

## Obtaining Response to a Mail Questionnaire<sup>1</sup>

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Facilitating response is a vital step in the process of information collection. After all, the larger the response, the more information collected. According to research by Galpin (1987), Berdie, et al. (1986), Blau (1978), and Dillman (1978), there are several factors that influence rate of response. Understanding the effect of these factors will not only increase response rate but will also make the program more cost effective. The following is an introduction to understanding these factors and some recommendations on increasing your response rate.

### THEORETICAL BASIS

A useful theoretical basis for understanding and influencing survey response is that of "social exchange" advanced by Blau (1964) and Homans (1961). Social exchange theory asserts that the actions of individuals are motivated by the return these actions are expected to bring, and usually do bring, from others. Three basic assumptions underlie this theory:

1. People engage in any activity because of the rewards they hope to reap.
2. All activities they perform incur certain costs.
3. People attempt to keep their costs below the rewards they expect to receive.

Exchange theory is often thought of in financial terms, i.e., exchange of money for goods or services and vice versa. Social exchange theory, however, is somewhat broader. In social exchange, future obligations are created that are diffuse and unspecified. The nature of the return cannot be bargained but must be left to the discretion of the one who owes it, and the range of goods, services, and experiences exchanged is broad.

What direction or guidance does social exchange theory provide in obtaining response to surveys? Dillman (1978) postulates a combination of three things, based on social exchange theory, that must be done if survey response is to be maximized:

1. Minimize the cost for responding.
2. Maximize the rewards for responding.
3. Establish trust that these rewards will be delivered.

Each of these steps is addressed in the following sections.

### Implementing the Theory

Dillman (1978) and Berdie and Anderson (1974) offer several suggestions for maximizing survey responses by minimizing costs, maximizing rewards, and establishing trust:

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### Minimize Costs to the Respondent

1. Make the task appear as brief as possible (try to reduce respondent's expectations of amount of time involved).

Make mail questionnaire clear and concise.

Attempt to reduce overall size of mail questionnaire.

2. Attempt to reduce the physical and mental effort required.

Eliminate complex questions and difficult directions.

Consider education and background of respondents when writing items.

Use attractive layout for mail questionnaires; incorporate white space.

3. Eliminate or soften questions likely to create risk or embarrassment for respondents (sexual behavior, methods of disciplining children, religious beliefs, etc.).
4. Eliminate any implications of subordination to the surveyor. Use an approach of "would you do me a favor by providing the information," rather than "it is necessary that you complete this questionnaire if we are to solve your problem."
5. Eliminate direct monetary cost of mail questionnaires by providing free postage or stamped return envelopes.

### Maximize Rewards to Respondents

1. Show a positive regard for the respondent.

Indicate the need for the information.

Personalize correspondence as appropriate (real signature, individualized salutation, individually typed letters, brief personal handwritten note on cover letter of mail questionnaires).

2. State how the study could benefit the respondent.

3. Offer tangible rewards.

Offer to send the results of the study.

List publications of potential interest.

Offer pens, pencils, notebooks, money, raffle tickets, etc. Though this may be viewed as "gimmicky," and may not be desirable. Rewards that appeal to the special needs of the people are likely to stimulate people to respond. For example, dental instruments for dentists will stimulate many dentists to reply (Berdie, Anderson, and Niebuhr, 1986).

### Establish a Trust Relationship

1. Identify survey with a known established organization.
2. Provide a token of appreciation in advance. Including this with the appeal is more effective than promising it on return of the questionnaire.

### COMMUNICATION WITH RESPONDENTS

It is extremely important for the respondent to receive an orderly set of correspondence pertaining to the survey. Dillman (1978) suggests a series of correspondence that consists of a (1) preletter or card, (2) cover letter that accompanies the questionnaire, (3) a reminder letter or card, and (4) a follow-up letter to those who did not respond within two weeks after the questionnaire was mailed.

#### Preletters

Preletters are letters to people informing them that they are going to receive a questionnaire. It usually includes the following points:

- Identification of the study by title.
- Identification of the study sponsors/ endorsers.
- Explanation of how the results will be used.
- Identification of why people should cooperate in the study.
- Information about when they will be contacted and the method by which they will be asked to give information.

