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Keeping in Touch with Project Participants between Surveys:
A Mailing Experiment

by Anne Motte and Marie-Christine Brault

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Keeping in Touch with Project Participants between Surveys: A Mailing Experiment

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Abstract

The present report reviews the results of a mailing experiment that took place within a large scale demonstration project. A postcard and stickers were sent to a random group of project participants in the period between a contact call and a survey. The researchers hypothesized that, because of the additional mailing (the treatment), the response rates to the upcoming survey would increase. There was, however, no difference between the response rates of the treatment group that received the additional mailing and the control group. In the specific circumstances of the mailing experiment, sending project participants a postcard and stickers as a reminder of the upcoming survey and of their participation in the pilot project was not an efficient way to increase response rates.

Key Words: Response rate, Random assignment experiment, Non-monetary incentives, Youth.

1. Introduction

Attrition is the curse of any longitudinal project. The consequences of losing respondents through time are far from anodyne. Small losses from one year to the next are cumulative and can result in a big reduction of the sample size by the end of the research project. In the end, the final sample may not be representative of the population from which it was originally selected. More specifically, in random assignment experiments, attrition can reduce the statistical power of the study. Moreover if attrition is selective, for example when more comparison group members are lost than treatment groups, it can introduce a bias in the resulting impact estimates.

Given these serious consequences, it is not too surprising that an array of methods have been used in the hope of minimizing attrition. Approaches are varied including sending reminders before a survey or giving incentives to survey respondents. The use of multiple approaches is not uncommon. Cantor and Cunningham (2002) present a number of best practices for obtaining high response rates on telephone surveys. These best practices cover various activities from survey design to giving interviewers appropriate training and sending advance notification letters. As these methods are often used in combination, it is quite difficult to determine if one is more effective than another.

A number of papers on longitudinal surveys refer to the use of sending a letter or a brochure to keep in touch with participants and to remind them of their involvement in a specific study. For example, survey participants to the British Household Panel survey receive a letter sent between survey waves (Budowski and Scherpenzeel, 2005). This type of approach is attractive for its relatively low cost compared with other means such as contacting participants by telephone or introducing a monetary incentive between surveys.

While there seems to be a consensus that mailings should be part of surveyors tool kit to limit sample attrition, the survey methodology literature counts relatively few studies rigorously evaluating the effect of this approach. To the

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Please note that a complete report on this mailing experiment can be downloaded at: http://www.srdc.org/uploads/FTD_mailing_experiment.pdf (in English only)
authors’ knowledge, the only such evaluation, Iredell et al. (2004), finds that sending a postcard just before a survey is a cost-effective method of increasing response rates.  

This report presents the results of a mailing experiment that took place within the Future to Discover (FTD) pilot project, a demonstration project financed by the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation and evaluated by the Social Research and Demonstration Corporation (SRDC). The mailing experiment project originated from a concern that contacts with FTD research participants were sparse: between the baseline survey and the follow-up survey (30 months following the baseline), only one tracking call was planned at 18 months. While the researchers planned to give students a $20 incentive for completing the 30-month survey, there were still concerns that the lack of contact could lead to important sample attrition.

2. Methodology

The primary objective of the mailing was to see if it could have a positive impact on increasing response rates to the upcoming survey. A secondary objective was to determine if receiving the mailing would ease the job of interviewers at the time of conducting the survey as respondents would be have been reminded of the upcoming survey. This section describes the development of the mailing content and the random assignment process.

2.1 Mailing design

A number of options were considered on the exact form and content of the mailing experiment such as sending a newsletter and different types of “freebies” such as fridge magnets. However, there were some important constraints to take into account when deciding on the type of “freebies” to send. The two main ones were the cost of producing and mailing the items and making sure that the items were age appropriate.

In order to minimize the postage cost, the content of the mail out could not be over a specified weight and size thereby eliminating sending something bulky like a pen or a bracelet/wristband with the name of the project on it. Given the age of participants (who on average were aged 17 at the time they would receive the letter), the research team decided that a large postcard would be more appropriate than a more formal letter or newsletter on the project. Stickers were chosen for their light weight but also because they appeared to be more appropriate than a fridge magnet. Their relatively low cost also meant that it was possible to send more than one. For this reason, three different versions of stickers were created.

The text of the postcard had to be carefully drafted to avoid any threats to the validity of the main FTD project. These could be introduced if the mailing inadvertently caused a change in behaviour that would differ between the program and comparison group members as assigned in the main project. The content of the postcard and the choice of pictures for the postcard and the stickers went through a number of iterations before researchers made a final decision.

