

WAYS TO INCREASE MAIL SURVEY RESPONSE RATES: AN UPDATE— BASED ON OVER 20 YEARS OF PRACTICAL AND EXPERIMENTAL EXPERIENCE

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Outline of Presentation

In the next 15 minutes I would like to accomplish the following:

- Give you a few highlights from the paper I presented on this topic in Vancouver in 1997 to help put the new findings into perspective;
- Show you new findings regarding response rates from experiments we have conducted over the past two years;
- Show you some findings available to MMR for the first time this year about the relationship of response rate to household income;
- Share with you an insight that may surprise you about controlling response rates.

Importance of High Response rates

We start with the premise that high response rates are important. They are not important just on syndicated surveys, where they must meet certain standards, but on all 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 — or at least minimize — this potential non-response bias.

Increasing Difficulty in Obtaining Respondent Cooperation

In the United States, and apparently in all parts of the world, 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 of calls within the household.
- Internet interviewing is still too new to be subject to decreasing cooperation rates, but such is likely to be the case over time.
- Mail surveys have not been spared attrition in response rates. On the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey, which has been conducted for 23 years, we have had to counter an 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 over 50 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 two industry associations in the United States, the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO) and the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR), have invented acronyms that characterize the practices as "sugging" (Selling Under the Guise of research) and "frugging" (Fund Raising Under the Guise of research).t

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 many 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 1999, households with incomes of at least \$75,000.

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. In addition to reaching affluent adults, these techniques have achieved high response rates among physicians, lawyers, CEO's, partners in major accounting firms, and top-level media executives, to name a few. Our Mendelsohn Affluent Survey has achieved a response rate of about 50 percent over the past several years. Some of the surveys among other difficult-to-reach groups have achieved even higher response levels.

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

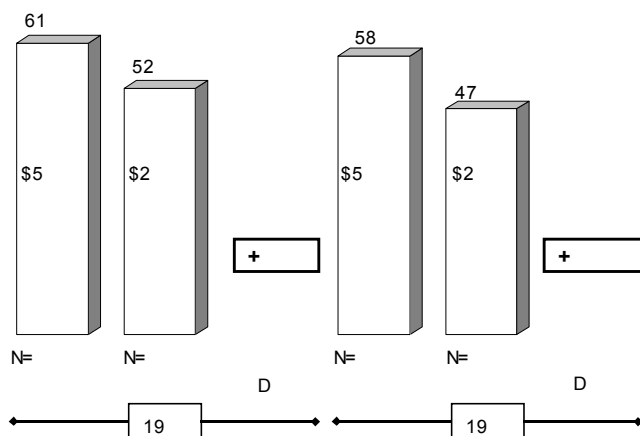
We have conducted a number of tests to measure the impact of monetary incentives on the response rates to mail surveys. Guided both by published survey results and by our own experience, we have **always included the incentive with the questionnaire** rather than sending it upon receipt of a completed 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, in more common vocabulary, a feeling of guilt if the gift is not reciprocated — appears to be the main motivating factor for respondents to complete the survey.

\$5 Bill vs. \$2 Bill

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 two bars on the left show the 1985 test, where the \$5 bill yielded a response rate increment of 9.5%.

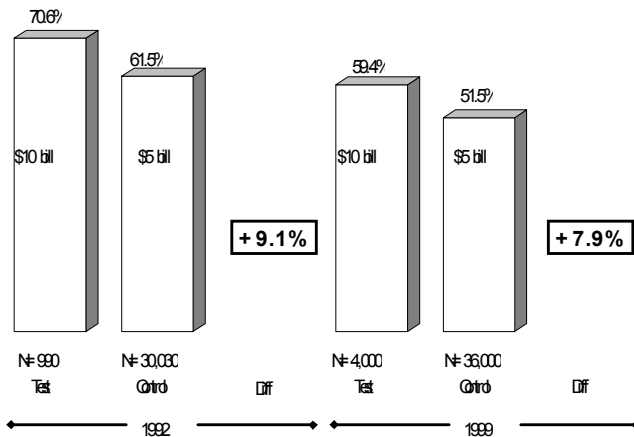
The two bars on the right show the 1986 test, where the \$5 bill yielded a response rate increment of 11.1%.



