BATTLING THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM:
PUTTING BEST PRACTICE ABOVE COST
IN GENERAL POPULATION SURVEYS

Alex Dunn & Laura Schauer
alex@illumeadvising.com
August 2019
A SURVEY NERD’S CROSSROADS
WHAT WE’RE FACING

Telephone Response Rate by Year

- 1997: 36%
- 2000: 28%
- 2003: 25%
- 2006: 21%
- 2009: 15%
- 2012: 9%
- 2015: 9%
- 2018: 6%

$ - $$$$
HOW WE’VE DEALT SO FAR

Reduce Certainty
95/5
90/10

Change mode
OUR POPULATION
COVERAGE
SAMPLING
NON-RESPONSE
MEASUREMENT
NON-RESPONSE

MEASUREMENT
TELEPHONE RESPONSE RATE BY YEAR


36%  28%  25%  21%  15%  9%  9%  6%
“[T]here is little empirical support for the notion that low response rate surveys de facto produce estimates with high nonresponse bias... As nonresponse rates increase, however, effective surveys require the designer to anticipate nonresponse and actively seek auxiliary data that can be used to reduce the effect of the covariance of response propensities and the survey variables.” (Groves 2006)
“there are understandable efforts to say that low response rates do not necessarily have adverse effects on data [, clearly] there are also examples where low response rates have major effects on results.” (Fowler 2016)
## Mode Differences

### Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Telephone Survey (Outbound)</th>
<th>Telephone Survey (Inbound)</th>
<th>Web Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Homeowners</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Age</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with College Degree or Above</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with Income of $50,000+</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Aware of Mass Save</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample Size</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

WHAT TO DO

1. Select a survey methodology that will best represent the population of interest

2. Introduce the research through advanced notifications and messages

3. Send incentives

4. Keep the survey short
ADDRESSING MEASUREMENT BIAS
WHAT NOT TO DO

1. Overly complex or technical language (assuming knowledge)
2. Asking two things at once (double-barreled questions)
3. Assuming a response (asking leading questions)
4. Providing incomplete options (non-mutually exclusive or exhaustive response options)
5. Length of the survey
6. Inconsistent rating scales throughout the survey
WHAT YOU CAN DO WHEN SCOPEING A SURVEY

- Do you have contact information?
  - Yes
    - Do you have email addresses?
      - Yes
        - Do you need to capture a specific population?
          - Yes
            - Use an email recruitment strategy with incentives, consider a phone or mail follow-up
          - No
            - Use an email recruitment strategy with up to 3 reminders
        - No
          - Do you need to capture a specific population?
            - Yes
              - Use an address-based mail-to-web recruitment strategy
            - No
              - Use a multi-modal survey recruitment strategy using phone and mail invitations
      - No
        - Do you need to capture a specific population?
          - Yes
            - Use an address-based approach using census data to create a sample with a higher proportion of hard-to-reach customers and use incentives
          - No
            - Use a panel with quotas for hard-to-reach populations – discuss limitations of interpretations based on panel use
  - No
    - Do you need to capture a specific population?
      - Yes
        - Use an address-based approach using census data to create a sample with a higher proportion of hard-to-reach customers and use incentives
      - No
        - Use a panel with quotas for hard-to-reach populations – discuss limitations of interpretations based on panel use
ALEXANDRA DUNN
MANAGING DIRECTOR
alex@illumeadvising.com