Researchers also sought the input of five high school students in British Columbia who were the same age as FTD participants via an informal group discussion. The students represented a sample of convenience - not likely to be representative of all FTD participants. Nonetheless, their comments were particularly useful especially with regards to the level of language used. In the draft of the text these youth reviewed, an informal tone had been chosen. The youth did not find this language credible coming from a research firm. This finding led to a revision of the text adopting a more formal tone. They also approved the choice of sending stickers rather than another item (such as a fridge magnet).

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3 Monetary incentives are more often the subject of evaluation. See Simmons and Wilmot (2004) for a review of the literature. Freeland and Furia (1999) tested if a reminder call to sample members of mail survey would improve response rates. Their results showed that the response rate of those who received a telephone reminder was not better than the ones who did not.
Postcards were personalised using “Dear [youth’s first name]” (gender differentiation was made in the French text with “Cher” and “Chère”). Personalisation of a letter in the context of surveys has generally been found to be effective to increase response rate (for literature review on the issue see Joinson and Reips, forthcoming). The name of the participant also appeared on the envelope along with his or her home address.

Postcards and stickers were put into an envelope on which were the participant’s name and address as well as the research firm (SRDC) return address. The return address would enable returning the postcard if ever the youth had moved. However, no postcard was returned. In order to protect participants’ anonymity in terms of their involvement in the FTD project, it was deliberately decided to not specify the project’s or the research firm’s names. Aside from confidentiality, not having the name of the project on the envelope may serve as another purpose: in the Swiss Household Panel, Budowski and Scherpenzeel (2005) report that focus group participants were more prompt to open an envelope not mentioning the name of the survey or the research firm. Also, in the case of the FTD project, researchers wanted to make sure that any recipients of the postcard would feel compelled to open the envelope which may not have been the case if the project was identified: FTD control group members could have thought this was a mistake, FTD program group members already receiving other information by mail could have put the envelope on the side.

During project development, it was hypothesized that aside from having a possible positive impact on response rates, the postcard could ease interviewers’ work attempting to engage treatment group members to take part in the survey. To validate this assumption, three questions were asked of the interviewer at the end of each 30-month survey interview. The researchers asked interviewers (who were “blind” as to who was in the treatment or control group for the mailing experiment) to evaluate each respondent’s awareness of the FTD project, the respondent’s level of expectation of the survey, and the respondent’s level of reluctance to participate to the survey based on how difficult or how easy it was for interviewers to convince the youth to respond to the survey.

2.2. Random assignment of the mailing experiment

As mentioned previously, the mailing experiment took place within a larger random assignment demonstration project. It was thus of extreme importance that the mailing experiment be carefully planned in order to avoid any threats to the main FTD research project.

In New Brunswick, the Future to Discover (FTD) project is evaluated separately for the Francophone and Anglophone sectors. Thus random assignment for the mailing experiment was performed separately for each linguistic sector. More specifically within each sector, stratified random assignment by FTD experimental group was used to ensure the experimental groups (EYH, LA, EYH/LA, Control) were equivalently represented among those who received the mailing and those who did not. If the mailing experiment had an impact (whether negative or positive) on the response rate, in a situation where by chance a larger proportion of one experimental group than another had received the mailing, the mailing could have led to biased results in the main experiment. Stratified random assignment avoids the risk of introducing such a bias.

Within each FTD experimental group, research participants had a 50 per cent chance of being assigned to the mailing experiment treatment group. It was determined that interviewers who conducted the 30-month survey would not be informed about these assignments and thus would be “blind” as to who received the postcard.

Given the content of the mailing (a postcard and stickers), the risk of contamination (the receipt of a treatment by comparison group members) was considered relatively low. Indeed, even if those in the control group (not receiving the postcard) had seen the sticker, there was no mention on the sticker that this was related to a reminder to respond to a survey. No complaint calls or other form of communication from project participants to the research or survey firms were received. Such complaints (from those who did not receive stickers but who learned that others received them, for example) could have indicated possible contamination.
3. Results

In theory, random assignment should produce a control and a treatment group that are statistically similar. This was the case with the current experiment as no systematic differences between the control and the treatment groups were observed. In cases where proportions differed, the difference was never significant even at the 10 per cent level.

Results of the experiment are divided into two sections. The first section treats of the impact of the mailing on survey response rates, the main outcome of interest. The second one looks at the perception of interviewers on the awareness of survey respondents.

3.1 Impact of the mailing on survey response rate

Tables 3.1-1 and 3.1-2 present per linguistic sector the impact of receiving a postcard on the main outcome of interest which is the response rate at the 30-month survey. Overall, for the 30-month survey, response rates of about 85 per cent in the Anglophone sector and 92 per cent in the Francophone sector were obtained.