\$10 Bill vs. \$5 Bill

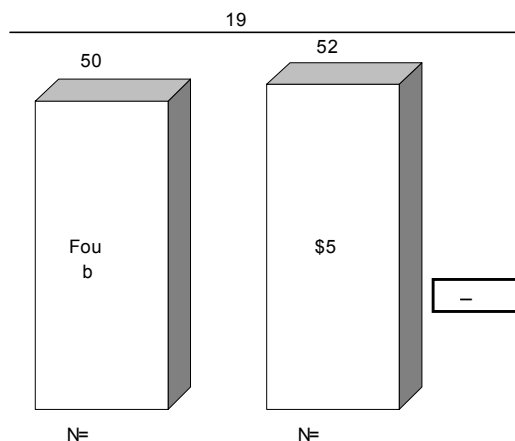
In 1992, we tested the use of a \$10 bill as an incentive compared with a \$5 bill. Not unexpectedly, the \$10 bill increased the response rate significantly (+9.1%).

This year, 1999, we repeated the \$10 bill versus \$5 bill test and found a lower, but still substantial, increment in response rate with the \$10 bill.



Four \$1 Bills vs. \$5 Bill

In 1998, we tested the use of four \$1 bills as an incentive compared with one \$5 bill. It was hypothesized that the larger number of bills (i.e. four) might cause a more favorable consumer response. Such was not the case, as seen by the almost 3 percentage point (-2.7%) loss in response rate compared with the single \$5 bill.

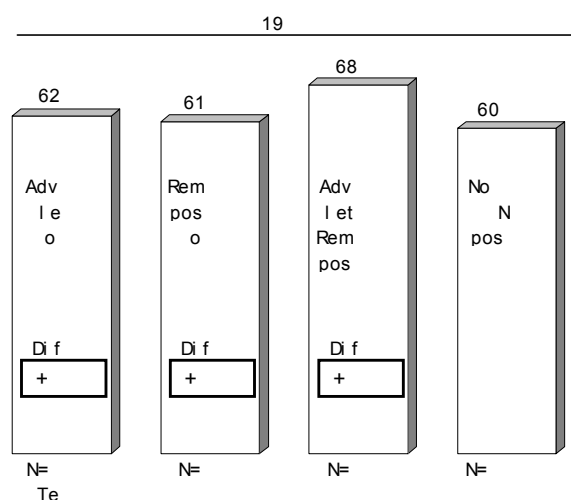


Advance Letters And Reminder Postcards

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.

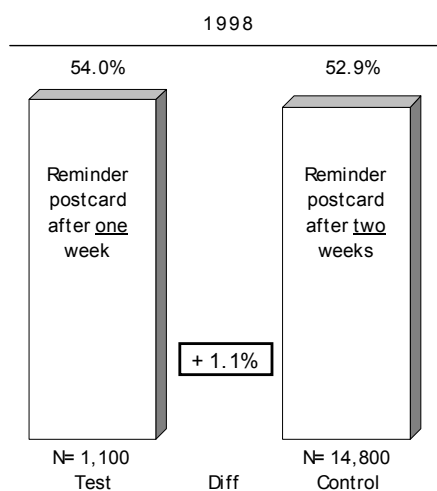
The results of the 1993 tests, shown above, bear out the maxim that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. The advance letter alone raised the response rate 2.4 percentage points, while the reminder postcard alone raised the response rate 1.3 percentage points. However, the advance letter and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

In 1994, we retested the combined effect of the advance letter and reminder postcard. While the increment (+5.4%) was somewhat lower than seen in the prior year, both tests showed substantive gains in response rate by using advance letters and reminder postcards.



Reminder Postcard Timing

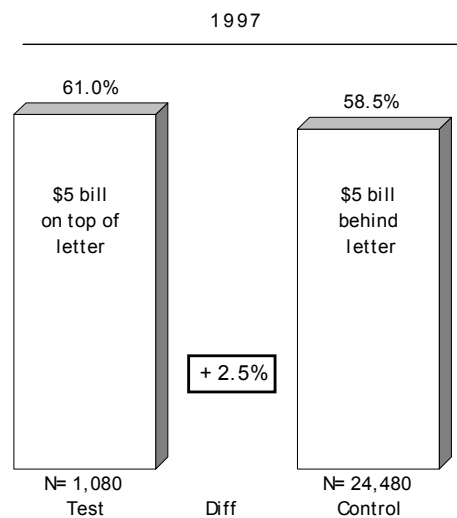
In 1998, we tested mailing the reminder postcard after one week rather than after two weeks as in prior years, thinking that the earlier reminder might influence the non-responder before he or she threw out the questionnaire. This test resulted in a positive, but not statistically significant, gain in response rate. Since we had also observed this type of finding in other surveys we conducted, and because we had no downside to implementation, we have adopted this new reminder postcard timing for our 1999 Mendelsohn Affluent Survey.



