



Response Rates

What Is an Acceptable Survey Rate of Response?

Rare is the survey that results in 100% participation. In all but just a few surveys that are conducted worldwide, there are two types of response groups - respondents and non-respondents. Non-respondents are those people from whom there was a failure to collect survey data. This absence of data is due to a) the refusal to participate, b) the inability to participate (e.g., illness, unable to read), and c) the inability of the survey sponsor to make contact with potential respondents (e.g., incorrect address or telephone number).

Survey non-response is potentially a major source of bias introduced into the study. Its impact is important if persons who did not take part in the survey are different on measures of interest than people who did participate. The degree of bias depends upon how different the two groups are *and* the size of the non-response group relative to the responding group. Failing to account for differences in the two groups will lead to erroneous conclusions drawn from the survey results.

There is no agreed upon standard for a minimum acceptable survey response rate. A lower response rate among a population where the respondents and non-respondents are very similar would result in data that is generally regarded as more credible than a higher response rate where the two groups are quite dissimilar. The size of the working sample will also play a key role. A study that results in a 60% rate of response, yet includes only 50 people in the study population may not yield the same quality of information as the survey that has a 30% response rate but includes responses from 2,000 individuals.

The most direct way to combat non-response bias is to minimize the number of individuals in the target population who do not respond to the survey. This can be accomplished through the use of multiple contacts, incentives, longer data collection periods, alternate contact modes, and refusal conversion attempts. Another method is to employ various non-response analyses that explore the extent of respondent and non-respondent differences. The Office of Management and Budget once required surveys funded by the federal government to achieve response rates of 75% or better. With the emergence of improved non-response analytical techniques, this minimum requirement has been lifted.

One other way to limit the effects of non-response bias is to choose the data collection method carefully. Historically, face-to-face interviews have resulted in the highest response rates. Direct communication between the interviewer and members of the study sample is the chief reason. Face-to-face interviews frequently yield response rates well into the 90% range.

Telephone surveys are commonly the data collection method that secure the next highest participation rates. Response rates in the range of 50% to 80% can be expected in most well designed telephone studies. Again, the contact between interviewer and respondent contributes to the generally high rate of response.

Mailed surveys and web-based surveys typically result in the lowest rates of response among the four primary data collection modes. Response ranges of 10% to 20% are common when follow-up procedures are not used. These two methods for collecting survey data can be easily ignored, which helps to explain the reason for a higher proportion of non-respondents. Implementing three to five follow-up contacts is effective in raising participation upwards of 50% and beyond.

A good rule-of-thumb in evaluating the quality of a survey is that studies with fewer than 1,000 respondents should result in a response rate of at least 50%. For surveys with more than 1,000 respondents, the footing is a little safer to accept somewhat lower rates of response. Any survey with a participation rate below 25% should be reconsidered. In the end, analyzing respondent/non-respondent differences is always a good practice, regardless of the response rate.

Survey Tip

The more personal a survey's presentation, the increased likelihood that it will result in a response. A common trait among people is that we are inclined to react favorably to communication tailored specifically for us.

Surveys compete with all other forms of communication we receive. Think about each day's mail, e-mail messages and telephone calls. Those we are most prone to notice are the ones that appear to be personally directed to us. The ones we tend to ignore are those where it seems obvious they have been sent to countless others as well.

A personalized survey can easily result in double the rate of response.

Did you know...

Cell phone usage by 18 to 24 year olds is 71% higher than all other age groups according to Telephia's Customer Value Metrics report. On average, young consumers spend more than 1,300 total voice minutes each month on their cell phones. The number of calls placed and received also outpaces all other age groups, with a monthly average of 340 calls.

To give some perspective, cell phone users in the 25 to 36 age group post an average of 970 minutes and make or receive 246 calls per month. Consumers in the 37 to 55 age bracket use an average of 726 minutes and make or receive 197 calls. Older cell users (56+) use the least number of voice minutes per month and make or receive an average of just 119 calls.

Young cell phone users send and receive a monthly average of 126 text messages. This is more than double the number sent and received by 25 to 36 year olds, who have the second highest average with 56.

Source: Telephia

Comments, suggestions and questions related to survey research should be directed to Doug Cox - NCDOT Market Research Manager at (919)733-2083.