- Encouragement to be prepared to respond quickly.
- Thanks for their cooperation.

A preletter may help to increase response rate. Even if it does not, it still is a courtesy to inform people that they are going to receive a questionnaire. Pituanuwat and Phattharayuttawat (1991) conducted a study on the effect of prenotification on response rate. The subjects were 800 public secondary school teachers in Bangkok, Thailand. The researchers found prenotification had a significant effect in increasing response rates for mail questionnaires.

### COVER LETTERS

Cover letters are essential in mail questionnaire surveys. They should be short and to the point. Cover letters should include the following:

- The study title.
- Identification of the study sponsors/ endorsers.
- Reiteration of the purpose of the study to help the recipients recall information in the pre-letter.
- Reminders to recipients of which population they are a member.
- Identification of why they should complete the questionnaire.
- Encouragement for prompt response.
- Mention of the inclusion of a postage-paid, pre-addressed return envelope.
- Indication of the confidentiality of the information they provide.
- The name and phone number of a person they can call with questions.
- Thanks for their cooperation.
- An offer of a summary of results.
- Deadlines for reply may discourage some "procrastinators" from answering. Expressions such as "Please complete immediately" or "Please complete as soon as possible" are better than "Complete and mail before May 12" or "It is

necessary to have your returned questionnaire by August 12 to use the data."

### Reminder Card

Send a card to all subjects three to five days after sending the mail questionnaire, thanking them for participating if they have responded by that time. This also serves as an inoffensive reminder to respond.

### Follow-up

Be dedicated to achieving a high response rate. Shoot for 100% response on every survey! To attain a high rate on mail questionnaires, follow-ups are generally necessary. Much research has been conducted on the effectiveness of follow-up letters. Results vary somewhat but generally support the value of follow-up correspondence (James and Bolstein, 1990). A variety of techniques can and should be used in follow-ups to obtain responses without being obnoxious. Some suggestions:

- Send the first follow-up letter to nonrespondents ten to fourteen days after initial mailing of the questionnaire. Include another copy of the questionnaire.
- Several types of follow-up can be used. The nature and potential reaction of the audience must be considered.
  - Humorous letters or reminders may be appropriate.
  - Formal letters or reminders may be tried or a combination of both.
  - Altruistic appeals may be effective.
  - Post cards may be used as alternatives to letters.
  - Phone calls are a very effective technique and may be used fairly early in the process.

On responses not obtained after one follow-up effort, it is particularly important to establish two-way communication to determine the nature of problem. This may be done by telephone or personal visit.

Follow up may be effective in raising response rate. Taylor (1991) did a study comparing two procedures: one with precard, cover and reminder letter with a standard statement of anonymity; another with precard, cover, reminder and follow-up letter with a standard statement of confidentiality. A difference of 11 percent in response rate was found

for the two treatments. The procedure with follow-up letter was superior in facilitating response rate. This significant difference in response rate may be due to the follow-up letter, the confidentiality statement, or the interaction of both. However, the study did demonstrate that the method with a follow-up letter is superior.

### Suggestions for Your Letters

#### Use a "consulting" approach.

- "Would you give us your opinion?"
- "We are attempting to find out what people like you think on these important issues."
- "What means have you found successful in . . .?"
- "What have you noticed taking place in . . .?"

#### Support the respondents' values.

- "We want your preferences to be considered."
- "The results will be made available to your industry."

#### Procedural Considerations

##### 1. Assign Responsibility.

If a large survey is carried out by several staff members, assign responsibilities for specific tasks. Set up a time schedule.

##### 2. Number.

Number mail questionnaires in sequence so that specific follow-up can be done. The number should be openly placed on the questionnaire cover. Berdie (1986) suggests the use of check-off sheets for control purposes. The authors have found this to be a very valuable tool.

##### 3. Mailing pointers.

Develop a mailing schedule.

It is important to develop and follow a mailing schedule for the survey (Dillman, 1978). The following is a suggested approach:

- a. Mail the preletter
- b. Three days later, mail the cover letter and questionnaire

- c. Three to five days after the questionnaire is mailed, send the reminder card or letter.
- d. Ten to 14 days after the questionnaire was mailed, send the follow-up letter to all who have not responded.
- e. Twenty to 24 days after the questionnaire was first mailed, start a telephone follow-up to those who have not responded.
- f. Example of a mailing schedule.

