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THE USE OF INCENTIVES IN INCREASING SURVEY PARTICIPATION

by  
Anne Glowacz

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the  
Master of Arts Degree  
of  
The Graduate School  
at  
Rowan University  
June 30, 2003

Approved by \_\_\_\_\_  
Professor

Date Approved 6-30-03

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## ABSTRACT

Anne Glowacz

The Use of Incentives in Increasing Survey Participation

2003

Dr. Donald Bagin, Advisor

Master of Arts in Public Relations

This study provides information on the effectiveness of incentives in increasing survey participation.

The author searched the online databases of Rowan University's Campbell Library as well as Internet search engines in an effort to locate secondary research on the topic.

The author collected and analyzed data from eight online surveys concerning the use of incentives. The surveys were completed by market research professionals.

Research indicated that the use of incentives is widespread and has become virtually necessary as the public increasingly realizes the value of providing personal information to survey administrators. Recommendations regarding the use of incentives were compiled based on the analysis of primary and secondary research.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to all who helped and encouraged me, especially Morgan and Kamali, who went beyond the call of duty with their after-hours reviews and courier service. Thanks to Dr. Bagin for his sound advice and memorable anecdotes—a better mentor there never was.

Thanks to Mom & Dad for their patience and faith in me despite my “scenic route” through academia; thanks to Brigitte and Christine who always accepted “rain checks” for dinners or shopping trips without complaint.

And last but not least, thank you to Rex, who always had a cup of tea and a plate of dinner waiting. I look forward to “sailing off into the sunset” together in January!

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## Chapter I

# BACKGROUND, NEED, PURPOSE, PROBLEM, PROCEDURES, LIMITATIONS AND DEFINITIONS OF THIS STUDY

## Background

Market researchers are encountering increased public resistance when it comes to participating in survey research. This presents a crisis for those who rely on survey responses to enact public policy, establish customer service policies, consider new product development, analyze employee relations or contemplate any of the innumerable issues that shape an organization.

As widely recognized and respected in its consequence as the United States Census is, it has faced significantly declining response rates. Seventy-eight percent of the population submitted their 1970 Census forms; in 1990 that number fell to only 65 percent. If the non-response trend continued, projections were that the 2000 Census would generate a paltry 55 percent response rate.<sup>1</sup>

For the first time in history, the Census Bureau used paid advertising in hopes of increasing participation in the 2000 census.<sup>2</sup> The New York firm Young & Rubicam, which generally works with clients such as Procter & Gamble and Johnson & Johnson,

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<sup>1</sup> Alison Stein Wellner, "The National Headcount," American Demographics March 2001: S12

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Bates and Sara K. Buckley, "Exposure to Paid Advertising and Returning a Census Form," Journal of Advertising Research January/April 2000: 65

led the \$167 million campaign.<sup>3</sup> In response to the public's implied question, "What's in it for me?" Y&R crafted the slogan that became the theme of the 2000 Census: "This is Your Future. Don't Leave it Blank."<sup>4</sup>

A Cincinnati-based national nonprofit research group, the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR), released survey results in September 2001 indicating that the number of people refusing to participate in survey research has tripled since 1982.<sup>5</sup> In *Journal of Advertising Research* Richard Colombo reports that "typical response rates from mail surveys are about 20 percent" and telephone survey participation rates are under 50 percent.<sup>6</sup>

However, CMOR's September 2001 report also contained promising news: "of the consumers polled by CMOR, a total of 77 percent reported they were either 'fairly willing' or 'very willing' to participate in future surveys, up from 71 percent in 1999, and comparable with the 78 percent of respondents who felt that way in 1995."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Verne Gay, "Fill It Out and Be Counted," *American Demographics* February 2000: 28

<sup>4</sup> Wellner S12

<sup>5</sup> Steve Jarvis, "CMOR Finds Survey Refusal Rate Still Rising," *Marketing News* February 4, 2002: 4

<sup>6</sup> Richard Colombo, "A Model for Diagnosing and Reducing Non-response Bias," *Journal of Advertising Research* January/April 2000: 85

<sup>7</sup> Jarvis 4

## Need

If people are so willing to participate in survey research, as indicated in CMOR's September 2001 findings, why are participation rates continuing to decline? Market research observers have offered several explanations: that potential participants are suffering from survey fatigue because of the popularity of survey research; that consumers provide information only to companies with which they have already established relationships; and that potential participants are becoming aware of the high commercial value their feedback offers.<sup>8</sup> Additional contributors to the declining rates of response are technological advances such as caller i.d. and internet junk mail filters.

