

# IMPROVING THE PRODUCT BOOKLET: RAISING CO-OPERATION STEP-BY-STEP

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## Summary

For many years, print researchers and data users have debated the trade-offs between the quality of print audience estimates and the scope of the data we attempt to collect. Among the potential solutions is the recent switch at Simmons to separate-sample data collection—one sample which provides print audience measures, and another which completes a product information booklet. A straightforward calibration process called “benchmarking” then yields an integrated audience and consumer database.

While this separate-sample approach has many advantages, including reduced burden on the magazine measurement sample, the Simmons approach brings with it a new challenge. Fielding a second sample—a significant investment in itself— all but requires the use of a relatively cost-effective method for the product booklet; for that reason, the Simmons product booklet is now a telephone-placed, self-administered, mail-out and mail-back questionnaire. That approach, of course, carries with it a nontrivial response rate challenge.

Earlier this year, the coauthors collaborated on a plan of tests and enhancements designed to improve the response rate of the self-administered questionnaire method, building on an already existing improvement program at Simmons. The current paper reports on the first three of this year’s tests; more initiatives are underway. Specifically, the research reported here suggests that response rates *can* be impacted with a program of affordable, sensible, incremental improvements. No one enhancement is a solution in itself, but taken together, the net impact on response rates should be significant.

## Introduction

For many years, print researchers and data users have debated the trade-offs between the quality of print audience estimates and the scope of the data we attempt to collect. Magazine measurement has become the Clydesdale of media research, hauling behind it a burdensome wagon—a wagon filled by the industry’s insatiable hunger for multi-media data, and for detailed measures of consumer purchasing and service usage.

Most of us recognize the strain that such a burden places on our audience measures, but few can agree on the right solution. Only one real alternative has surfaced in the U.S. in recent years, and that’s the separate-sample measurement now used by Simmons. One sample provides print audience measures, and another completes a product information booklet. A straightforward calibration process called “benchmarking” then yields an integrated audience and consumer database.

While this separate-sample approach has many advantages, including reduced burden on the magazine measurement sample, the Simmons approach brings with it a new challenge. Fielding a second sample is inherently expensive, which all but dictates the use of a relatively cost-effective method for the product booklet. In part for that reason, the Simmons product booklet is now a telephone-placed, self-administered, mail-out and mail-back questionnaire. That approach, of course, carries with it a nontrivial response rate challenge.

There are a number of distinct advantages to telephone-placed, mailed-out questionnaires. Aside from the cost advantage, and the related opportunity for sample sizes, there are numerous reasons to consider the self-administered mail questionnaire:

- Using telephone placement can yield a more dispersed, less clustered sample than some other methods.
- Telephone placement and mail delivery can facilitate the use of differential procedures, targeting higher incentives and other more intensive procedures where they’re needed.
- This combination of procedures allows for a centralized and carefully monitored quality control system.
- A self-administered questionnaire may be the only practical way to collect highly detailed consumer data.
- As telephone marketing increases, some believe that mail questionnaires may look increasingly appealing to consumers, relative to the chore of an interview at the wrong time.
- And because of that lack of time pressure, we believe the self-administered booklet tends to yield relatively low levels of item nonresponse.

Whatever the advantages, though, the mailed-out questionnaire carries with it some methodological baggage. The most notable is that it can yield a lower response rate than some other methods. And because response rate is a rather visible measure (especially for an EMRC-accredited service like Simmons), this disadvantage can’t be easily swept under the rug.

Thus, response rates are clearly the largest challenge for the mail questionnaire method, including the Simmons method for product and consumer data. However, response rates *can* be improved, with the right program of research, and the right level of

company commitment.

We're here at this Worldwide Readership Research Symposium to provide the first chapters in the story of Simmons' commitment to response rate improvement. It will be a story of step-by-step improvement; in the real world, gains in cooperation rarely occur in leaps and bounds. We're here to introduce a *program*, not a single idea, because the battle against low cooperation is a long and difficult one.