Looking at the difference in response rates between the treatment and the control groups, it stands out very clearly that receiving a postcard did not have an impact on the number of surveys completed. For example, the response for FTD participants who received a postcard in the Anglophone sector was 83.6 per cent while for the control group it was 85.2 per cent. The difference is not significant. The same conclusion holds for the Francophone sector where the response rate for the treatment group was 91.5 per cent and for the control group 92.1 per cent. Conversely, there was also no impact on the proportion of participants that were away (“absent or untraceable”) or on the proportion of participants who refused to take part in the survey.

Table 3.1-1
Impact analyses – Survey response rate, Anglophones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Treatment group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Difference (Impact)</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue of the survey</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
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<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview completed</td>
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<td>85.2</td>
<td>-1.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample size (total=998)</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

… not applicable
Table 3.1-2
Impact analyses – Survey response rate, Francophones

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Treatment group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Difference (Impact)</th>
<th>Standard Error</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Issue of the survey</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refuse</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absent</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview completed</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>-0.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sample size (total=969)</td>
<td>485</td>
<td>484</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2 Impact of the mailing on respondents’ compliance as perceived by interviewers

For FTD participants in the Anglophone sector, interviewers determined that 17 per cent of those who received a postcard and 20.4 per cent of those who did not were not aware of the pilot project. The proportions are a little higher in the Francophone sector with 22.7 per cent and 25.2 per cent respectively. However in both cases the differences were not significant.

Similarly, there were small differences between control and treatment groups in the interviewers’ evaluation of respondents’ reluctance to participate in the survey but none were statistically significant. Overall, the great majority of respondents (over three quarters in any linguistic group and treatment group) were not seen as being reluctant to participate in the survey.

The only significant difference appears in the Anglophone sample when looking at interviewers’ response regarding their assessment of whether the respondent expected the survey. Half (50.5 per cent) of respondents who received the postcard were considered to expect the survey while it was the case for 56.1 per cent of the control group. This difference is significant at the 10 per cent level.

To say the least, this result is quite puzzling as it suggests that those who received the postcard were less likely to expect the survey. This outcome is the opposite of what the postcard was intended to do. Although not significant, there is a difference in the opposite direction for the Francophone sector. Treatment group members were more likely to expect the survey than control group members. While it is hard to explain the difference between linguistic groups, a possible explanation is that the question may have been interpreted differently by English and French speaking interviewers. This assertion need to be taken cautiously as there were no debriefing with interviewers.

4. Discussion and conclusion

It is clear that a mailing to all FTD participants would not improve response rates even marginally and would not improved youth’s survey participation. Moreover, it appears that interviewers’ job during the survey was not easier. Without implicitly downplaying the lack of impact of the experiment, it is important to remember that this conclusion holds under the conditions of the experiment described earlier. It is possible that under other circumstances a similar mailing would have had an effect.

While the experiment did not determine any impact, a few points that may explain some of the results should be kept in mind. It is important to state that these points are for the sake of discussion as they are speculative on the part of the authors.
Firstly, it is worth remembering the respondents’ characteristics: FTD participants are for the great majority students in their last year of high school. These students and more precisely their family may not be very mobile. It may be the case that it is too soon to detect an impact. Once students move out of their parents’ home, it is possible that they will contact the survey firm to give new contact information. In other words, it can be hypothesized that the mailing has a longer term impact which is beyond the scope of this paper, such as lowering future tracking costs. It is doubtful that this is the case, but later analyses may test this hypothesis.

Secondly, survey respondents were all offered an incentive of $20 when they accepted to answer the 30-month survey. This amount of money may have been a sufficient incentive to ensure good response rates with 17-year-old high school students. This hypothesis would be consistent with the literature on monetary incentives. In general, monetary incentives are shown to be an effective to increase response rates. In their review of the literature, Simons and Wilmot (2004) conclude that even small amounts of money can have a more significant effect than non-monetary incentives on response rates.

Thirdly, the timing of the mailing may be at play: it also possible that sending the postcard six months before the survey was too early to produce an impact. And finally, in the great majority of cases, the same interviewers undertook the 18-month contact call and the 30-month survey. As suggested by Cantor and Cunningham (2002), it could be the case that a relationship was established between interviewers and participants which was enough to ensure a good response rate.

Despite not having had an effect on response rates, the experiment was a methodological success. At a relatively low cost, it was possible to test whether a between survey mailing was an efficient strategy for increasing response rates.

Two important conclusions can be drawn from this experiment. First, a practical implication of the experiment for the project and possibly for other projects of this kind: to protect and enhance response rates in FTD for subsequent surveys, researchers should turn to other strategies besides a between-survey mailing. Second, at a more general level, the random assignment design of the experiment has isolated any specific “mailing” impact, and found it to be effectively zero. Had all FTD participants received the postcard, it would have been impossible to determine whether or not the high response rates would have occurred even in the absence of the mailing. In other words, this relatively simple experiment showed once again the importance of having a counterfactual in any evaluation.

References