4. Send questionnaire to the place where it will most likely be completed. For example, do not send a questionnaire to a feed mill worker at his or her place of employment. Yet, it may be appropriate to send a questionnaire to a feed mill manager at his or her place of employment.
5. Make mail questionnaire attractive and interesting. Many people simply enjoy filling out questionnaires. Try to build on this.

Use high quality paper, different colors of paper and/or ink, high quality printing. This will not guarantee that you will have a high response rate. However it will not discourage people from answering. Besides the effect of these factors may be situation-dependent. Taylor and Summerhill (1985) found that color had no significant effect on the response rate when the respondent population has some familiarity with the sender. However Phattharayuttawat (1991) found paper color effective in increasing response rate in their study.

##### 6. Consider the first impression:

- Use good quality envelopes.
- Do not misspell names.
- Stuff so that the first thing looked at is the cover letter.
- Fold letter in a "Z" configuration.
- Put questionnaire behind the letter.
- Include return envelope.

If sending to small sample, consider using stamps for the reply envelope rather than business reply envelopes.

**SAMPLE SCHEDULE FOR MAIL SURVEY**

Task	Date
Mail preletter	August 6
Mail questionnaire	August 10
cover letter	
questionnaire with sequence number	
return postage paid envelope	
Mail reminder or thank you card or letter	August 14
Mail follow-up letter	August 20
letter	
questionnaire with sequence number	
return postage paid envelope	
Start telephone follow-up	August 30

### Use of Incentives

Much has been written about the usefulness of incentives on return rate of mail questionnaires. All of us have experienced receiving everything from a tea bag to money as a token of appreciation for completing and returning a mail questionnaire. The effectiveness of incentives is not clearly demonstrated. James and Bolstein (1990) reported a significant increase in response rate with the use of monetary incentives ranging from a quarter up to \$2.00 in the first mailing.

### Speed of Response

A minimum of one month is required to conduct a mail survey. The literature suggests that various factors may influence the speed of return of a mail questionnaire. Nichols and Meyer (1966) and Brown (1965) reported on the effects of the use of post cards on response speed. Research by Dillman and Fry (1974) and Cox (1974) indicated that personalization of correspondence increased response speed. Moss (1980) reported that questionnaire format had a significant effect on response speed.

Working with citrus growers and managers Taylor and Summerhill (1985) found that for an overall return rate of 61 percent that 50% of the returns came in 10 working days (one weekend was involved) after the first mailing of the questionnaire. Forty five percent of the returns came in 12 days after the second mailing of the questionnaire. The other five percent came in 13 or more days after the second mailing of the questionnaire. One should expect to

receive from 40 to 45 percent of total returns from the first mailing wave (12 to 14 days after the first mailing of the questionnaire). Another 40 to 45 percent should be expected to come in 12 to 14 days after the second mailing of the questionnaire. This leaves 10 to 20 percent dribbling in 24 or more days after the first mailing of the questionnaire.

### A Check List

The summarized responses of information obtained by questionnaires cannot be assumed representative of the sample unless a high response rate is achieved. When designing a study, many considerations arise that will likely affect the response rate:

1. How will you relate to the people you ask to complete a questionnaire? Will you be "formal" or "folksy" ?
2. Are you able to guarantee the confidentiality of the respondents?
3. Have you considered using different types of printing and paper, and different colors of paper and ink for mail questionnaires?
4. Have you carefully considered the content and approach of your pre-letter and cover letter?
5. Would some type of incentive encourage response to your questionnaire?

6. Have you identified your resources from which to obtain up-dated addresses of the people in your study?
7. Will you use postage, penalty mail or business reply envelopes?
8. Will you send the mail questionnaire to respondent's place of work or home?
9. How will you know why people are not returning completed mail questionnaires? (You need to know so that you can attempt to overcome their resistance.)
10. Have you a follow-up plan?
11. Have you considered using the following for mail questionnaire follow-ups: telephone calls, post cards, formal letters, informal letters, and personal visits?
12. Will your follow-up be humorous, serious, or a combination of both?

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