Fortunately, we do have some good news.

## The Test Concepts

When Simmons and Peacock Research first began reviewing the response rate possibilities for the self-administered questionnaire (SAQ), it became clear that there were opportunities at each stage of the process after sample selection. To provide a more detailed context, here's the SAQ process that we began with:

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. RDD Sample Selection</li> <li>2. Telephone Placement (Single Person per Household)</li> <li>3. Mail Product Booklet to Agreeing Persons</li> <li>4. Reminder Contacts (Calls, Postcard)</li> <li>5. Completed Booklets Mailed Back by Respondents</li> <li>6. Premium Mailed to Returning Respondents</li> </ol> |
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Figure 1

The overall performance of this process can be thought of in two stages—the process of getting initial agreement, and the process of encouraging the return of completed booklets. The former is usually measured by what we'll label "Consent Rate," or initially agreeing persons divided by estimated predesignated persons. Booklet completion is best summarized by Return Rates, or usable booklets divided by booklets mailed. A response rate, then, is approximately the product of those two measures.

At the beginning of the response rate improvement program, both Consent Rates and Return Rates were suboptimal. Each tended to be below 50%, suggesting that there was ample room for improvement in both areas. We could do more to get the initial agreement necessary for mailing; and we could do more to encourage follow-through by those initial cooperators. Thus, the Simmons program has been and will continue to be broadly focused.

The test program developed by the co-authors complements an existing program of quality improvement at Simmons. Over the last year, there were a number of changes which Simmons felt could and should be implemented directly, without testing. Among the enhancements introduced by mid-1997 were:

- **Revised Calling Schedule**, including more careful distribution of attempts across dayparts;
- **Increased Calling Attempts**, from six to eight;
- **Recalling Undeliverables**, and re-mailing to those who had address corrections;
- **Increased Reminder Calls**, from two to three;
- **Enhanced Interviewer Training and Incentives**, including improved interviewer-level data monitoring; and
- **Tighter Monitoring of Calling Vendors**.

Those were all clearly necessary and desirable, and the changes were implemented across all replicates by this past June.

Other ideas seemed to warrant at least some testing, however, if only to be sure that the additional investment was truly worthwhile. After considerable discussion, we decided on three concepts for quick testing.

- **Warm-Up Postcard**, mailed to sample for which we could obtain addresses prior to any calling.
- **Foot-in-the-Door** techniques at the beginning of the placement call.
- **Up-Front Premiums** in lieu of the traditional delayed, reward-for-return premiums.

We settled on these techniques for a combination of reasons, including our best judgment about the likely cost-effectiveness of these approaches. Frankly, we thought these ideas might have the biggest "bang for the buck." But we also wanted to start with a mixture of techniques that might touch on each major component of the Simmons process.

We'll discuss each of these tests in turn.

## A Limitation

Before discussing the individual tests, we should acknowledge a limitation that affects all three. As mentioned, Simmons is anxious to improve its SAQ response rates as quickly as possible, and that results in an aggressive schedule of change and testing. Ideally, we would have liked to conduct large, controlled, split-sample experiments with each technique. In fact, though, the timeline, costs, and systems pushed us toward a simpler, longitudinal design. In each case, we implemented the test procedure with a special off-line sample for a fixed period of time with a number of identifiable sample replicates; this was extra sample fielded by Simmons at a time when syndicated sample isn't normally being placed. We then contrasted the SAQ test sample performance over that period of time with recent syndicated Simmons sample at a different point in time.

Clearly, the longitudinal design is not ideal, if only because of seasonality differences. In most cases, our "control group" was a large portion of the Simmons syndicated sample that was being placed from January to April of 1997, with booklet returns continuing into June. Our test groups were generally being placed between April and June, with the time allowed for booklet completion spilling into the traditional Summer months.