Position Of Incentive

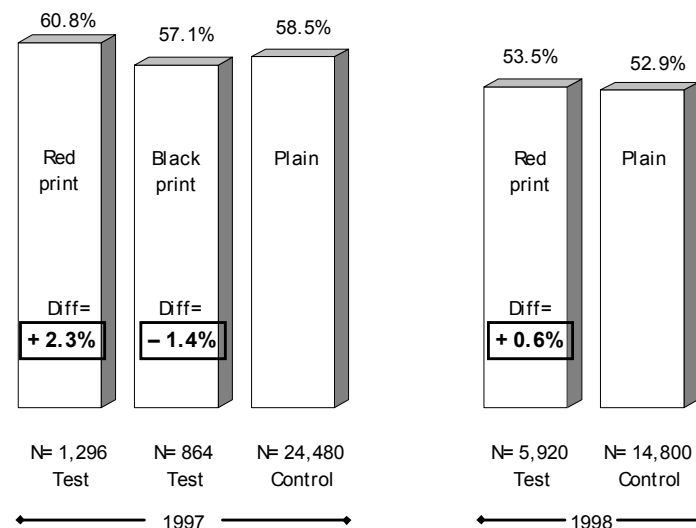
Something apparently as simple as the position of the monetary incentive in the mail-out package can be reconsidered. Our practice for the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey has been to attach the incentive (e.g. a \$5 bill) to the back of the cover letter that was placed in front of the questionnaire. This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

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, was sufficient encouragement to cause us to adopt this low-cost practice.



Banner on 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.



In 1997, the red banner cell had an incremental response rate level of +2.3 percentage points. Even though the increase was not statistically significant, the small additional cost of printing the envelopes has caused us to implement this option again. Interestingly, the black banner cell did not show an incremental response rate. In fact it had a numerical decrease of 1.4 percentage points.

In 1998, when we repeated the red banner test, the increment was +0.6%.

Other Tests Conducted With No Gains in Response Rate

As I reported to you in Vancouver, we conducted a number of tests over the years that had no positive effect and some that had a negative effect on response rates.

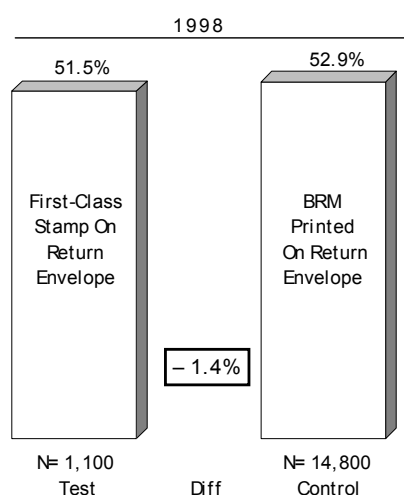
- 800 Telephone # Given In Cover Letter (+0.1%)
- Blue Signature Used In Cover Letter (-2.8%)
- Blue Signature And Blue Letterhead Used (-2.4%)
- \$1 Bill In Advance Letter Followed By Usual \$5 Bill In Questionnaire Packet (-0.2%)
- Cash Prize Offer (\$1,000/\$2,000 if returned early) In Addition To Usual \$5 Incentive (-3.6%)

First-Class Stamp on Return Envelope

In 1998, another experiment we conducted joined the ranks of those showing no increase in response rate.

Some mail researchers have indicated that a first-class stamp on the return envelope results in a higher response rate than a pre-printed Business Reply Mail (BRM) envelope. The rationale is that to some potential respondents the first-class stamp indicates the importance of the questionnaire being returned and/or serves as an encouragement to return the questionnaire so as not to be wasteful and throw out an envelope with a “good” stamp on it.

An experimental treatment we used in 1998 challenges this point of view. Potential respondents receiving the return envelopes with the first-class stamps had a numerically lower (-1.4 %) response rate compared with those who got the pre-printed BRM envelope.



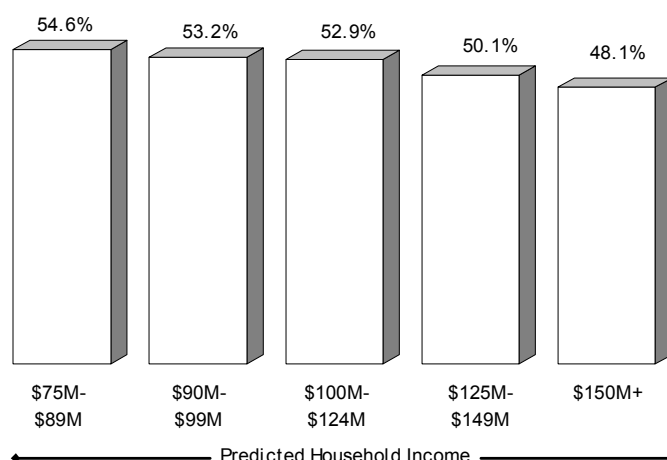
Response Rate Levels Among Predicted Income Groups

For years there has been much speculation about how response rate varies as income level increases. Such an analysis is rarely possible since there is usually no a priori knowledge of income level.