To combat the problem of public resistance and/or tap into audiences' willingness to participate in survey research, many organizations provide incentives in exchange for that invaluable feedback. Due to the expense of conducting a survey combined with the added cost of an incentive, an organization would benefit from research such as this thesis that condenses as well as adds to the body of research that has been done on the topic of survey participation initiatives. In an online interview with CMOR's Director of Respondent Cooperation, Jane Sheppard, she stated, "While we have learned a fair amount about the relative value of different motivational approaches, there is still much to learn and any new learning may be of interest to the industry."

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<sup>8</sup> Ken Gofton, "Data Firms React to Survey Fatigue," Marketing April 29, 1999: 29



## Purpose

This thesis will provide readers with a condensed guide for increasing survey participation through the use of initiatives. Research has indicated that the use of initiatives can dramatically increase survey return rates, while often reducing overall study costs by decreasing the need for administrators' follow-up.<sup>9</sup>

## Problem

This study was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Are initiatives generally recommended or do situations exist where initiatives are not recommended?
2. Why do initiatives work?
3. What initiatives are most effective for increasing survey participation?
4. Are initiatives more effective when presented before or after the completion of the survey?
5. What are some cost-effective initiative ideas?

## Procedures

The first step in producing this study was to conduct online and library database searches using the keywords "survey," "market research," "survey return rates," "rates of

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<sup>9</sup> Mary P. Maher, Eleanor Singer and John Van Hoewyk, "Experiments With Incentives in Telephone Surveys," Public Opinion Quarterly Summer 2000: 187

return,” “polls and surveys,” “survey fatigue,” “survey organizations,” “effective surveys,” and “incentive for survey return.”

The online and library database searches revealed the leading market research organizations and e-mail inquiries regarding survey methods and initiatives used were sent to approximately 120 appropriate personnel at those organizations.

The 30 individuals from market research organizations who responded were then engaged in more in-depth inquiry studies conducted through internet interviews. Of the 30 inquiries distributed, only eight responded with information about their organizations’ practices regarding the use of incentives.

Additionally, the author registered as a participant in several online survey administration organizations, including Harris Interactive. Participating in online surveys allowed the author to assess incentive programs from a participant’s point-of-view.

## Limitations

1. The author recognizes that the guidelines presented will not be applicable to all survey situations.
2. The author’s in-depth inquiry studies were limited to those parties who responded to the interview invitation.
3. In researching the effectiveness of survey participation initiatives, it was presumed that an initiative was effective with participants when the administering organization reported a high rate of survey return.

## Definitions

1. Incentive: A gift intended to influence a party's behavior. In this study, the term "incentive" will refer to rewards that those who participate in surveys receive.
2. Response Rate: The number of completed interviews divided by the sum of completed interviews, respondent refusals and non-interviews.<sup>10</sup>
3. Non-interviews: Situations resulting from a phone not being answered, a language barrier, an incomplete interview, a permanent health condition or non-eligible participant.<sup>11</sup>
4. Survey Research: The scientific process of obtaining data and opinions from the public.<sup>12</sup>
5. Survey Fatigue: a condition affecting potential survey participants that results from an inundation of requests for information. Survey fatigue causes a reluctance to share information and thus reduces survey return rates.<sup>13</sup>
6. Survey Participation: Providing information requested in a survey in a manner that renders it valuable to the study.

