Three keys to survey administration success

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Before we conclude the pre-field and field discussion of survey research, there are a few topics left to discuss: timelines, incentives and reminders. All three topics contribute greatly to successful questionnaire administration.

Length of field periods
Field periods for a survey depend on several factors, including the method of administration, resources available, amount of screening required and quality of the lists from which you draw your sample.

Of the traditional survey administration methods, mailed surveys require the greatest field time. Allow one month between the time you mail and the cut-off for returns.

With telephone surveys, a general rule is that one interviewer can secure between 10-25 completed interviews per day, depending on the length of the instrument. Simply judge the length of the field period by how many interviewer hours you have. This number can vary widely with the type of survey you are conducting, the lists you are using, whether your respondent pool is likely to talk with you and other variables.

For in-person interviews, the difficulty lies in scheduling and accounting for cancellations. You can schedule as many interviews per day as you have interviewers. Because of your pretest, you know how long each interview takes and can factor in travel times. Since you know how many completed interviews you want, simply divide to come up with a timeline.

For these methods as well as others, such as kiosk surveys, mall intercepts and faxed questionnaires, a long field period can be counterproductive. If you are collecting opinions on time-sensitive issues such as elections, new products or reactions to specific events, early responses can be different from those at the end. While there are exceptions, the maximum field period you should allow is two months.

Are incentives worth it?
For some people, the mere idea their opinions are being counted may be sufficient incentive to respond. For example, district managers may be highly motivated to respond about ways to improve relations among offices. Patients exposed to new drugs may be willing to describe the effects of their treatments. In short, people familiar with the questionnaire’s source and confident about its relevancy, may believe they can benefit from participation and may respond without an incentive.

Most populations, however, are not tightly defined enough to guarantee this kind of motivation. So, additional incentives are a good idea. This is particularly true for mailed surveys, which are easy to ignore. Incentives can be:
- Cash, such as a dollar inserted into the envelope
- Contest entry for responses received by a certain date (this also helps get questionnaires returned in a timely fashion)
- A small gift mailed with the survey
- Don’t underestimate small gestures. Even a stamp on the return envelope, as opposed to a business reply code, has been shown to increase response rates. While not exactly an incentive, the stamp adds a human touch.

Telephone surveys do not lend themselves very well to incentives. Since response rates for phone surveys tend to be good, it is less of an issue. Certainly, the same incentives mentioned above can work.

Face-to-face interviews often require incentives. The value of the incentive usually depends on the length and target of the interview. For example, mall-intercept studies can give respondents small samples of products or coupons. Because interviews are brief, an incentive is often not necessary. For long, at-home interviews, focus group or interviews requiring travel, cash incentives are appropriate. Depending upon the audience, cash incentives can range from $40 to over $100 per respondent.

Don’t forget reminders
Reminders serve two functions. First, they remind people of scheduled phone or personal interviews. It is important to remind people at least a day or two before administration, since knowing about cancellations gives you time to find replacements.

Second, reminders are invaluable for increasing mailed survey response rates. Send reminder cards to all recipients of the questionnaire. They should reach respondents mid-way through the field period. If your field period is one month, respondents should receive the card two weeks before the cut-off date. Or, you can send a second copy of the questionnaire. This technique is effective, but also requires more money. If you do send another copy, use a respondent-tracking system to prevent the respondent’s answers from being counted twice.

Next time
Since this concludes the discussion of the pre-field and field portions of the survey process, next time we begin discussing what to do to prepare the data for analysis: data entry, data cleaning and related topics.