

Ryan Bliss, ADM Associates Inc

Title: How do we affect the behavior needed to study behavior? Or: Getting the best response rate to surveys is still more complicated than you think.

Abstract: Surveying program participants shortly after their participation not only gives program managers information on needed adjustments but, when assessed over time, can make it possible to assess how program changes affected participant behavior and satisfaction. But it's hard to study energy-related behavior when you can't get people to respond to surveys, which is why a very popular subject of behavioral research is how to get the best survey response rates. Lately, a fair amount of research has come down on the side of offering a modest fixed incentive for survey completion as a cost-effective method. However, the majority of that research appears to be focused on either residential populations or medical professionals. Very little research has looked at how to get responses from business customers. One Pacific Northwest program administrator has been tracking program success indices through phone surveys conducted about one month after project completion for a variety of residential and nonresidential programs. With declining phone response rates and increasing phone survey costs, the program administrator contracted with an evaluation firm to assess whether a web survey can produce sufficient response at a lower cost and with comparable representation of the program population. The research tested the effectiveness of various web survey recruitment methods (mailer only, mailer+email, email only) and incentive types (none, fixed, or lottery), compared to using a phone survey. With about 1,300 phone and more than 2,000 web responses from residential and nonresidential customers over a six-month period, the results from the residential customers were consistent with previous findings: a fixed incentive produced better response than a lottery incentive, which did not produce a better rate than no incentive. In fact, the fixed incentive web survey had a better response rate and a lower cost per completion, than the phone survey. However, these findings did not apply to the nonresidential survey, where neither a fixed nor lottery incentive increased response rates compared to no incentive, and the phone survey still produced twice the response rate as the web survey. This research demonstrates that the getting behavior often needed to assess program participant behavior responding to a survey may depend on whose behavior you are trying to assess. This paper will provide details of the research methods and findings and will discuss possible reasons why web survey incentives appear to have different effects on residential and nonresidential program participants.