While that lack of calendar period comparability will muddy the comparisons somewhat, we believe the net effect is to make the test results more conservative. Since Summer is typically a time of reduced cooperation, and our test groups were the only ones to include a significant portion of Summer, that reduces the likelihood of a positive test finding.

## Test of Warm-Up Postcards

One of the most difficult types of noncooperator is what's often called a "Won't Talk"—the person that hangs up almost as soon as the researcher begins talking. You can't impress them with promises of premiums, or the elegance of your materials, or the ease of your task; as soon as the interviewer begins, they're gone.

The only real hope for reducing the incidence of hardcore Won't Talks is to warm them up *before* you call, sending at least a postcard or letter to those for whom you have addresses. Of course, for the sample without listed phone numbers, it can be difficult or impossible to obtain an address. But since over half of the households in the U.S. provide an address to the telephone company, we have a shot at "warming up" over half of our starting sample. While it's not perfect coverage of the total population, it still seems desirable to try to improve where we can.

Here are the specifics. Where Simmons normally begins its SAQ process with a "cold call" in an effort to place the booklet with a randomly selected person, in these test replicates we began the test process with a warm-up postcard (Figure 2). The postcard was mailed to all sample to which we were able to append a mailing address, and the cards were sent out one week in advance of the first telephone dialing attempts.

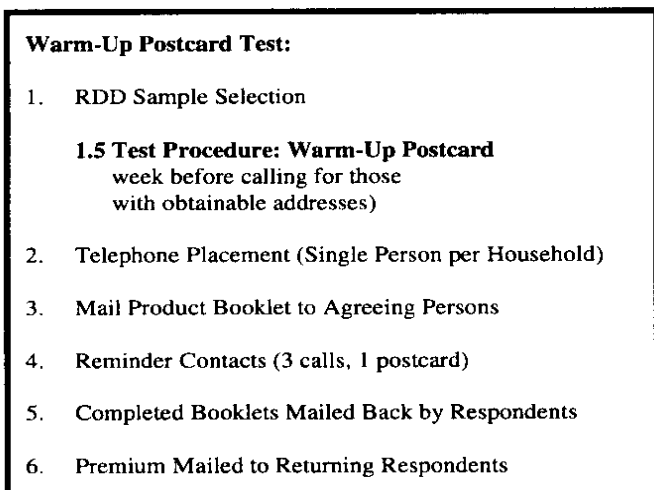


Figure 2

Here are a few of the other details on the test and control samples:

	<u>Control</u>	<u>Test Group</u>
Postcards Mailed	n/a	April 21-25, '97
Telephone Interview Dates:	Jan-Apr '97	Apr 28-Jun 8, '97
Estimated Predesignated Hh:	51,033	6,164

And here's the postcard itself (Figure 3):

