

Tips for Improving Response Rates for Surveys of College Students

The following tips were developed by the University of Wisconsin Survey Center.¹

1. Provide sample members with a small, prepaid monetary incentive

A substantial literature, primarily involving surveys administered via the mail shows the effectiveness of prepaid, monetary incentives in increasing response rates (Church, 1993; Edwards et al., 2002; Singer & Ye, 2013).

- For a web-based survey that includes postal addresses, it is possible to provide a monetary incentive in a mailed contact (Dykema et al., 2013b).
- If it is not possible to deliver a prepaid, monetary incentive, offer a cash incentive (e.g., \$5 or \$10) to those completing the survey (Stevenson et al., 2011).
- Avoid lotteries which are not effective at increasing response rates (Singer & Ye, 2013; Stevenson et al., 2011).

2. Include a sufficient number of contacts with sample members

You will need to make decisions about the type, timing, and number of contacts you make with sample members.

- *Prenotification.* If time and budget allow, pre-notify sample members of the upcoming survey by contacting them beforehand, preferably using a mode other than the web, such as in a postal mailing (Crawford et al., 2004).
- *Invitation.* Sample members can be invited to participate in a web survey in an emailed invitation in which a hot-linked URL is embedded, or in a mailed invitation in which an URL is included on a postcard or in a letter that respondents manually type into a browser. When sample frames include both email and mailing addresses and budgets permit, we recommend first sending a postal letter, but also including the URL in the letter (to allow motivated respondents to participate immediately).
- *Reminders.*
 - Send multiple emailed follow-up reminders (at least two) to sample members who fail to complete the web survey following the initial invitation.
 - Vary the type of appeal you use in these subsequent contact attempts in order to bring in sample members with different motivations for participating (e.g., appeal to the utility and value of the research initially, but make a personal appeal for help in a later contact).

3. Follow best practices for the content, format, and design of email and postal contacts

Research indicates that the content, format, and design of e-mail and postal contacts can have an effect on survey participation (Dillman et al., 2009; Kaplowitz et al., 2012), and the following guidelines are offered:

- Personalize salutations for invitations and follow-up requests.
- State the purpose and utility of the study clearly and briefly.
- Provide information about the sponsor of the research project and who to contact if more information is desired.

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- Ensure confidentiality explicitly (or anonymity if appropriate).
- Include a hot-linked URL in e-mail correspondence and a manual-entry URL in mailed correspondence.
- Avoid terms used by spammers in the subject line and in body of e-mail (e.g., “opportunity” and “click”).
- Avoid sending e-mail messages from a generic account.
- Include an inviting and appropriate subject line for email messages; avoid using the word “survey” (Edwards et al., 2009).

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