

Survey Responses: Mail Versus Email Solicitations

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ABSTRACT

Surveys, particularly electronic surveys, are becoming popular methods of eliciting consumer responses. For example, many businesses now have survey sites printed on the bottom of receipts with some future discount as an enticement to participate. Clearly, the intent of such incentives is to stimulate participation. Surveys have also become popular in academia, but rarely are incentives offered. Clearly, those in academia also prefer a high participation rate, but without financial incentives what can be done to encourage participation? This research attempts to address that question.

Keywords: Physical surveys, electronic surveys, surveys, participation rates, personalized emails

INTRODUCTION

Surveys seem to have always been around, but they are migrating from the physical form to electronic methods. It would be an interesting challenge to find anyone who has had an email account for more than 30 days who had not received an invitation to at least one survey. Academia too has been inundated with surveys by book publishers, fellow academicians, professional organizations, and dissertation research, among others. Elections that used to be held at national/regional meetings are now conducted electronically. As part of a research project involving thousands of faculty, issues regarding participation were also examined, and this paper reports those results focusing primarily on physical versus electronic solicitation.

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Quite often, studies on opinions of students rely on opinions from the researcher's students with the occasional participation by neighboring schools. We took a vastly different approach by obtaining a copy of the Hasselback directory with the intent of asking every faculty member to assist in obtaining student opinions. We used the enticement of allowing faculty to see the results for their students (once three students had completed the survey) for every registered course. We also offered optional topical questionnaires related to the main theme of the study, and faculty could see the results of their students to these questionnaires as well.

The research website was designed so that faculty could set up course information in about five minutes which would uniquely identify each course. When the student then logged-in, they entered a recognizable name and one that would not be recognizable. They were assured that faculty would only see a list of participant names (perhaps as part of an assignment or extra credit) and summary results. If the student had the same instructor for multiple courses, they could simultaneously select the multiple courses. In essence, the site was designed to "give credit" to either multiple courses or multiple instructors and prevent contamination of the results by collecting multiple responses from the same student.

To the Hasselback directory, we added missing email addresses which seemed to be reasonably discernable. For example, many schools use firstname.lastname@XXX.EDU, or some variation thereof. In those cases, the implied email address was added to the database (699 email addresses were added by this methodology).

We next added 87 more email addresses by visiting the schools’ web sites. We then dropped those still without email addresses, those listed as Emeritus, and those shown to be non-accounting deans. This process left us with 8,598 individuals.

These 8,598 individuals were then partitioned into those affiliated with a United States school (6,355) and those with an international affiliation (2,243). Two of the accounting researchers then identified those individuals that they thought a personal solicitation would be more effective and provided a personal name. For example, assuming a potential participant named Robert E. Smith used Ed rather than Robert, the personalized version read “Dear Ed,” rather than “Dear Professor Smith.”. The body of the letter was also more casual for the personalized solicitation. The generic “Dear Professor” was never used.

A grant of \$750 allowed us to generate 1,008 physical solicitation letters, and this was offset with 1,008 randomly chosen emails from the organization created for the study. This comparison was designed to test the effectiveness of physical solicitations versus electronic solicitations from unknown organizations. The organization was created specifically for the study. The remainder of the individuals was divided among the four researchers.

THE RESULTS

The primary purpose is to address the impact of physical solicitation versus email solicitation. Clearly, physical mail is always going to be more costly, but the question is whether or not the additional costs result in additional responses. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Physical Mail versus Email

| Method | Number of Responses | Total Cost | Cost per Response |
|---|---------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Physical | 22 | \$750 | \$ 34.09 |
| Email | 15 | \$30 | \$ 2.00 |
| <p>Note that the cost of email is an assumed amount for two hours of effort at \$15 per hour. In actuality there was no cost.</p> | | | |

Clearly the response rate was horrifically low, but even so we can clearly state that the response rate for physical mail was not statistically significantly different from the Email rate. If someone were being paid to set up the email solicitation, we estimated it would have taken no more than two hours. Thus, even if we allow two hours of cost of conducting the email solicitations , the email is clearly less costly than physical mail, in total and per response. If the number of responses is critical, one might argue that the additional costs are justified, but rarely would one pay seventeen (17) times as much per additional response. Let us now turn our attention to other potential issues.