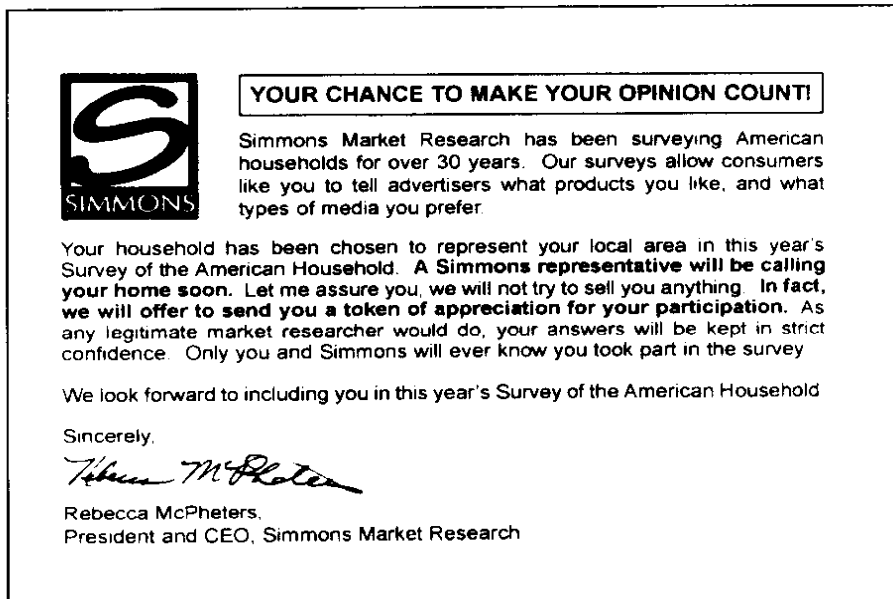


Figure 3

On the surface, it appears that the postcard made no difference to consent rates, our measure of initial cooperation. Both the Control Group and our Test sample had identical consent rates of 39%. As noted above, that result might still indicate some mild positive effect for the postcard, since we have seasonality muddying the waters. Furthermore, we know that any benefit we might see has been diluted by the incomplete coverage of the treatment; only half of the predesignated sample actually received the treatment because of the absence of initial addresses for unlisted sample.

The effects on sample distribution by age and sex also appeared to be small or nonexistent; the differences in percentage were all within about half a point, and none of the differences appear to be significant or meaningful (Chart 1):

Obviously, we were disappointed by the apparent lack of effect. While there's a chance that the postcard would contribute a small amount to sample performance (assuming that our test was conservative), it doesn't appear to be a very cost-effective solution to our response rate challenge.

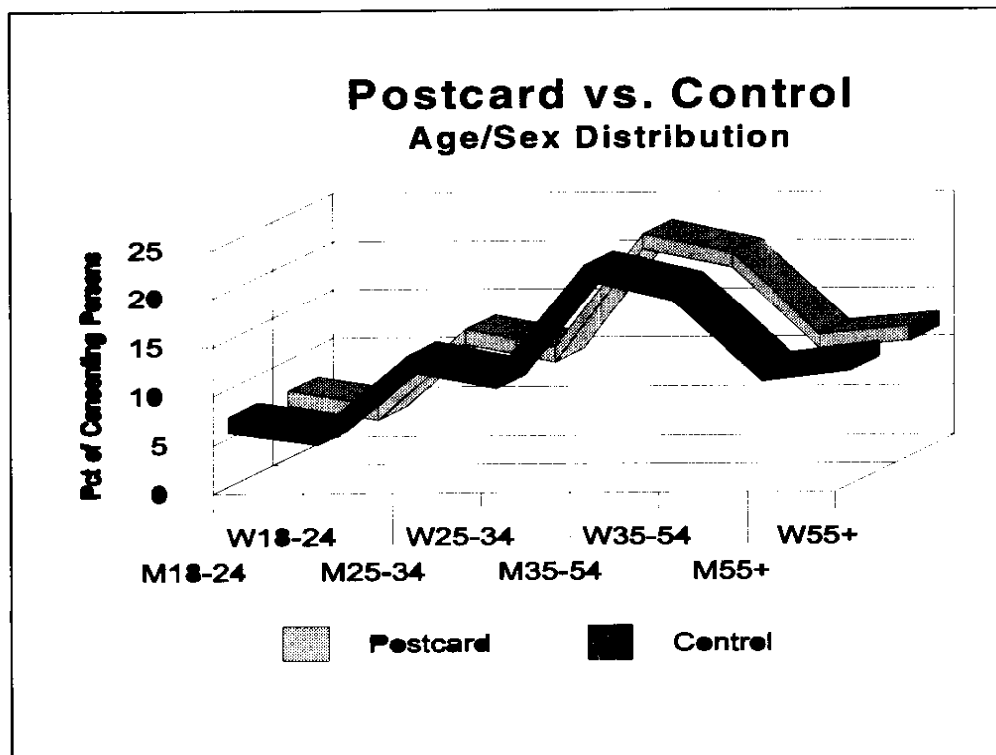


Chart 1

Since others have found such warm-ups to be helpful, we debated whether our results are sensible. One possible influence is that the Simmons SAQ process is single-person-per-household (SPPH). We have to reach a predesignated person within the household, not just the person who might answer the telephone. That suggests a possible dilution in the impact of an advance warm-up; the person we're recruiting may not be the person who saw the postcard.