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<sup>10</sup> Maher, Singer and Van Hoewyk: 188

<sup>11</sup> Maher, Singer and Van Hoewyk: 188

<sup>12</sup> [www.cmor.org/what\\_is\\_research.htm](http://www.cmor.org/what_is_research.htm)

<sup>13</sup> Gofton: 29

7. Action Planning: The act of evaluating survey results and deciding what to do with them.<sup>14</sup>
8. Interpretive Report: A summary of information gathered by analyzing the survey. It relays in words and graphs how people responded to each item and dimension.<sup>15</sup>
9. Item: A single question on the survey/questionnaire.<sup>16</sup>
10. Dimension: A group of related items gauging an area of interest; a theme.<sup>17</sup>
11. Mean: The average obtained by adding item scores and dividing by the total number of items.
12. Median: The middle value in a group of scores. For example, in a groups of seven scores (1,2,3,4,5,6,7), “4” would be the median.
13. Mode: The most frequently observed response.
14. Reliability: The likeliness that each time a measuring device is used the results will be the same if the subject is static.<sup>18</sup>
15. Population: The group from which a sample is taken.
16. Sample: The group of people selected from the population.

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<sup>14</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>15</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>16</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>17</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>18</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

17. **Sampling:** The process of gathering information from a population.<sup>19</sup>
18. **Random Sampling:** This type of sampling gives everyone in the population and equal chance of being surveyed.<sup>20</sup>
19. **Systematic Sampling:** This type of sampling involves taking the number of people in a population and dividing that number by the number of people who will be receiving surveys. For example, if administrators would like to survey 100 people from a population of 1,000, they would divide 1,000 by 100 to get 10, pick someone randomly, then select every tenth person until reaching 100.<sup>21</sup>
20. **Stratified Sampling:** This type of sampling involves categorizing the population into subgroups, then systematically selecting from these groups.<sup>22</sup>
21. **Response Option:** A possible answer that a respondent can give to a question or item.<sup>23</sup>
22. **Validity:** The likelihood that that information actually being measured is what is desired to be measured.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>20</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>21</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>22</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>23</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

<sup>24</sup> [www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm](http://www.ncspearson.com/research-notes/glossary.htm)

## Chapter 2

### RELATED RESEARCH

#### Background

This subject was researched using a variety of methods. Using the keywords “survey,” “market research,” “survey return rates,” and “incentive for survey return,” the author searched Rowan University Library’s online databases as well as numerous internet search engines including Google and Yahoo. The searches returned 1,210 documents, of which approximately 30 were relevant to the study.

Additionally, approximately 120 staff members at market research organizations were e-mailed a request to participate in answering a series of questions for the purpose of this study. The potential participants were guaranteed anonymity and offered a copy of the study once compiled. Of the 120 potential respondents e-mailed, 30 replied that they would participate. However, at the time of publication, only eight had responded with information regarding their organizations’ practices concerning the use of survey incentives.

As one market researcher put it, “Survey research is an important part of our democratic society, allowing people to express their views on political and social issues, as well as on products and services.” As important as surveys are, people’s willingness to participate is on the decline. Even the arguably most respected survey in the nation, the

U.S. Census, needed to launch an advertising campaign to reduce levels of non-participation in 2000.

Many familiar explanations are offered for people's unwillingness to participate in surveys. Concerns about privacy protection have increased since the average potential survey participant can rarely distinguish between anonymous research, database building or requests for information that lead to sales pitches. People are reluctant to share information with organizations that they neither know nor trust. As Shaun Doyle, chairman of database consulting firm Intrinsic, puts it, "There are things you don't ask on a first date."<sup>25</sup>

Non-participation is also fueled by the fierce competition for participants' attention including cell phones, television, telemarketers and other survey administrators. Jane Sheppard of the Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR) stated, "Back in the 90's, we started to see sharp increases in the number of survey refusals and that was the time when telemarketing grew substantially." Telemarketers have caused consumers to perceive that "anyone calling is somehow trying to sell you something."

The public's distrust, coupled with faster-paced lifestyles, is bad news not only for administrators of telephone surveys, but also of internet, mail and intercept surveys. Busy consumers tend not to want to give up their free time to participate in a survey. People are becoming increasingly aware of their participation's worth in market research currency and they are reluctant to share information below its fair market value.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Gofton: 29

<sup>26</sup> Jarvis: 4

## “What’s in it for me?”

As the people become more aware of the value of their opinion to market researchers, it becomes progressively more necessary to provide incentives for them to participate.

