

# Response Rates

## Finding Direction

### Bite Sized Thought Piece

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The market research industry depends on the co-operation of members of the public to provide information about their behaviour and attitudes. People are increasingly busy and suspicious of intrusions on their time. What can be done to halt the decline in response rates? As long ago as 1974, an MRS Working Party bemoaned the fact that the response rate on the National Readership Survey had fallen from 78.1% in 1968 to 73.4% six years later.

Today the response rate stands at about 50%. Other national and international surveys have witnessed similar declines. In some areas though, response rates have held up and there are strategies that can be used to maximise co-operation. Some aim to persuade respondents to participate while others seek to maximise the chances they will be contacted.

There is no universal panacea though; strategies to maximise response need to take into account the survey universe and the method of data collection. Ipsos MediaCT strives to define best practice and some of the considerations are outlined here.





### **Mixed methods of data collection**

Giving respondents the chance to respond in different ways seems an obvious approach wherever this is possible. The National Student Survey, carried out by Ipsos MORI, surveys the opinions of more than 250,000 final year undergraduates each year. This involves an email approach initially, followed by a paper questionnaire and then, if there is still no response, a telephone interview. This combination of methods generates a response in excess of 60%. Among the media currency surveys, the NRS has successfully deployed self-completion questionnaires as an adjunct to the face-to-face CAPI interview, while RAJAR has announced that it is experimenting with an online data collection methodology to complement the paper diary.

### **Publicity and sponsorship of the survey**

People are increasingly bombarded with advertising and marketing messages and this helps to create a reluctance to take part in surveys. Presenting the subject matter in a way that is interesting and relevant to the respondent, can help to overcome this. This often works to the benefit of government and social surveys. Surveys about television, especially if they are sponsored by broadcasters, can also achieve high response rates. The BARB Establishment Survey, which Ipsos MediaCT has been running since 1991, is able to maintain a response rate of c70%.

## **Respondent engagement**

With online surveys there is an opportunity to engage with respondents in a way that is not possible with other methods of data collection. For example, online 'respondent communities' can be created (such as viewers of a TV channel or readers of a newspaper). Participants are able to interact with each other, changing the dynamics of the data collection process, and can be made to feel that their voices are being heard. Providing this sort of environment encourages people to take part in the research process.

## **Respondent incentives**

These are inherent in most forms of online research where panels are involved. They are not just used for panel surveys though. The NRS now pays an incentive of £25 to respondents in London. This has had a beneficial impact but if incentives are to become the norm, this will inevitably push up the cost of research. Financial incentives need to be used with care and in some countries, can actually be counter-productive as respondents perceive them to be a 'bribe'. Incentives can take different forms – for example on business surveys it is a good idea to give respondents the opportunity to obtain a copy of the survey findings if they are interested.

## **Survey look and feel**

For self-completion surveys (both online and paper-based), it is important to present the



questionnaire in a way that appears attractive to the respondent and easy to complete. The principles behind obtaining a good response to a postal survey are well understood and were first outlined in Dillman's seminal work 'Mail and Telephone Surveys' (Wiley, 1978). The increase in online research has meant that the principles of self-completion questionnaire design have had to be adapted to take advantage of the opportunities provided by this new medium.

## **Fieldwork planning**

Fieldwork and project management are also important. For telephone and face-to-face surveys, call strategies need to be planned so that interviewing is spread across different times and days. Interviewer training, motivation and rewards need to reflect this. Sufficient time must be allowed if a good response is to be achieved. If interviewing can be spread over a long period with adequate time for recalls, this will help.

The decline in response rates is often presented as the most important problem facing the market research industry. It certainly cannot be ignored, but with careful survey design and planning the effects can be mitigated. For the future, the key will be to use all the data collection tools available to design creative research solutions that will deliver data that is both relevant and actionable. With a background and track record as innovators in all aspects of data collection and interpretation, Ipsos MediaCT will continue to lead the way.





## Further Information

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