So, between the unlisted sample dilution and the further dilution because of SPPH, a mailed warm-up may simply not be very powerful in the Simmons SAQ environment.

### Foot-in-the-Door Test

We mentioned earlier that one of Simmons' challenges is to reduce the number of early refusals—the people who want to get off the phone quickly. That's not unique to the Simmons method, but it's clearly an area with great potential, at least theoretically. You might conclude from the postcard study that there's little hope for such hardcore refusals, but fortunately, there's at least one technique that *does* appear to work.

At the risk of sounding like a Fuller Brush salesman, this concept has been labeled the "foot-in-the-door" technique. At the simplest level, the technique involves trying to sound very different than a typical sales or research call during those first critical seconds of contact with a respondent. The typical telemarketing or research call begins something like this:

"Hi, I'm John Interviewer from Acme Research of America, and I'd like to ask you a few questions. Now, I'm not trying to sell you anything; we're just conducting a survey. I'll only take a little bit of your time. First, may I ask if I've reached [the displayed phone number]?"

There are lots of variations on that theme, but the common elements are familiar to most consumers. An unknown company, calling for unknown purposes, whose first question has no interest or appeal to the consumer—and worst of all, taking enough time to say all of that for the consumer to collect their thoughts and rehearse their rejection.

The foot-in-the-door technique tries to cure two of those problems. The script's first question is something that might actually interest many people, and it gets to that question so quickly that the average person doesn't have time to organize their thoughts. Here's the exact text of the question we used in this test:

"Hello, this is \_\_\_\_\_ calling from Simmons Research. We are not trying to sell you anything. We're a research company that conducts surveys about television viewing and radio listening in your area. Have you watched any Television today? [*accept any answers*] What's your favorite Television show? [*accept any answers*]"

After that brief interaction, a Simmons interviewer then slides into the real screener interview, but again focusing at first on the media-related questions. Very simple, and fortunately, very effective.

This audience will undoubtedly want to know why we chose a television-oriented question at the beginning of a Simmons study. At Simmons, the key magazine audience measures are collected in a separate personal interview with a different sample, but the SAQ survey is still very magazine-oriented, in part to fuel the benchmarking process.

Frankly, we felt that it was important to have the foot-in-the-door question concern something that's nearly universal. We wanted to engage the respondent in some dialogue which is likely to be meaningful and interesting to the vast majority of contacts, and we wanted to avoid the possibility of disinterested responses as much as possible. These questions are "hooks," and we believe that the TV question provides the most inclusive hook available, while still seeming consistent with the rest of the call.

This technique was first developed and publicized by one of the coauthors (Mr. Peacock) for The Arbitron Company, and it was demonstrably effective in an actual ratings-survey environment. But we couldn't be sure that this approach would be as effective in the Simmons product-booklet context, and a test seemed to be in order.

The test of Foot-in-the-Door was also designed longitudinally:

	<u>Control</u>	<u>Test Group</u>
Telephone Interview Dates:	Jan-Apr '97	Apr 14-May 23, '97
Estimated Predesignated Hh:	51,033	3,240

Fortunately, in this study, there was clear benefit: The Foot-in-the-Door script raised consent rates by almost two-and-a-half points, or about nine percent (42.4% for the Test Group, vs. 39.0% for Control). This difference is both significant in statistical terms ( $p < 0.001$ ) and meaningful. Technically, we can't rule out seasonality, but we believe that seasonal factors

**9% improvement in consent!**

would tend to depress the Test results, not help them. So in contrast to the Postcard findings, the evidence seems clear—how you begin that first phone call can make a tremendous difference.