According to Doug Zabor, CEO of Research Triangle Park, NC-based research firm Johnston, Zabor, McManus Inc., “Paying 100% of the respondents (for their participation in a survey) needs to happen and will happen in the consumer research realm.”

For years it has been the research industry norm to pay physicians for their participation in pharmaceutical surveys at a rate approximately equal to what they would charge their patients for a comparable amount of time. Asks Nick Tortorello, president of Guideline Consulting, a division of New York-based Guideline Research, Inc., “If we do it with professional groups, why not ordinary consumers?”<sup>27</sup>

Each of the eight market researchers who participated in the author’s e-mailed interview indicated that incentives were “almost always” used. All respondents also indicated that incentives are customized to audiences, as described above. The resounding sentiment, however, was summarized by the respondent who stated, “CASH beats all.”

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<sup>27</sup> Jarvis: 4



## The Theories Behind Incentives

Why do people participate in surveys? Some research has indicated that survey respondents are motivated by the intrinsic “social” reward of pleasure in having been consulted in a significant matter. Many state that they are “happy to feel like their opinions count.” Other research suggests that motivation to participate in surveys is predominantly economic, especially since the public is becoming acutely aware of the value that market researchers place on their feedback and demographic information. The preponderance of research, however, indicates that the most effective incentives present a well-timed economic exchange that closely mimics a social exchange and is appropriate for the effort expended.<sup>28</sup>

## The Timing of the Incentive

The majority of research the author examined indicated that incentives are much more effective when presented before a survey is administered.

An incentive presented prior to a survey’s completion is a method of establishing a social exchange between the administrator and the participant, a “symbol of trust”<sup>29</sup> that creates in the potential participant a sense of obligation to return the favor through agreeing to be interviewed. Completing the survey then complies with the “norm of

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<sup>28</sup> Susan A. Adlis, Timothy J. Beebe, Holly L. Jensen and Michael J. Shaw, “The Use of Monetary Incentives in a Community Survey: Impact on Response Rates, Data Quality and Cost,” Health Services Research February 2001: 1340

<sup>29</sup> Don A. Dillman, Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method (New York: Wiley, 1978) 16

reciprocity,”<sup>30</sup> which is another intrinsic reward in addition to the satisfaction of having been consulted.

Incentives presented after the completion of a survey, however, too closely represent payment or compensation for work performed. This eliminates or severely reduces a participant’s sense of reward felt as a result of completing a “social exchange” type of transaction, as when an incentive is presented before the survey’s completion.

### The Cost-Efficiency of Incentives

Given people’s increasing reluctance to share information about themselves, it is becoming increasingly more expensive and time-consuming for market researchers to generate reliable data about their audiences. President of the Advertising Research Foundation Jim Spaeth summarizes: “The more refusals you get, the longer it takes to gather the data. As that continues, the cost of research will escalate. Until you can turn the tide on declining cooperation, costs will increase.”<sup>31</sup>

The consensus among market researchers is that incentives are the way to stem that tide. Arbitron, a firm that measures radio listenership through participants’ keeping diaries, has made attempts to reduce the rate of non-participation by increasing the cash payments used as incentives. The company discovered just how effective the incentives

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<sup>30</sup> Alvin Gouldner, “The Norm of Reciprocity: A Preliminary Statement,” American Sociological Review 1960: 161

<sup>31</sup> Katy Bachman, “Diaries: Not So Dear,” Mediaweek November 29, 1999: 5

were when it cut back its “Respondent Cooperation Team” program and response rates immediately plummeted. Arbitron has since reinstated the program.<sup>32</sup>

All of the market researchers interviewed stated that even participants in intercept surveys (such as those in shopping malls) that generally take only five or 10 minutes are paid anywhere from \$2 to \$10. One stated, “Unless the survey is just for fun, we ALWAYS offer incentives.”

