

Experiments With Online Survey Response January 2011

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As response rates for surveys continue to decline, researchers have explored and experimented with a range of issues related to survey response. Among these issues are length of the survey, time in the field, salience, design and appearance, pre-notifications, and reminders. In the past few years, I myself have explored some issues of particular interest to those of us who do alumni surveys, conducting experiments with incentives, the sender, salutations, and logos. This article summarizes the findings from these experiments and what they suggest.

All of the surveys discussed here explored issues relating to programs and services available to all alumni, so the surveys were salient to the general alumni population of each institution, and not just to certain sub-groups. All of the surveys were conducted on the web, were in the field for about one month, and two or three reminders were emailed to non-respondents at approximately one-week intervals. For the sake of readability, the word “invitation” in this article refers to both the initial invitation and the reminders.

Incentives

At one point or another, most of us who conduct surveys with alumni wonder if we should offer an incentive. Three questions immediately arise:

- Research over the years indicates that monetary incentives, offered to all respondents, can increase response to surveys – but few of us who work with alumni have the budget for this. But what about *lottery* incentives, where only some respondents win money or a gift? There is less research and less consensus about the effect of lottery incentives.
- Prospect theory suggests that the way a proposition is framed can affect the decision people make. So is it more effective to offer respondents multiple chances to win a smaller gift...or a single chance to win a larger gift?
- Do lottery incentives affect – either positively or negatively – the composition of the participating sample and how representative it is of the population? In seventeen years of surveying alumni from universities and colleges in the US, Canada, and around the world, we have consistently (and not surprisingly) seen greater response among alumni who are engaged with and supportive of the institution. Donors, for instance, are almost always more likely than non-donors to participate in surveys. Would a lottery incentive increase response among those who are less engaged and supportive? If so, it could be of benefit by making the participating sample more representative of the population. Or, conversely, would a lottery incentive increase response even further among those who are engaged and supportive? In that case, the incentive would make things worse by further skewing the participating sample and making it even less representative.

To explore these questions, I conducted an experiment in June 2008 in a survey of Stanford alumni. One random sample of 2430 alumni was offered no incentive, and two other random samples of 2449 and 2454 alumni were offered incentives of the same expected value (i.e., dollars multiplied by probability of winning) but framed differently – one sample was offered five chances to win a \$100 Visa gift card, and the other was offered one chance to win a \$500 Visa gift card.

Overall response was a slight bit higher in the incented samples (32.5%) than in the non-incented sample (30.6%). More noteworthy, however, is that the lottery incentivized the wrong alumni. Donors and women – who were more likely than non-donors and men to respond without the incentive – responded even more disproportionately when offered the incentive. So not only did the incentive *not* improve the sample composition by increasing response among *under*-represented groups, but the incentive in fact *worsened* the sample composition by further increasing response among *over*-represented groups. The incentive magnified the skew already present in the participating sample.

And the framing made no difference whatsoever. Response was virtually identical in the sample offered five chances to win \$100 (32.6%) as it was in the sample offered one chance to win \$500 (32.4%). Moreover, this was seen across all demographic groups, so neither framing outperformed the other with any particular slice of alumni.

Implications: The incentives drew a response rate only 1.9 percentage points higher than no incentive did – a statistically significant difference (just barely), but a very small one. And the incentives made the participating sample less representative of the population. Thus for most alumni surveys, lottery incentives may not be worth the extra effort and cost...not to mention the added bias to the participating sample. However, if it is of paramount importance to shake every last possible respondent from the trees, lottery incentives may be of some small benefit. They may also be of benefit for surveys conducted exclusively among those groups most motivated by incentives (in this case, donors and women), when the increased participation of these groups will not make the sample less representative of the population.

If a lottery incentive is offered, it may not matter if you offer multiple chances to win a smaller gift or a single chance to win a larger gift. In this experiment, response was the same for both. Of course, it's possible that the expected value of an incentive may be more important than the framing of the proposition. If so, larger or different incentives than the ones we tested might produce different results.

The “From” Header

Previous research suggests that open rates and response rates can be higher when material is sent from high-profile, popular, and well respected individuals. But what if a marquee name isn't available or appropriate for your survey? Would response be higher to invitations from a known and credible organization...or from a person whose name few would recognize?

This was tested in a survey I conducted in July 2010 for a private university in New England (which we will call XYZ University, and whose alumni magazine editor we will call Betty Boop). One random sample of 3184 alumni received an invitation from XYZ Magazine, and another random sample of 3185 alumni received the exact same invitation but from Betty Boop.

Response was significantly higher to the invitation from Betty Boop (16.1%) than to the invitation from XYZ Magazine (11.9%). Moreover, the invitation from Betty Boop obtained a higher response among all demographic groups, so the higher response was across the board and not limited to certain groups.