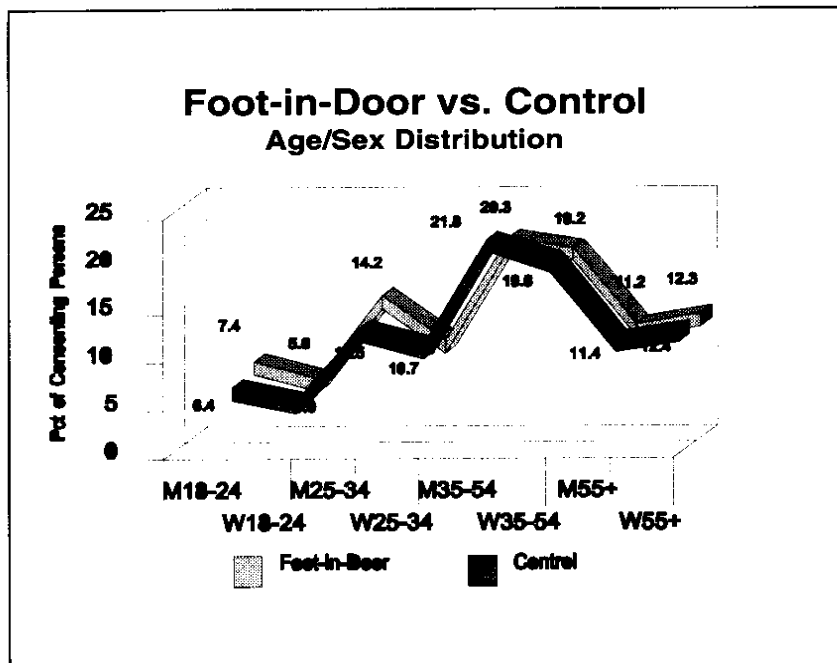


Chart 2

Another probable effect is that the Foot-in-the-Door technique appears to help where help is most needed—with young adults, including young males (Chart 2).

Here, we see what we believe are meaningful improvements in the distribution of consenters. Men 18-24, one of the notoriously difficult demographics, went from representing 6.4% of the consenters to 7.4% with the Foot-in-the-Door technique, a nearly significant ( $p < 0.15$ ) difference. And there was a similar finding for Women 18-24, leading to a combined Adult 18-24 increase of 1.5 points (12.9% for Foot-in-the-Door, vs. 11.4% for Control,  $p < 0.11$ ).

We began by speculating that this technique could help with the early-in-call refusals. In all honesty, our database doesn't tell us whether the benefit came from those early Won't Talks, or if we simply did better with borderline consenters later in the call. But in our judgment, we succeeded in the real objective—to make a meaningful improvement in one of our two key measures of cooperation, the rate of initial consent. This procedure, of course, has now been implemented at Simmons.

### Upfront Incentives Test

Perhaps the most dramatic change that Simmons tested was a switch from after-the-fact (reward) premiums, to smaller cash incentives provided up front with the mail-out of the booklet. Traditionally, Simmons has offered only token premiums to respondents at the beginning of the process, but has promised significant incentives *if and only if* the booklet is returned. Those reward-style premiums ranged from \$10 to \$25, with the higher premiums being used to favor men over women, young adults over older groups, and higher incomes over lower. For example, all men under the age of 35 received a \$25 premium, while older and lower income women received only \$10.

Both of the coauthors had prior experience which suggests that smaller premiums given "up front"—that is, with the mailing of the booklet to the respondent—can be at least as effective as larger, but delayed reward-for-return premiums. But the Simmons product booklet is a different sort of task; perhaps the reward approach is needed to sustain people through that demanding process. We felt that it was time to find out.

