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Survey Incentives -- When and How to Use Them (July 2009)

We are often asked the question, "what works best?" regarding ways to maximize survey response rates. The question is applicable to nearly all research methods, but we will limit our viewpoints to the two quantitative methodologies with which we have the most experience -- online and mail/paper surveys.

The first consideration is whether an incentive is necessary at all. Whether electronic or print media, you need to first capture the attention of potential respondents. In an age of information bombardment, we still notice offers of tangible things -- money, prizes and free products or services. On the other hand, many successful survey research projects are completed offering no incentives whatsoever. People like to feel that what they have to say is valued, and be given the chance to make an impact.

Wherever possible, make the survey experience its own incentive. Keep it brief, to the point, well-timed and carefully constructed. Poorly designed skip patterns, repetitive questions and other pitfalls can turn completing a survey into a frustrating experience. An interesting and truly engaging survey may be enough to accomplish what an incentive cannot.

If you decide to offer an incentive to achieve the desired response, what works? Following are the most common practices we have seen to attract respondents to a survey or to boost participation:

- ★ Cash. Let's face it, most people like getting it. Many years ago, one tried-and-true practice was to mail surveys with a shiny quarter taped to the front. It worked by grabbing attention and instilling a little guilt that "these people sent me something in good faith; I should therefore reciprocate and complete the survey." When a quarter got to the point of no longer buying a cup of coffee, a crisp \$2 bill attached to the survey worked like a charm. Fulfillment of cash incentives is a little different with the evolution of web surveys, but variations such as Amazon.com gift certificates or PayPal money can achieve the same purpose electronically. Don't have the budget to provide an adequate incentive to all respondents? Try this: "The first 50 respondents will receive..."
- ★ Prizes. Sweepstakes or prize draws are commonly used to attract respondents. Be careful with legalities however -- you want to be sure you are not running an illegal lottery. Always check with your legal department to be sure you comply with all applicable regulations. Also consider the prize... a larger number of smaller prizes may be more enticing than a single "grand prize." People like it when they think they have a good chance of winning.
- ★ Free products/services. Again, people appreciate what is free. While it is important to consider the cost of fulfillment of anything that must be physically shipped, items like flash drives, calculators, t-shirts and gift cards have all been employed successfully as survey incentives. Electronic gift certificates can make fulfillment much easier and more economical, but use caution with services/sites which may have limited interest or have access restrictions.
- ★ Information. A business or professional sample may value a white paper on a related topic. A group of consumers may value "top ten ways to save for retirement." Share the results of the survey where applicable.
- ★ Donations. Another technique we have used to attract difficult-to-reach respondent groups such as physicians and business executives is to provide an opportunity to help those in need. This not only serves as a valuable incentive but can also provide carryover goodwill towards your company, product, etc., possibly even to the quality of survey responses.

Other considerations: We're not going to venture into possible data quality issues including the various ways respondents may provide limited or poor quality responses when completing a survey solely for the purpose of receiving the incentive. That's a subject for another day, another article. But suffice to say, be sure to do your due diligence to make sure that what you are offering as an incentive is fairly exchanged for good faith responses to your survey.

Employ common sense and always consider your audience. The use of appropriate incentives for survey participation can ensure the success of your research project and be a valuable tool to maximize the return on your research dollars.