

Mail Options Research...and we have a winner

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Florentina Salvail, MSc, DungHanh Nguyen, Shu Liang, James Dannemiller, Hersh Singer, Michael Altman, Brent Watanabe

Background

Since 2009, Hawaii BRFSS has been mailing surveys to telephone non-respondents to augment landline survey participation. The 2009 mail survey results had two problems:

- ❑ Lower than desired return rates
- ❑ Low survey completion rates

Objective

Our objective was to identify a mail survey design option that improved return rates and completion rates at a reasonable cost.

Approach

We conducted focus groups with RDD mail-survey respondents and non-respondents to understand what prompts people to respond or refuse. Participants told us to

- ❑ Soften the cover letter design and wording and emphasize participation benefits
- ❑ Improve and simplify survey instructions
- ❑ Simplify the way questions were numbered
- ❑ Improve production quality and add color
- ❑ Use notification and reminder postcard alerts
- ❑ Half wanted incentives, half did not.

Test

We tested six mailing options and a control survey.

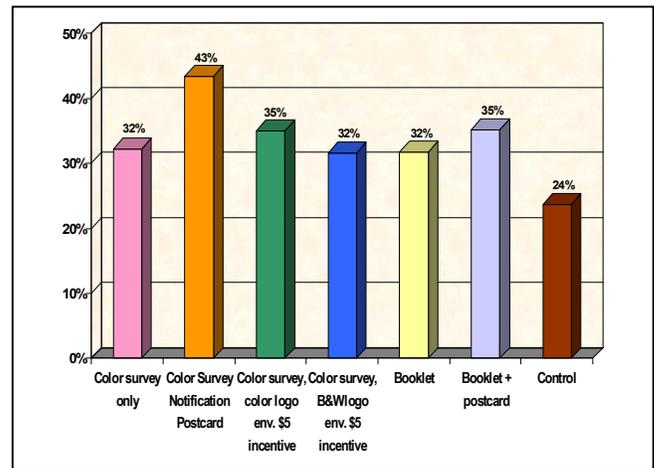
- Control: National BRFSS survey printed in black & white with black & white envelopes
- Option 1: Color survey, black & white envelope
- Option 2: Color survey, black & white envelope with a notification postcard alert
- Option 3: Color survey, color envelope, \$5 incentive
- Option 4: Color survey, black & white envelope, \$5 incentive
- Option 5: Color survey booklet, color envelope
- Option 6: Color survey booklet, color envelope, reminder postcard.

Each option was tested over a four-week period with an average mail out of 357 for each cycle. All options, featured improved cover letters and simplified instructions and numbering.

Results

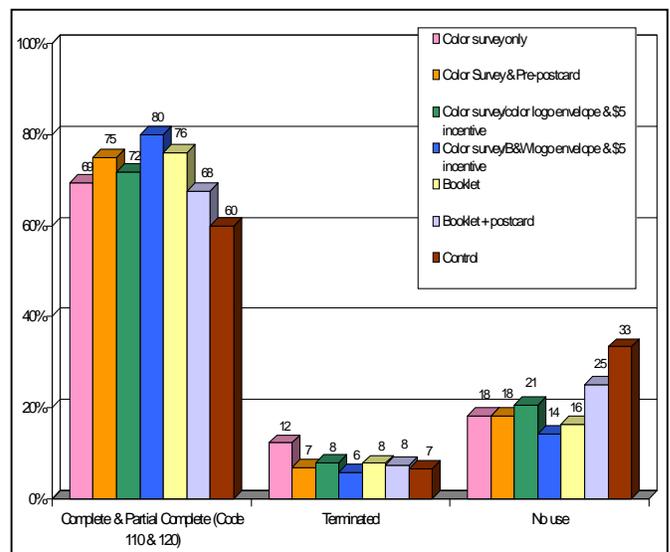
All six fielding options had higher return rates and higher completion rates than the control method.