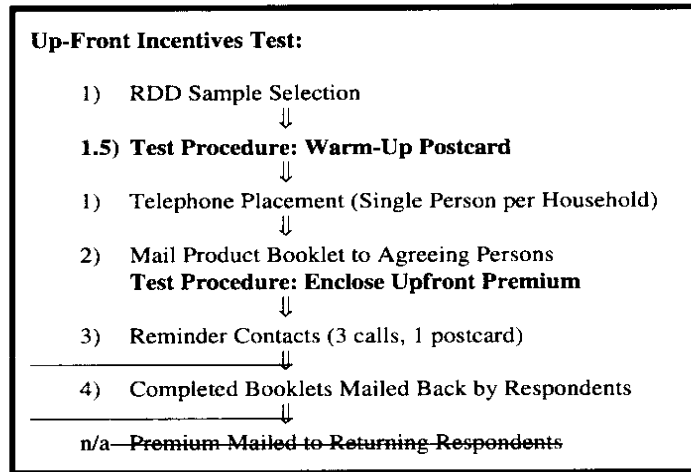


Figure 0

Note that we chose to bundle the test of up-front incentives with additional use of the previously-described warm-up postcard. Since the separate test of the postcard suggests no impact, we'll attribute any effects in the current study to the use of up-front incentives.

Of course, premiums are one of the largest components of survey costs. So for both business reasons and for research purity, we attempted to hold the total Simmons investment in premiums approximately constant. While that was important to costs, it also helps us assess the two premium strategies on a more even playing field.

Since up-front premiums are provided to about twice as many people as are premiums which only go to booklet returners, we had to design a plan which used up-front premiums that were about half the size of the reward incentives. Thus, where the standard after-the-fact premiums ranged from \$10 to \$25, our up-front incentives ranged from \$5 to \$15.

One judgment call that we made was to limit the premium increments to units of \$5. In other words, we limited ourselves to premiums of \$5, \$10, or \$15. Attribute this one to "professional judgment"; at this stage, we didn't see any point to fiddling with odd-amount incentives like \$8 or \$12.

The effect of that decision was to cause some sample to receive an up-front premium which was 50% of the old reward premium, while other sample types received an up-front incentive that was 60% of the reward (e.g., \$15 vs. \$25). As in the past, we erred in the direction of young adults, men, and higher-income; those groups, which historically received \$25 as a reward, were scaled by only 60% for their up-front premium, to \$15. A handful of sample types were scaled to 40% of their reward premiums, from \$25 to \$10; those groups included the unemployed and those refusing the employment question, among certain age groups.

Note that Simmons also uses an additional rule for African Americans. In the current system, their *minimum* reward premium is \$20; in the up-front model, the minimum became \$10.

As before, the testing approach was longitudinal:

	<u>Control</u>	<u>Test Group</u>
Telephone Interview Dates:	Jan-Apr '97	May 12-June 20, '97
Cutoff for Booklet Return:	June '97	July '97
Estimated Predesignated Hh:	51,033	6,463
Consenting Persons:	19,903	2,456

In our judgment, this study may have been the most affected by the seasonal differences between Test and Control. Not only was the Test group fielded later than the other test groups, but the key behavior here is booklet return, not consent. Thus, our Test group was affected by people's propensity to return booklets in June and July—not an ideal time for survey research.

Fortunately, we did not see any meaningful differences in the consent rates between these two groups. Since the test procedure follows consent, it's helpful to know that the groups of consenting sample are comparable.

But—and it's a good-news “but”—we *did* see a material and significant difference in *return* rates, in favor of the Up-Front Incentive group. Where the return rate of the standard procedures averaged 41.5% in the preceding months, the Up-Front Incentives group yielded returns that were almost four points higher (45.4% for the Test group, vs. 41.5% for Control,  $p < 0.001$ ). That's over a nine percent improvement in returns, from just a simple re-allocation of our premium investment!

