

Survey Nonresponse

Nonresponse is survey research's "silent killer." Much is made of a survey's margin of error as the measure of a research project's quality. But equally important to survey quality is the potentially harsh effect of nonresponse.

Recently, I overheard a group of people talking about a survey they had conducted within their organization. Naturally, my ears perked up. Amid the pros and cons being discussed relating to their overall survey experience, one item stood out for me as I continued to eavesdrop. The group was pleased that they had managed a response rate of 31%. Attaining data from nearly one in three people was, indeed, a good day's work they thought. But the big question is - *what about the other 69% who did not respond?*

Understanding survey nonresponse requires reducing it down to its three complicit parts. *Noncontactability* is the first component of nonresponse. Before a respondent can take part in a study, the questionnaire must arrive. This means having good addresses for mail surveys, good electronic addresses for web surveys, and good phone numbers for telephone surveys. Following successful contact with individuals included in a sample, a second source of nonresponse lies in the potential *inability* of the person to respond. This can be due to factors such as illness at the time of the survey or a problem understanding the language, for instance. The third form of nonresponse, and the one that garners the most attention because it is typically the largest, relates to *refusals* - individuals choosing not to be a survey participant.

While steps are routinely taken to minimize the issues of noncontactability and the inability of some to respond, much of the effort to boost response rates rallies around techniques intended to turn what would otherwise be a refusal into an acceptance. What follows are the eight primary tipping points between a decision to take part in a survey and refusing to participate.

Inviting Appeal - the questionnaire and accompanying materials should draw the recipient in. All materials should be neat, clean and professional in appearance.

Level of Effort - the questionnaire should not

be burdensome on respondents. It should be simple to follow and comprehend, include appropriate instructions, and be no longer than is necessary to achieve the objectives of the project.

Topic - the questionnaire's subject matter should have saliency and be relevant to those being asked to complete it.

Sponsorship - the entity behind the survey should lend credibility to the research project. This includes the individual from whom all correspondence and communication with respondents will come.

Incentives - seeking reciprocity from potential survey respondents by offering a token of appreciation for completing the questionnaire provides a sense of *quid pro quo* between the study sponsor and recipients of the invitation to participate.

Follow-up - the use of multiple contacts that begin by alerting potential respondents to an upcoming survey and then serving as reminders during the course of the study to complete and return the questionnaire provide a subtle nudge to respond.

Personalization - potential survey respondents should be made to feel unique rather than part of a larger mass by personalizing all correspondence associated with the survey.

Length of Data Collection - the period set aside for completing and returning questionnaires should be of sufficient length to permit respondents ample time to participate in light of all the other demands and priorities they have.

The reason that nonresponse is such a threat to survey quality is due to not knowing how those individuals who take part differ from those who do not. When differences exist between the two groups, as they are prone to do, confidence in the study's findings is diminished the higher the rate of nonresponse. Therefore, acknowledging nonresponse as a threat and taking steps to reduce it are essential for the healthy wellbeing of all surveys. 

From the Field...

A summary of recent survey findings from across the country.



An estimated 754,000 people are homeless in the U.S. on any given night. Nearly one-half (47%) are single adult men, while close to one-quarter are children. Six in ten are members of minority groups.

Source: *Abt Associates*



Features and form are the primary drivers behind cell phone purchases, followed by brand name. The youngest buyers seek a phone that "reeks of cool" while somewhat older consumers want a wide range of capabilities. Older buyers want a solid flip phone that does not lack basic capabilities and is backed by a good name.

Source: *NPD Group*



Close to 45 million Americans have no health insurance. Conversely, 249 million are covered.

Source: *U.S. Census Bureau*



Seven in ten white Americans and six in ten African-Americans use the Internet. Hispanics, who comprise 14% of the U.S. adult population, use the Internet at a rate of 56%.

Source: *Pew Internet Project*



Forty-seven percent of the American public say Hollywood celebrities can offer a new perspective on political issues and should be involved in politics. Forty-eight percent say celebrities are inexperienced about key issues and should stay out of politics.

Source: *CBS News*