

DECLINING COOPERATION: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS IN PERFORMING EVALUATION WORK

Moderator: Shel Feldman, Shel Feldman Management Consulting

PANELISTS:

Kathleen Gaffney, West Coast Consulting, KEMA-XENERGY
Victoria Albright, Field Research Corporation
Mike Dennis, Knowledge Networks

SUMMARY:

Begin with some home truths: To meet the needs of corporate sponsors, legislative committees, and regulatory agencies regarding the effects and value of residential programs, evaluators rely heavily on information gathered from customer interviews. The credibility and value of that information is dependent on the sample being unbiased and the respondents understanding the questions and being willing and able to respond knowledgeably. However, the ability of evaluators to meet those requirements is sometimes questionable. Indeed, the problems of collecting representative and appropriate data are increasing. For example, the range of populations served is expanding to include clients in “hard-to-reach” segments, often with different languages and limited interview experience. Moreover, technological changes such as the proliferation of telephone numbers devoted to cell phones, fax machines, and computers, as well as increases in concerns about privacy and the intrusiveness of telemarketing appear to have depressed response rates substantially.

So what’s an evaluator to do? This panel brings together experts from within the energy efficiency industry and from the survey research industry who are grappling with these issues and developing the next generation of research methods to mitigate the problems noted.

Kathleen Gaffney will discuss approaches to improve the collection of energy and non-energy data from households with low and moderate incomes, using community-based outreach workers to facilitate recruitment for participant interviews and on-site home inspections, while adhering to a statistical sample design. Ms. Gaffney’s project also employs multiple data collection techniques, including the use of several languages, intensive in-person training with research teams to ensure reliable and consistent data collection and response interpretation, and alternative questionnaire design formats and survey implementation strategies.

Victoria Albright will focus on issues confronting the conduct of telephone surveys today, including the growth of “Do not call” lists and their impacts (regardless of whether the law applies to evaluation research), the rise in privacy managers, and shifts from the use of land lines to cell phones. She will also address the challenges of conducting surveys in multiple modes (e.g., telephone and web-based versions of the same instrument). In addition, she will highlight substantive experience with evaluation of social marketing and campaign evaluations relating to adoption of energy efficiency programs by the public.

Mike Dennis will draw on recent reports on the survey response rate problem presented at the most recent meetings of AAPOR (American Association for Public Opinion Research) as well as methodological research conducted by Knowledge Networks. First, he will review recent information on response rates actually experienced by major research organizations and attempts by various firms to improve response rates. Then, he will summarize recent research on the impact of lower response rates on the validity of survey results. Finally, he will comment on industry trends in efforts to address the problem.

The presentations will be brief and pointed, to allow generous time for discussion and audience input.