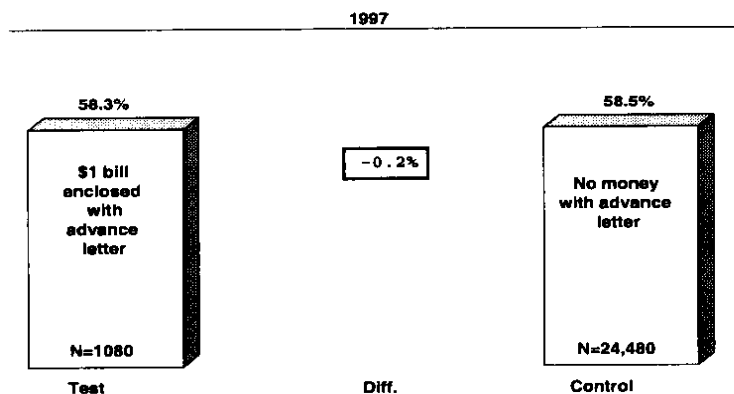
In the 1992 Mendelsohn Affluent Survey, we offered certain questionnaire recipients an 800 telephone number to use. In the cover letter, respondents were told, "If you have any concerns or questions about filling out the questionnaire, please call our toll-free number at: 1-800. . . ." The presence of the 800 number had no effect on the response rate.



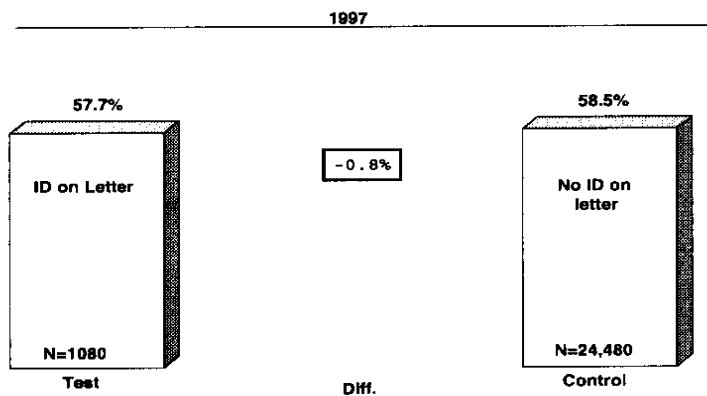
In 1996, we tested the use of a blue signature and the combined use of a blue signature and new blue letterhead as potential ways to increase our response rates compared with those obtained by the existing black letterhead and signature. As it turned out, our prior practice was at least as good as the two new alternatives being tested.



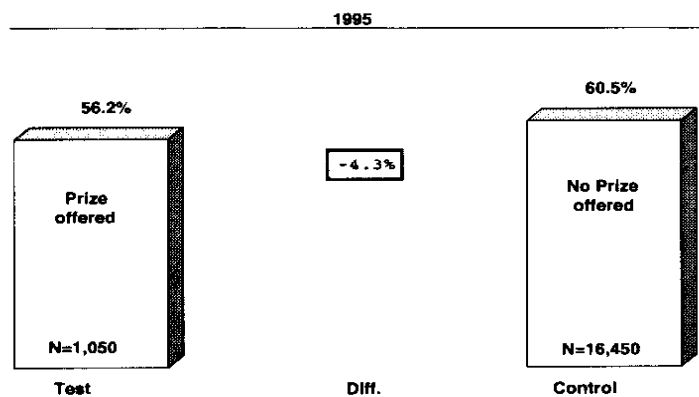
A test we conducted in 1997 involved the use of a \$1 bill in the advance letter in addition to the \$5 bill attached to the questionnaire. It was thought that the \$1 bill in the advance letter would demonstrate to potential respondents that this was a legitimate research project. It was also hypothesized that the "norm of reciprocity" that encouraged completion and return of the questionnaire would be heightened by an additional \$1 bill. This hypothesis turned out to be incorrect. Potential respondents receiving the \$1 bill in the advance letter had the same (-0.2 %) response rate as those who got the same mailing without the \$1 bill.



For some time, for reasons of efficiency and quality control, we have wanted to print an ID number on the cover letter that accompanies the questionnaire. We did not do so because we thought it might negatively affect the response rate. Our test cell in 1997 indicated that we were right. While the loss was only -0.8, it prompted us to consider other ways of retaining our quality and increasing our efficiency.



Finally, a test we conducted in 1995 involved the offer of a prize in addition to the usual \$5 incentive. It was hypothesized that the chance to win \$1,000 (or \$2,000 if the questionnaire was returned by a very reasonable "due date") would appeal to potential respondents who were not affected by the "norm of reciprocity" and would be a bonus to those who were going to return the questionnaire anyway. We were initially surprised when the test showed that the prize offer actually decreased the response rate.



Upon reflection, this result should not have been so surprising. While the gratuitous \$5 bill initiates the "norm of reciprocity", the conditional offer (i.e., "If you don't return the questionnaire, you don't have a chance to win the prize") evidently negates the feeling of a need to reciprocate. Some potential respondents must have felt that they no longer needed to fill out and return the questionnaire if they were willing to forego being considered for the prize.

Prospects for the Future

There is no reason to believe that the downward trend in response rates will soon be reversed. It is up to all survey researchers to find ways of encouraging prospective respondents to complete surveys. Perhaps in the future, the Internet, interactive cable, and other technologies will be able to reach widespread, representative samples. In the meantime, we will continue to test new techniques to elicit completed surveys in the conventional ways and to retain the goodwill of the public. We encourage others to do the same and to share the results with the entire research community, as we have done today.

