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Mail Surveys: Tips for Success! (April 2014)

In the last edition of StarTips, we determined that [there is in fact a place in today's fast paced e-world for mail surveys](#). How can you make sure you use your research budget wisely? We've had years of experience and success desktop publishing survey documents and working with printers and mailing facilities. In this edition of StarTips, we share some of our key findings for making your mail survey a success.

Alert: Get the word out. One to two weeks before you are scheduled to mail out your survey, send out an alert letter or postcard letting respondents know that the survey is coming. Benefits of doing this include:

- ★ Build excitement about the upcoming survey.
- ★ Provide an opportunity to update addresses and remove undeliverable addresses from any mail pieces that are returned to sender.
- ★ Increase awareness so that the survey packet isn't immediately discarded.

Survey Design: A mail survey should have clear cut instructions and be easy to follow. It should be concise and ask only pertinent questions that will not take too much of a respondent's time. Here are a few suggestions on how to create a clean, crisp looking survey document:

- ★ Consider using recognizable logo(s) and/or letterhead.
- ★ Include a cover letter or, if space permits on the survey itself, an opening paragraph thanking the potential respondent for their time and explaining the purpose of the study.
- ★ Avoid using "fancy" fonts. For example, Arial is a nice, clean font that is easy to read.
- ★ Use bold face for question text and regular type for response choices.
- ★ Italicize or otherwise call attention to survey instructions.
- ★ Be sure questions and checkboxes are properly aligned and spaced so it is clear which box corresponds to each response.

Sampling: A mailing list can come from internal resources, or can be purchased from an external list company – or a combination of both. Customer, client or patient lists are one of the most valuable resources for conducting mail surveys. A few simple quality checks can make sure your survey reaches the intended recipient, including:

- ★ Check your file for duplicates. This will ensure that no respondent receives more than one survey, thus decreasing postage and printing costs.
- ★ Check for missing fields. Ensure that each field is populated correctly so that your survey packet is not returned as undeliverable.
- ★ Consider running your database through the National Change of Address (NCOA) registry. Benefits include reducing undeliverable mail by using the most up to date address for a potential survey respondent, provided they have filed a change of address form with the United States Postal Service (USPS).
- ★ If possible, insert individual tracking codes so that returned surveys can be easily matched back to the database.

Response Rate: You've done a lot of work to ensure that your mail study is a success. You've designed a clean survey document and checked your sample to make sure that there are no obvious errors. Now, in the final stretch, you need to make sure that your surveys are returned for processing. Here are a few tips to boost your response rate:

- ★ Personalize the cover letter with the respondent's name. This can help boost response rates by lessening the notion that the packet is "junk mail," and convey that you are interested in their opinion, not just any resident at that address.
- ★ Set a completion date so that surveys are returned in a timely fashion and are able to be included in your data analysis.
- ★ Include a Business Reply Envelope (BRE) with the survey. People are more inclined to mail back their survey if they don't have to pay for postage.

- ★ [Send an incentive](#) along with the survey. It's a well-known fact that people like to get things for free. Some ideas for incentives include a dollar bill or a coupon for an item or service.

Post Survey Follow-up: "Will my responses make a difference?" "Were my opinions heard?" "Was my survey received?" These are just a few thoughts that could be going through a respondent's mind after returning their survey. Once all data has been processed and your analysis is complete, consider sharing the results with those who participated. You can do this easily by mailing out a thank-you postcard, letter or other document that contains a brief synopsis of the findings.

We hope you've found this article helpful and look forward to working with you on your next survey mailing!

You may be interested in these other StarTips articles about mail surveys:

- ★ [Getting the Right Answers: 10 Tips to Better Questionnaire Design](#)
- ★ [Mail Surveys: Is there a place for them in a Digital Age?](#)
- ★ [Survey Incentives – When and How to Use Them](#)