



## *Variables & Trends in Mail & Internet Studies*

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# Readex Research

- Since 1947, specializing in custom-designed self-administered surveys
  - mail
  - Internet
  - mixed mode
- 650+ studies in 2006
- Focus is B2B, professional, and enthusiast populations
  - magazine and journal readers / subscribers
  - scientific society / professional association members
  - conference attendees
  - B2B marketers
  - affinity / enthusiast groups

# Mail Surveys Highly Effective In Some Commercial Applications

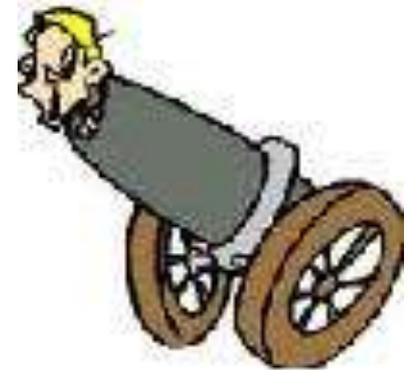
*response*

*rate study*

- 91% participants evaluating pilot wellness program
- 78% social workers describing contemporary practice
- 70% volunteers evaluating volunteer experience
- 70% operating room managers editorial needs/preferences
- 66% allied health association member needs
- 63% veterinarians describing contemporary practice issues
- 59% older Americans demographic profile

# The Secret: No One Thing

One of the most common mistakes made in the design of mail surveys is to assume the existence of a "magic bullet," that is, one technique that will assure a high response rate regardless of how other aspects of the survey are designed. Dillman



# What Works? How We've Learned

- The Masters
  - Erdos
  - Anderson/Berdie
  - Dillman
  - Cialdini
  - Groves
  - Singer
  - Tourangeau
- Controlled experiments
- Regression analyses of hundreds of varying study designs

# Fundamental Challenge of Mail: No Interviewer

- Leverage-Salience Theory (Groves et al) – response depends on:
  - importance of various attributes of participation request (leverage)
  - amount of emphasis on those attributes in request (salience)

Expert interviewers observe idiosyncratic concerns of the householder and customize their remarks to those concerns, using a technique labeled "tailoring." By tailoring, interviewers attempt to heighten the salience of some features of the request, those they judge will be favorably received by the householder. [Groves et al]

# Fundamental Opportunity: No Interviewer!

- Increased societal efforts to fend off unwanted intrusions  
⇒ improved odds for impersonal, unpressured requests
- Opportunity to invoke still-powerful norms of **reciprocity** [Cialdini] or “**social exchange**” [Dillman]

All societies subscribe to a norm that obligates individuals to repay in kind what they have received. Evolutionary selection pressure has probably entrenched the behavior in social animals such as ourselves ... Receiving a gift - unsolicited and perhaps even unwanted - convince[s] significant numbers ... to return the favor. [Cialdini]

# The Token Of Appreciation



- A gift obligates repayment
- Token cash or checks work best
  - even as little as \$1.00
  - increasing \$ increases response, but not in proportion to added cost
  - biggest lift when topic interest, sponsor affinity low
- Stamped reply envelope works the same way
- Non-cash token gifts weaker
- Stronger effects in mail than in interviewer-mediated methodologies

# Key Points About Social Exchange

- In social exchange, “future obligations are created that are diffuse and unspecified. The nature of the return cannot be bargained over as in economic exchange, but must be left to the discretion of the one who owes it.”
- Must be token: “The closer the monetary incentive comes to the value of the service performed, the more the transaction tends to move into the realm of economic exchange and the easier it becomes for many people to refuse it.”
- Must be in advance: A promise to pay or provide something of value after the request is fulfilled creates an ECONOMIC rather than a social exchange, and is evaluated under a very different set of norms.

[Dillman]

# Don't Incent, Obligate!

- "Paying incentives can [does] result in expectations that all future survey work should be compensated."  
[Singer et al]
- "a growing mercantilist attitude ..." [MacElroy]



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# Lotteries As Incentives?



- Now standard practice in many Internet surveys, some mail surveys
- But highly inconsistent effects on response rates
- Theory explains why:
  - based on a promise, not a gift
  - offers uncertain (actually highly unlikely) economic – not social – reward

# Topic Interest A Key Driver



- Signal self-interest clearly:
  - “Member Needs and Satisfaction Survey”
  - NOT “Nationwide Survey of ABC Members”
- Quick scan reveals interesting questions:
  - your opinions, your suggestions; NOT demographics*
- Easy, interesting, and quick to complete
- Stress importance of study
- As much as possible, conduct surveys on topics of interest!