As noted earlier in the research design, when the researcher felt a strong enough personal connection then he/she created a separate email solicitation for that individual. These are shown as Personal in Table 2.

Table 2
U.S. Results by Region

| Researcher | | Region | | | |
|------------|-----|--------|----|----|----|
| | | NE | W | MW | S |
| R1 | 20 | 6 | 3 | 2 | 9 |
| R2 | 16 | 5 | 5 | 1 | 5 |
| R3 | 22 | 4 | 5 | 0 | 13 |
| R4 | 22 | 5 | 2 | 4 | 11 |
| Physical | 22 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 14 |
| Org | 15 | 4 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| Personal | 12 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 11 |
| | 129 | 28 | 22 | 10 | 69 |

Researcher One (R1) was the technical member who assisted with web design and technical support. While he is not known to the accounting community, doing a Google search provides many hits to his academic and other research. Researcher Two (R2) is a named professor who has a national reputation. Researcher Three (R3) was the lead author and Researcher Four (R4) had considerable teaching and research experience in the primary area of the study. The Physical mail was mailed by R4 and the emails sent from the organization created for the study is shown as Org rather than Email in this table since all but the physical were delivered via email. Finally, participants who were solicited by the informal solicitation are identified as Personal.

Note carefully that the 12 Personal responses were from a much smaller source of participants. Of the personal solicitation, we heard from most as to why they could not participate. There were 112 potential participants who were sent personalized solicitations whereas the others numbered in the thousands (1,008 for Physical and Org; 1,645 or 1,646 for R1-R4) While the number of participants is disappointing, given the magnitude of the original solicitations, the responses were fairly diversified with none of the researchers getting significantly more than the others. The participation rate was substantially higher for the personal emails since the population of personalized emails was significantly lower. Researcher R2 was not very selective in his personalized list; R3 and R4 had 12 participants of the 112 personalized solicitations. Finally, note that although the number of participants was higher for the southern region, the participants are otherwise geographically diverse.

ADDITIONAL NOTE

The following is not directly on point but may be of use to anyone conducting a large email survey. Given the nature of the email solicitation, the lead author “spoofed” the email addresses through Microsoft Outlook and emailed the solicitations for all authors. When this was effective, the email appeared as if it had come from each researcher’s academic email address, and had the same return email address. Each request listed the researcher in first position, implying that they were the lead author. While we found this process conceptually appealing there were unanticipated issues, the most significant of which was that many emails were returned as spam due to the spoofing process being detected. Realizing that many spam filters do not return a notice to the sender, a second email was generated from the research organization with individual names contained in the subject line. While this has the potential to bias the results in favor of the organization, no such contamination was evidenced. It is worth noting that for larger schools, multiple solicitations were filtered as well. It makes one wonder if some filters are not set too tight for normal email traffic

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The most important conclusion supported by this research (Table 1) is that physical mail is not more effective than email from even an unknown organization. Table 2 suggests that national reputation had no effect on response rates, nor did anything else except personal connections. Using personalized email in soliciting participation appears to be the only effective method to increase participation. The responses in Table 2 also indicate that using a database such as Hasselback can net geographically diverse responses.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

James R. Hasselback became the Mary Ball Washington Eminent Scholar at the University of West Florida in 2006 after teaching at Florida State University for 27 years. He previously taught at the University of Florida, Texas A&M University, and Eastern Michigan University. He has published over 150 papers in professional and academic journals, including *The Accounting Review*, *The Tax Adviser*, *Financial Management*, *Journal of Real Estate Taxation*, and the *American Business Law Journal*. Jim Hasselback compiles the *Accounting Faculty Directory* published by Prentice Hall. The 2009-2010 edition marked the 33rd edition. The *Accounting Faculty Directory* may be the most cited reference in the Accounting field.

Rodger G. Holland obtained his PhD from The Ohio State University in 1981 and has conducted research across a diverse range of topics. His current research interests include ethical perceptions of students and reasons faculty tend to settle in one location.

Bryson Payne obtained his PhD from Georgia State and began his academic career at Georgia College & State University. Upon moving to North Georgia College & State University he was soon asked to assume the role of Interim Chief Information Officer, and the Interim was soon removed.
Aileen Smith retired from Stephan F. Austin State University in 2008.

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