The market researchers offered alternatives to cash as an incentive. The most frequently cited non-cash incentives were coupons, gift certificates and raffle or sweepstake entries. As part of this study the author registered as a member of Harris Interactive and ZoomPanel, two online survey administrators. Both organizations offer participants “points” for participating in online surveys. The more extensive a survey is, the more points associated with participating in it. The points are “banked” in the member’s online account (accessed through the administering organization’s website) and ultimately redeemed for merchandise such as electronic equipment, household appliances and restaurant gift certificates. Generally, the administering organization provides an overview of the survey topic as well as an estimate of the time it will take to complete the questionnaire.

In addition to increasing the sheer number of survey responses, research indicates that the use of incentives reduces the tendency of participants to omit answers within

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<sup>32</sup> Bachman: 5

surveys.<sup>33</sup> The omission of answers generally results in a “non-interview,” or unusable result—an expensive waste of time.

### The Multi-faceted Benefits of Incentives

Research also indicates that the motivation provided by incentives presented in advance of a survey’s completion may not stop with potential participants. Interviewers who are aware that a household has received an incentive may be more comfortable and confident and therefore more effective approaching that household with a request for participation. The interviewers may anticipate potential participants to be more cooperative as a result of receiving the incentive and thus may act in a way that fulfills that expectation. Then again, potential participants may simply be more inclined to cooperate as a result of feeling obliged due receiving the incentive. Or, most likely, a combination of all of these principles is at work.<sup>34</sup>

### Concerns About the Use of Incentives

The study of the use of incentives has raised some concerns among researchers. While concerns about the public’s declining survey participation rate has led many to promote strong attempts for encouraging everyone’s eager involvement, others are

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<sup>33</sup> Maher, Singer and Van Hoewyk: 183

<sup>34</sup> Maher, Singer and Van Hoewyk: 180

concerned that excessive efforts will backfire. Overly generous incentives, it is reasoned, may lure participants who are “careless or indifferent” in their responses and thus damage the quality and validity of data obtained. Other concerns with generous incentives include the theory that if participants perceive the “payment” received as too large for the effort required, intrinsic motivation is reduced, thereby deteriorating the quality of responses.<sup>35</sup>

This apprehension leads to another concern that incentives tend to cause participants to respond to survey questions more optimistically than do their non-incentive-receiving counterparts. Frequently cited theories surrounding this effect include the supposition that incentives put people in good moods and that people are conditioned socially to “be nice” to someone (or an organization) that has presented a gift.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, it clear that there is much room for additional research concerning the use and effect of incentives when administering surveys.

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<sup>35</sup> Maher, Singer and Van Hoewyk: 176

<sup>36</sup> John Brehm, “Stubbing Out Toes for a Foot in the Door? Prior Contact, Incentives and Survey Response,” International Journal of Public Opinion 1994: 45

## Chapter 3

### PROCEDURES

#### Sources Used

The author used four sources for this study: 1) a search of Rowan University Library's online databases; 2) a search of numerous internet search engines; 3) e-mail interviews; 4) review of relevant organizations' websites and online studies.

#### Rowan University Library's Databases

Rowan University Library's databases were searched as the initial step in composing this study. A search of ABI/Inform using the keyword "survey" produced more than 10,000 hits. The search was then refined to "market research," which produced 5,970 results. Subsequent searches using the words "survey return rates," "rates of return," "polls and surveys," "survey fatigue," "survey organizations," "effective surveys," and "incentive for survey return" resulted in more manageable documents—166 in all, of which 56 were relevant.

#### Internet Search Engines

The online search engine Google was also explored. A search of Google using the keyword "survey" produced an unmanageable 302,000 documents; refinement of the search term to "market research organizations" yielded 1,210 documents, most notably

being the website of the Marketing Research Association. The majority of the documents located by Google were websites of market research companies. Content analyses of those organizations' websites were also performed.

### E-mail Interviews

Many companies' websites provided an e-mail contact, prompting the author to send e-mails to approximately 120 relevant market research firm staff members. These e-mails inquired whether the party to whom the correspondence was addressed would participate in an interview via the internet for the purpose of this study. The author assured the potential respondents anonymity and offered a copy of the study's results once compiled in exchange for participation.

Of the 120 initial e-mail inquiries sent, 30 garnered a positive response. Approximately 20 responses were negative, with authors citing non-interest, non-relevance to their positions or their organizations' policies to decline participation in such a survey. Approximately 55 of the e-mails were not answered, despite follow-up e-mails by the author of this study. Fifteen e-mails were returned to the author as "undeliverable."