# Low Interest? Leverage Social Influence Cues

If the topic is of interest, people tend to engage in extensive cognitive processing of the message itself. If the topic is not of interest, people tend to rely on peripheral cues ... to make a judgment.

[Petty and Cacioppo]



In deciding whether to say yes or no to a requester, we frequently pay attention to a single piece of relevant information in the situation ... the most popular prompts ... are the most reliable ones, those that normally point us toward a correct choice. [Cialdini]

# Social Influence Cues

- Reciprocation
  - token of appreciation in advance
  - stamped reply envelope
- Consistency
  - “Members like you are noted for your dedication to this issue.”
  - “We ask your help because only you can provide this valuable perspective.”
- Social Validation
  - “To date we have received many valuable replies, but yours is not yet among them.”
  - “Your replies will help us to better serve members like you.”

# Social Influence Cues

- Liking

“Like you, I have been a reader for more than 10 years.”

“I am very interested in your unique opinions.”

- Authority

- prestige of / affinity with sponsoring organization

- powerful requester

- Scarcity

“You have been selected as part of a small, scientific sample ...”

“Only responses received by September 15 can be considered.”

# Multiple Contacts Required

Leverage-Salience Theory says different people respond to different aspects of the appeal ⇒ multiple contacts in multiple formats with variant messages:

- alert letter
- survey kit
- reminder postcards
- followup kit to nonrespondents
- additional contacts: mail, FedEx, email, phone



# Breaking Through The Clutter

- Use sponsoring organization's letterhead / envelopes
- Personalize letters
- Date letters
- Real signature
- Typed addresses (not labels, window envelopes)
- Outgoing postage stamped, not metered
- First Class postage (not bulk)



# Mail Survey Success - Recap

- Provide a small monetary token of appreciation up front
- Make survey of interest and import to respondents
- Appeal to key social influence factors:
  - reciprocation
  - consistency
  - social validation
  - liking
  - authority
  - scarcity
- Employ multiple contacts in multiple modes with variant messages
- Break through semi-conscious intrusion policies:
  - capitalize on sponsor prestige / affinity
  - look as much like personal correspondence as possible

## Internet Surveys – The Other Self-Administered Mode

- Speed and cost advantages lead to increased use of Internet-only and mixed-mode data collection
- But e-survey response rates generally lower than with equivalent mail efforts
- Response rates seldom exceed 50%

How can e-surveys be made viable when high response rates are required?

## Mail Approaches That Transfer Directly To E-Surveys

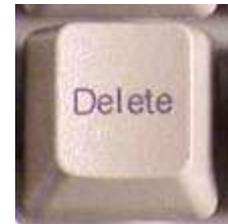
- Multiple contacts (2 or even 3 non-respondent followups)
- Scarcity appeals
- Other social influence appeals - consistency, social validation, liking ??
- Variant messages (norm of email brevity a challenge)
- Survey topic interest even more critical in e-surveys

# Sponsor Authority / Affinity

- Less effectively invoked on Internet, since email From: line is easily aliased
- Possible solutions:
  - advance email from sponsor's server alerting of research company email to come
  - invitation email includes link to authenticating page on sponsor's site
  - invitation includes contact info for sponsoring organization official

# Breaking Through

- Unwanted intrusion policies even tougher on Internet
- Possible responses:
  - advance email from sponsor
  - email personalized salutation
  - email From: individual + organization, not organization only



# Use Multiple Modes

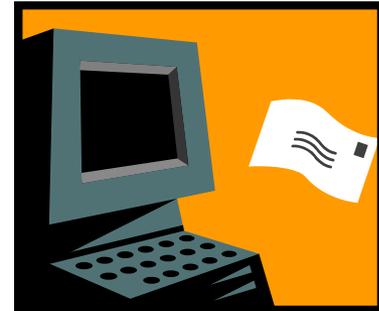
- Alert card or letter in advance (better than reminder)
- Letter on sponsor stationery also signals legitimacy
- Switch to mixed-mode (email + mail) after initial email appeals exhausted

# What About That Token Of Appreciation?

- Major hurdle for e-surveys
- Email-deliverable money (e.g. PayPal) not widely used, imposes significant burden
- Electronic gift certificates / promo codes provide little lift, even in advance – high respondent cost to use

# Invoking Reciprocity

- Alert letter plus token cash = better response
- Work for the day when there is a truly fungible Internet payment medium



# Summary

- Intrusion policies becoming more stringent for all data collection modes
- Lessons learned from self-administered surveys may apply to other approaches as well
- Surveys should ...
  - Be of import and interest to respondents
  - Be easy and quick to complete
  - Use multimodal messaging with variant messages that trigger social influence responses
  - Incent participation via social, not economic, exchange



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