

The Impact of Survey Incentives and Survey Mode on Response Rates

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Survey research is an important tool for energy efficiency program planning and evaluation. However, with telephone survey response rates at an all-time low, the continued viability of the method is in question. Low response rates increase the costs of surveys and open the results to non-response bias. While telephone survey response rates have declined, mail survey response rates have held steady. The internet has also become an alternative mode of survey outreach and response. For surveys to remain a cost-effective evaluation tool that produces quality data, new survey methods are needed.

This poster presents the results from a 2x3 factorial survey experimental design that tested the impact of three different survey outreach modes and three incentive structures on survey response rates. The surveys were conducted with residential customers who had participated in a free CFL giveaway program.

For two of the survey modes, we utilized a “mail-push-to-web” (MPW) approach in which we mailed customers an invitation to complete the survey and gave them the choice of completing the survey on-line or calling our call center and completing the interview with a live interviewer. We varied the reminders to complete the survey for these two MPW groups. We sent a single postcard reminder to all customers, and for customers for whom we had email addresses, we also sent two email reminders. The third mode that we tested was email outreach only. For this internet-only group, we only communicated with potential respondents via email sending an initial email invitation to complete the survey on-line and two email reminders. Past research has shown that using multiple forms of outreach can increase response rates. By comparing the response rates of the MPW group that received email reminders with the group that only received emails, we can determine whether the additional mailings were worth the cost or whether sending emails alone is just as effective.

Survey incentives are widely known to increase response rates but less is known about the relative impact of different incentive structures. We tested two different types of sweepstakes incentives compared to no incentive. For the sweepstakes, our experiment tested whether offering a larger prize of \$100 was more effective at lifting response rates than a smaller prize of \$50. We held the odds of winning constant by telling respondents in both sweepstakes conditions that we would be giving away ten prizes and there would be approximately 300 entries.

We present the main effects of the experiments where we compare the average response rate of each survey mode controlling for incentive type and incentive type controlling for survey mode. We also compare the response rates of each of the nine survey mode/incentive combinations to identify any combinations that were particularly effective.

These results suggest that only using the internet for outreach when the evaluator has email address can be as effective as using multiple and more expensive modes of outreach. The response rates of MPW with email reminders and internet only were nearly identical and three times higher than the MPW/postcard approach. Each reminder that we sent increased survey participation, though at a declining rate. It is possible that the MPW/postcard response rate was so much lower because the group received only one reminder compared to up to four for the other groups.

The larger sweepstakes prize of \$100 had a slightly greater effect on response rates than the \$50 prize. The response rate of the \$100 prize group was double that of the group that did not receive an incentive whereas the response rate of the \$50 prize group was 1.6 times higher.

The most effective mode/incentive combination was MPW/email with \$100 sweepstakes incentive. The response rate for this group was nearly 7 percentage points higher than any other condition.