Those eight individuals from market research organizations who responded were then engaged in more in-depth inquiry studies conducted through internet interviews. The questions posed in the interviews follow:

1. Do you typically use incentives when administering surveys? If not, why not?
2. What is generally offered as an incentive?

3. Are incentives presented before survey completion or after?
4. Do you customize the incentives to various audiences?
5. Are there any situations in which incentives aren't effective?
6. Please list any unique or creative incentives you've heard of.

All eight of the respondents completed the survey by typing the relevant response immediately below each of the author's questions. Upon the author's receiving the e-mailed replies, the market researchers' responses were calculated to determine their field's common practices concerning the use of incentives. Through analysis of the data, the author drew conclusions about the frequency of using incentives, typical incentives that are offered, the timing of incentives' presentations, customization of incentives, incentives' potential ineffectiveness and the use of creative incentives.

### Participation in Online Surveys

Additionally, the author registered as a participant in several online survey administration organizations, including Harris Interactive and ZoomPanel in an effort to experience survey research incentive programs firsthand. Specifically, the author sought to determine whether online surveys provided participants with incentives; what those incentives were, if any; and how the incentives, if any, were distributed.



## Chapter 4

### RESULTS

In an effort to analyze the market research field's typical practices concerning the use of incentives to encourage survey participation, the author sent e-mails to approximately 120 relevant market research firm staff members. These e-mails inquired whether the party to whom the correspondence was addressed would participate in an interview via the internet for the purpose of this study. The author assured the potential respondents anonymity and offered a copy of the study's results once compiled in exchange for participation.

Of the 120 initial e-mail inquiries sent, 30 garnered a positive response. Approximately 20 responses were negative, with authors citing non-interest, non-relevance to their positions or their organizations' policies to decline participation in such a survey. Approximately 55 of the e-mails were not answered, despite follow-up e-mails by the author of this study. Fifteen e-mails were returned to the author as "undeliverable." Those eight individuals from market research organizations who responded were then engaged in more in-depth inquiry studies conducted through internet interviews.

All eight of the respondents completed the survey by typing the relevant response immediately below each of the author's questions. Below are the author's questions (bolded), immediately followed by the eight individuals' responses to those questions.

7. Do you typically use incentives when administering surveys? If not, why not?

- “Depends on the type and length of the study. Short telephone interviews (up to 30 minutes), no. In-person interviews where they come to a central facility, yes. Internet interviews of 30 minutes or longer, yes.”
- “Yes.”
- “Always.”
- “Yes, very frequently. Sometimes, if it’s ‘just for fun,’ we don’t.”
- “Always for focus groups—from \$40 to \$150 or more for physicians, CEOs, etc. For mall intercepts from \$2 for maybe 5 to 10 minutes to \$25 or \$30 for 40-45 minutes. Much longer than 45 minutes really should not be done as mall intercept.”
- “Most of the time.”
- “You have to.”
- “Y”

8. What is generally offered as an incentive?

- “Depends on the criteria and the population. Doctors and professionals, for example, are always paid. Otherwise, they do not participate. In-person: \$25

to \$100 for consumers depending on the difficulty of finding them and the length of the study. Professionals of any length study: \$100 to \$500.”

- “Money or my client’s products/services.”
- “Cash.”
- “Anywhere from \$1 to \$75.”
- “CASH beats all.”
- “It depends.”
- “Money.”
- “Cash, even if it’s a nominal amount.”

9. Are incentives presented before survey completion or after?

- “After.”
- “Generally before, but occasionally after.”
- “Before.”
- “No.”
- “Offered at time respondent is being intercepted or recruited.”
- “Let them see what they’ll get, then give it to them when they are done with survey.”
- “We advise them of the reward at time of recruitment, but actual presentation doesn’t occur until interview is complete.”

- “Before, because we give our clients’ products as gifts and we want them to be familiar with the product ahead of time.”