**9% improvement in returns!**

There were some small shifts in our returned-sample distribution (Chart 3), but these don't appear to be significant. Remember that this chart is based on a smaller “n” (the distribution of the *returning* sample, not the distribution of consenters). Even the largest differences are only a little over one standard error apart.

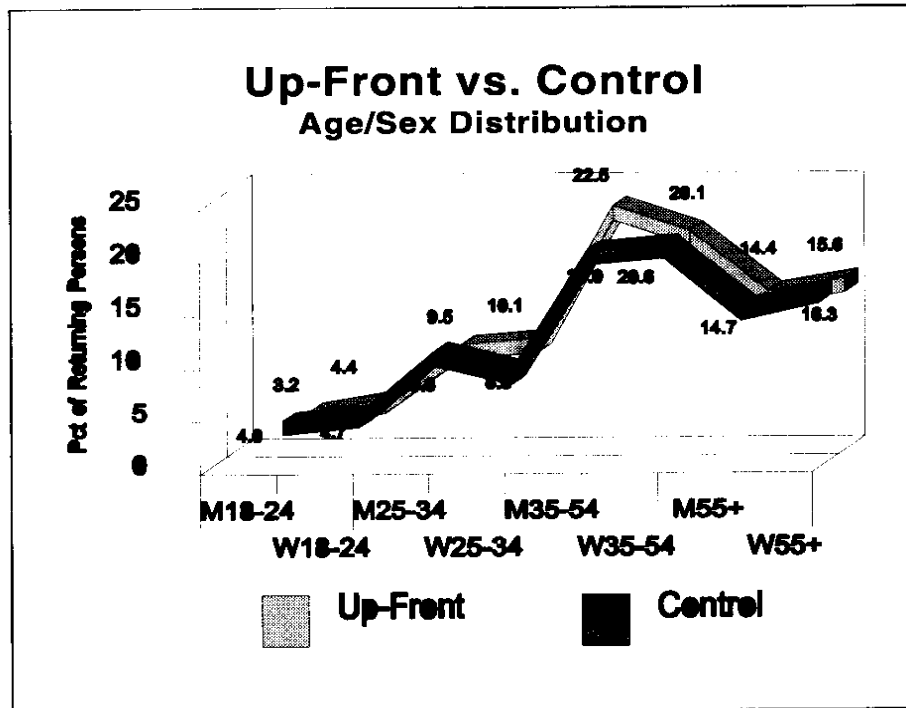


Chart 3

We've heard it before, and here's one more piece of evidence: Nothing works better than cash *up front*. We can now be confident that the old axiom holds true for complex tasks like the product booklet as well as for shorter or simpler studies. The beauty, of course, is that we achieved this nine percent improvement with an approximately equal investment; we simply invested more wisely.

Needless to say, this procedure is also being implemented at Simmons. We'll start using this approach in January, once the operational systems are in place. In the future, we may consider different allocations across the targeted subsamples. But for now, it's clear that up-front incentives, as tested, are a meaningful improvement.



## Conclusion

We began by acknowledging that a separate-sample approach to magazine and consumer measurement solves many problems, but that it carries with it a new challenge. Clearly, an affordable approach to parallel samples—a mailed-out, mailed-back self-administered product booklet—has to confront the challenge of response rates.

Simmons has committed to an aggressive program of response rate improvement and research, and we're starting to see the payoff. In two of the first three significant projects, we identified ways to improve the rate of initial agreement by nine percent, and the rate of booklet return by a complementary nine percent.

It's true that more should probably be done. Certainly Simmons isn't satisfied yet. That's why this ongoing program of response rate improvement will continue indefinitely. For example, Simmons is presently testing the use of additional premiums with its reminder mailings.

We invite you to join us in this program, since we're always in search of good ideas. Response rate improvement rarely comes in leaps and bounds, and even the best ideas rarely contribute more than we've seen today. Improving cooperation is a step-by-step process, and it takes many different enhancements to add up to a meaningful victory.