The results from this experiment suggested a further question: Would response be higher to an invitation from a peer than from just any old joe? To answer this question, I replicated the XYZ experiment in a survey of Stanford alumni in November 2010, but added a third random sample to the experiment. For this survey, one random sample of 3327 alumni received an invitation from Stanford Alumni Association, a second random sample of 3336 alumni received an invitation from Jerold Pearson, and a third random sample of 3323 alumni received an invitation from Jerold Pearson '75 (with the class year denoting that the invitation was from a fellow alumnus).

As with the XYZ survey, response to the Stanford survey was significantly higher to the invitations with my name (27.2%) than to the invitation from Stanford Alumni Association (23.7%).

But adding the class year made no difference at all: Response was about the same to the invitation from Jerold Pearson '75 (26.9%) as it was to the invitation from Jerold Pearson (27.5%). Even among a more narrowly defined “peer group” (the Classes of 1970-1980), response was virtually identical to the invitation without my class year as to the invitation with my class year. (There were too few alumni in each sample from just the Class of 1975 to see if there was a “peer effect” exclusively among my classmates.)

Implications: When possible, use a person’s name rather than an organization in the “from” header of your survey invitations. Perhaps an organization name suggests to recipients that the email is generic marketing or promotional material that can be deleted without opening – while a person’s name, even if they don’t recognize it, may suggest something a bit more out of the ordinary, personal, or otherwise worth opening. Whatever the reasons, response will probably be higher if the invitation is from a person, but it may not be a great deal higher. In other words, it’s worth doing, but it won’t be a game changer. And it may not matter if the sender is an alumnus/a or not.

Salutations

Does the salutation make a difference? Would response be higher to invitations with a personalized salutation than to invitations with a generic salutation? And, if so, what kind of personalized salutation works best?

In September 2002, I conducted a four way experiment in a survey of Stanford alumni. One random sample of 775 alumni received an invitation with a generic salutation (Dear Stanford Alum), while three other random samples of 782, 761, and 790 alumni received invitations with different types of personalized salutation: Dear Mr Bond, Dear James, and James.

Response was a bit higher to the three personalized salutations taken as a whole (50.8%) than to the generic salutation (47.9%). But there wasn’t much difference – at least overall – among the three personalized salutations: 51.8% responded to “Dear Mr. Bond” and 50.3% responded to both “Dear James” and “James.” Within certain age groups, however, there were some differences:

- Perhaps surprisingly, alumni under 30 were more likely to respond to the formal “Dear Mr. Bond” (61.5%) than to either of the familiar salutations (54.6% to “Dear James” and 51.5% to “James”). Maybe younger alumni appreciate the respect that the more formal salutation implies.
- Among alumni 50 and older, response was somewhat higher to “Dear Mr. Bond” (53.0%) and “James” (52.7%) than it was to “Dear James” (47.6%). Again, “older” alumni may appreciate the respect implied in the formal salutation. If so, their similar response to one of the familiar salutations is puzzling.

Response to the three personalized salutations did not differ in any other age groups or by gender.

Implications: Again, while it’s not a game changer, it’s certainly worth personalizing the salutation when possible. And a formal, rather than familiar, personalized salutation may be more effective with the broadest spectrum of alumni.

Logos

What about logos? Might response be higher to email invitations that include a logo, perhaps for branding or aesthetic reasons? Or, conversely, might response be higher to plain text invitations, perhaps because they seem more personal, less commercial or hyped, and don’t require recipients to display or suppress the image if prompted by their email client?

Turns out it makes no difference at all. In a survey I conducted in September 2010 for a public university in the South, one random sample of 6997 alumni received an invitation that included the alumni association logo, and another random sample of 6996 alumni received the exact same invitation but without the logo. The response rate was almost identical – 10.4% for the invitations with the logo, and 10.0% for the invitations without the logo. Furthermore, this lack of a difference was seen across all demographic groups, so including or not including the logo didn’t even make a difference for particular groups.

Implications: Including a logo won’t make any difference to your response rate. If you feel compelled to use a logo for branding or aesthetic reasons, it shouldn’t hurt. Likewise, if you don’t want to go to the trouble of including a logo, you have nothing to lose in terms of the response rate.

Final Note

Looking at just the three Stanford surveys discussed here (so we compare apples with apples), we see that overall response declined from 50% in the 2002 survey testing salutations, to 31.9% in the 2008 survey testing incentives, to 26% in the 2010 survey testing senders. Response rates *are* falling, so it makes sense to consider the issues discussed here when implementing your surveys. However, as with most experiments, extra confidence comes with replication, so please let us know the results if similar or other experiments are conducted at your own institution.

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