The sample for the Mendelsohn Affluent Survey is a result of application of Donnelley Marketing's regression-based model called FIND, an acronym for Family Income Detector. By using this model, we are able to substantially increase the likelihood of mailing questionnaires to households that meet our income target (this year \$75,000+ household income). Instead of obtaining completed questionnaires from only 20% with the target income, as would be the case in a general population mailing, FIND enables us to obtain three times that number.

For the first time this year, we were able to obtain the actual predicted household income levels from FIND. Using these predicted income levels as a surrogate for actual household income, we can see how response rate varies as predicted income increases.

As seen in the chart, response rate falls as income increases, but it falls quite minimally; a lot less than many had predicted.

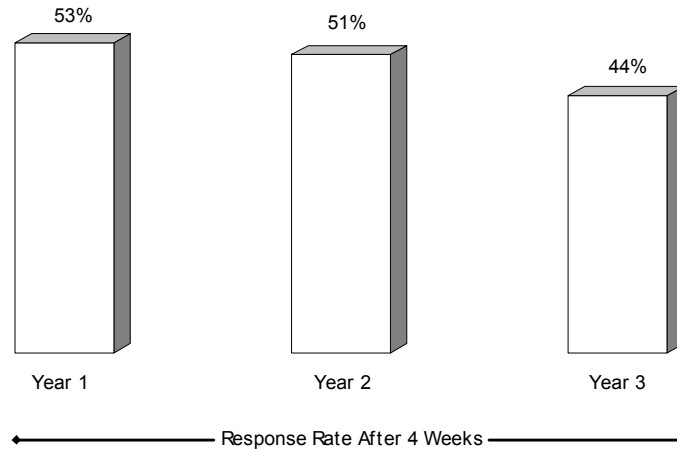


A Valuable Response Rate Insight From An Actual Case History

I would like to share with you a valuable response rate insight drawn from an actual case history that happened earlier this year.

The Problem

The third yearly study of a continuous mail tracking survey (not the Affluent Survey) revealed a particularly sharp drop in response rate.



The Investigation

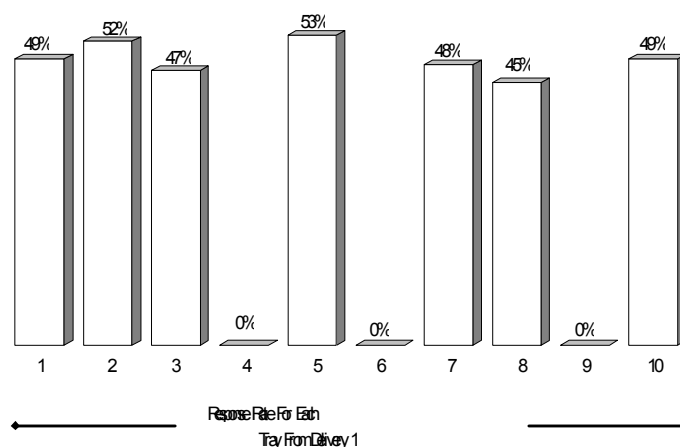
An investigation revealed that the first of three deliveries of questionnaires to the post office had a substantially lower response rate level than did the other two.

All three deliveries were made by two trusted permanent MMR employees and were checked in by a supervisory post office employee who issued a detailed receipt for the number of pieces received.



The Investigation Continues

Further investigation revealed that three mailing trays from the first post office delivery had no returns whatsoever. It was now time to call the postal inspectors.



The Culprit?

Could the loss of three trays containing 625 envelopes be due to a dishonest post office employee?

Shortly after we reported this situation, a postal inspector called us to say that the post office worker who signed our receipt had been arrested for theft in another situation.

Problem Resolution

- Re-mail full questionnaires with incentives to the 625 potential respondents
- Resulting response rate was comparable to the full sample.

The Lesson

- Do mailings in replicates so that if all or part of a day's mailing is stolen or lost, it will not result in the loss of all responses from the Midwest or all individuals in a certain profession, etc.
- Keep detailed control records of your mailings so that you can trace problems and re-mail if necessary.

Future Prospects

What about the future of response rates?

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.