

Response rates on mail surveys

Technote

Introduction

The mailed questionnaire has an undeserved reputation as a poor method of survey research. Many people feel that it is condemned to low response rates—never higher than 15%. As well, information obtained in a self-administered survey is presumed to be “softer” than information obtained from an in-person survey.

These views are outdated. Mail surveys are used with good success in many contexts, and response rates of 50–70% are common, with 90% possible in some cases.

Main steps in achieving a high response rate

To achieve high response rates, several steps are essential:

Professionalism in all materials

The initial package sent to the respondent is important. The entire package must be professional looking and should contain the questionnaire, a cover letter, and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope.

The cover letter explains the purpose of the study and that confidentiality is assured. This letter should be short and should provide a contact name and number. In general, it should be written by a senior officer, but be careful in using an elected official, since some respondents may react negatively.

A booklet is a good format for the questionnaire. There is little incentive for respondents to reply to a set of poorly photocopied sheets, with densely packed questions and obscure directions. Careful use of graphics and overall design presents an appealing visual impression and encourages response. Of course, the use of well-phrased and clearly relevant questions is basic.

A stamp (as opposed to metered mail) and a handwritten address on the envelope enhance the package and “de-institutionalize” the presentation. However, this adds to cost. The goal of the mail-out package is to attain “coffee table adhesion factor”—it survives being thrown out as junk, gets to the coffee table, and has a good chance of being answered later.

Follow-up

Follow-up is essential to high response rates. It is common for telephone and in-person surveys to require extensive repeated attempts to obtain a response. Mail surveys are no different.

The first contact, consisting of the cover letter, questionnaire, and stamped, self-addressed return envelope, produces a response of about 20–30% of the initial mail-out. The second contact, following in about a week, consists of a reminder postcard and often accounts for about 30–35% of the mail-out. The third follow-up, consisting of a letter and a replacement questionnaire, typically produces the final 10–20% toward an ultimate return of 65–75%. As Figure 1 shows, the fourth contact, another reminder postcard, may be unproductive and may generate hostility among non-respondents.

Survey Response Over Time

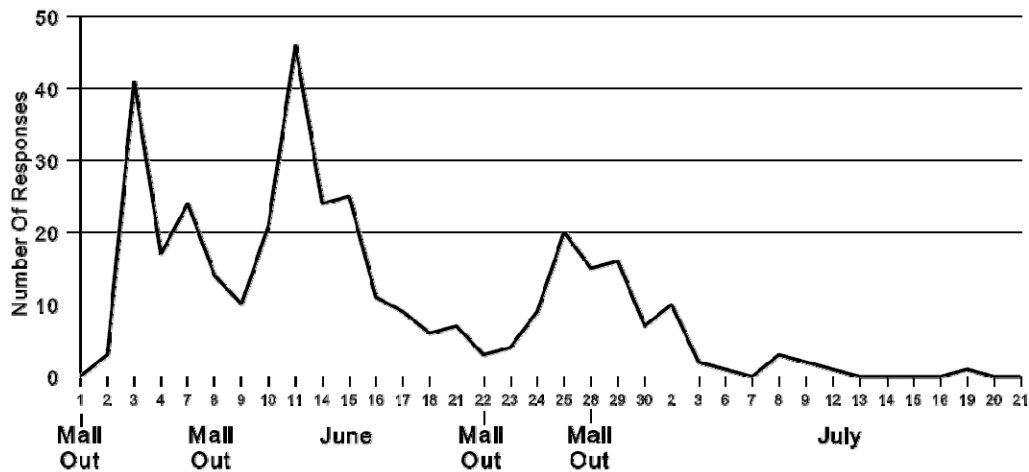


FIGURE 1
Survey response over time

Note: This is the actual response pattern obtained for a local urban sample. Regional and national samples will take longer to complete.

Other factors in the success of a mail-out survey

Other steps enhancing response rates on a mail survey include:

Avoid mailing near holidays. If the first mailing has not occurred by November 1 or May 15, the survey may encounter difficulty as people become preoccupied with vacations.

Mail material early on Tuesdays to have the package arrive on Wednesday or Thursday. Mail that arrives on Fridays or Mondays tends to get set aside by respondents.

Use a “hot-line” to address respondents who wish to verify the validity of the survey or who seek clarification. Make sure that staff are informed about the survey and that the hot-line is maintained during business hours.

Consider using a telephone announcement the week before the mailing to “alert” the respondent that a survey is in the mail. This is more practical for local surveys because national surveys have long distance charges. A sample frame with telephone numbers is necessary in order for this to work.

Use a prominently displayed administrative number on the front of the survey. Emphasize right beside it that the number is being used only to avoid bothering respondents who have already replied. This reduces costs by identifying for follow-up only those who have not responded.

Never reveal the identity of non-respondents to anyone, but their attributes (age, area of residence, length as a client, etc.) should be compared with respondent data. This is useful to evaluate non-response bias and to ensure quality control.

Evaluation of the mail survey

Advantages of a mail survey

Mail surveys are superior to telephone interviews when the goal is to survey households, and it is useful for several respondents to contribute to the data. As well, when the information is sensitive, a mail survey may encourage greater candour because no interviewer is present. The research organization can establish the legitimacy of the survey (since letterhead is used for the letter), unlike the anonymous telephone survey.

Mail surveys are relatively non-intrusive because they allow the respondent the greatest control over the interview.

Disadvantages of a mail survey

Mail surveys take longer and are less useful than telephone surveys for tracking public opinion on current events.

Mail surveys assume literacy

Mail questionnaires should be avoided when a specific target group is needed (e.g., women of child-bearing age), unless there is a good list from which to sample.

When complex information is required, interviewers are often essential. Questionnaires that require the respondent to move through extensive skips (depending on the responses or a complicated scale) are not suitable for mail surveys.

Costs

The mailed questionnaire (three waves) will typically cost about the same as a comparable telephone survey (depending on long distance costs). This may be surprising, since many organizations use a single wave of mailed questionnaires as a way to reduce costs.

Typical costs are about \$10 – \$30 per completed interview, depending on the extent of analysis and reporting required. A fixed (upfront) cost is required for design and analysis. Complex projects require additional design and evaluation, which raise costs.

Additional readings

- Blankenship, A.B., & Breen, George Edward. (1993). *State of the art marketing research*. Chicago: American Marketing Association.
- Cochran, William G. (1977). *Sampling techniques*. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.
- Dillman, Don A. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method*. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.
- Peterson, Robert A. (2000). *Constructing effective questionnaires*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

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