10. Do you customize the incentives to various audiences?

- “As above.”
- “Cash appeals to everybody, in my experience.”
- “Yes.”
- “Yes.”
- “Always—see above.”
- “Yes—depends on the survey.”
- “They all get cash.”
- “Usually.”

11. Are there any situations in which incentives aren’t effective?

- “Probably.”
- “Not that I know of.”
- “No.”
- “Possibly, but not to my knowledge.”
- “Always effective in improving cooperation rates. Just not economically practical for most phone surveys. But even there we will offer some type of raffle as an incentive so we only have to send out one or a few winners.”

- “??”
- “I guess.”
- “Maybe.”

12. Please list any unique or creative incentives you’ve heard of.

- “Sweepstakes, charitable contributions, client’s product, gift certificates, results of the survey (like you offered).”
- “Cruises! (For hard to get professionals.)”
- “Raffles, coupons for free stuff.”
- “Sweepstakes, charitable contributions, gifts of their choice from a list, experience of some sort—get to go somewhere, e.g., Make a Wish but on a small scale.”
- “As with yours, for business a copy of a report is often a good incentive.”
- “With college kids, food works well. Depends on the audience.”
- “Lotteries, raffles for big-ticket items.”
- “Chances to win vacations or cars.”

From these responses, the author concluded that the use of incentives to encourage survey participation is widespread, especially when administering a lengthy survey or seeking information from physicians or other professionals. The market researchers’ responses indicate that cash is the most common incentive, but that other

items such as merchandise, coupons and gift certificates are occasionally offered. The market researchers also indicate that raffle entries are popular incentives as well. Most mentioned that they generally customize incentives to audiences. The market researchers did not specifically state any situations in which incentives were known to be ineffective.

## Chapter 5

### RECOMMENDATIONS & AREAS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Research indicates that offering incentives to survey participants increases return rates, thereby expediting what can be an expensive and time-consuming process. Much research has been done on the use of incentives and their potential effects on participants. Some guidelines based on that research follow.

- Provide incentives prior to participants' completing the surveys. Research shows that this method is more effective because it more closely mimics a social exchange rather than an economic exchange, which is theorized to be less satisfying, and thus less motivating.
  - In addition to increasing return rates, research shows that incentives reduce participants' tendencies to omit responses within surveys.
- Offer incentives that are proportionate to the amount of effort required by participants to complete the survey. Research shows that overly generous incentives tend to lure indifferent participants into the sample who would otherwise not contribute to the survey. Frequently, indifferent participants answer survey questions haphazardly, compromising the quality of the data collected.
- Encourage honesty from survey participants. Research shows that people occasionally respond more favorably in a survey when they have been

presented with an incentive. It is important to take measures through the design and administration of the survey to prompt candid responses.

- Explain to participants the credibility of the administering organization as well as the importance of the survey. Research shows that people are reluctant to share information with a company that they are unfamiliar with even if a survey has been presented. Additionally, research indicates that better feedback is obtained when participants understand the purpose of the survey.
  - Ensure that survey administrators are properly trained to provide accurate instructions to survey participants. Research indicates that administrators who show a high level of enthusiasm garner higher survey return rates.
  - Provide participants with the results of the survey once they are available. Research shows that follow-up increases the credibility of an organization among its publics, as well as grooms those who participated for future participation.
- Accommodate participants' needs. Research shows that potential respondents report that they would be much more likely to participate in surveys if administrators made the task more convenient for them, such as calling back at a better time or scheduling a time to return for an intercept survey.
- Distribute coupons, gift certificates, phone cards, raffle tickets and other resourceful incentives as alternatives to cash incentives. Research shows that



these creative incentives are often attention-getting as well as appropriate for the effort involved.

In summary, the proper use of incentives is a proven way to increase survey participation. Incentives let survey participants know that they and their opinions are valued, while inspiring goodwill and cultivating future participation in endeavors to improve and evolve organizations. With the effectiveness of incentives established, other topics to be explored emerge:

- Do incentives have any effect on interviewers' attitudes?
- Do incentives affect participants' candidness?
- Are incentive values directly proportionate to participants' levels of optimism within a survey?
- How effective are incentives that remain a mystery to participants until after the survey's completion?

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