Response Rates for Six Options and Control



The color survey with a notification postcard had the highest response rate . 43 percent compared with 24 percent for the control method. Others were all between 32 and 35 percent.

Completion Rates for Six Options and Control



Complete and Partial Complete+surveys were acceptable for processing. Fully 80 percent of people who got the color survey-color envelope-\$5 incentive package returned acceptable surveys. Compare that to only 60 percent of the control method.

Costs associated with each mailing option are shown below. Figures include direct costs for printing, materials, and mailing only.

Unit Costs for Six Options and Control

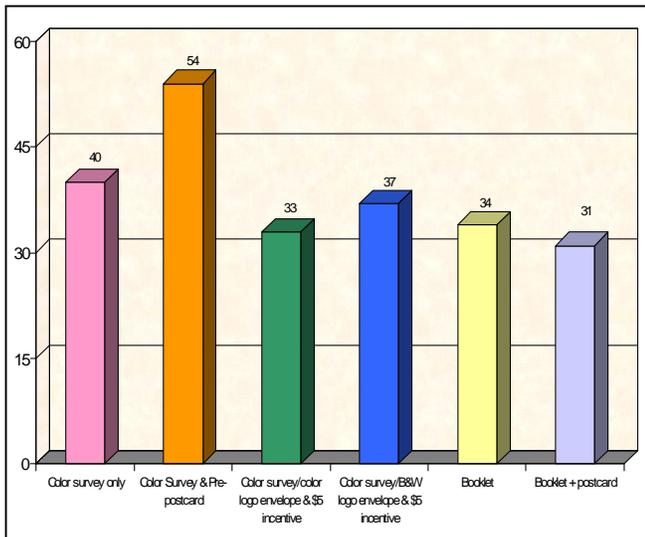
Mailing Process	Outgoing Mail Cost	Incoming Mail Cost	Total Fielding Cost
A. Control	\$3.94	\$0.69	\$4.10
B	\$5.33	\$0.69	\$5.55
C	\$5.75	\$0.69	\$6.05
D	\$6.03	\$6.38	\$7.54
E	\$5.50	\$6.38	\$6.87
F	\$6.70	\$1.30	\$7.11
G	\$7.12	\$1.30	\$7.57

A = Control; B = color survey only; C = color survey and notification postcard; D = color survey, color logo envelope, \$5 incentive; E = color survey, B&W logo envelope, \$5 incentive; F = booklet survey, and G = booklet survey and reminder postcard.

The least expensive mailing option was B, the color survey only and the most costly was the booklet survey and reminder postcard (Option G).

Combining outcomes and cost, we calculated % quality rate+, the number of complete and usable surveys returned per \$1,000 of direct costs.

Usable Surveys per \$1,000 for Six Mailing Options



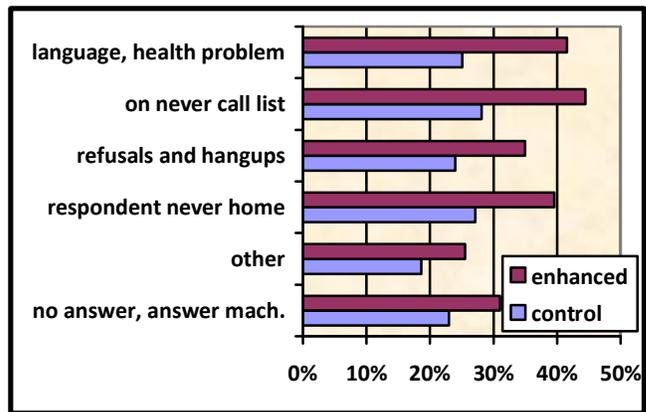
Considering the number and quality of surveys returned, and the cost of the effort, one option was clearly superior: The color survey with a notification postcard.

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with most of the literature on methods for mail surveys and mail follow-up surveys. Notification procedures usually produce at least noticeable results, and an attractive, professional-looking survey instrument works. The runner-up methods included incentive. Recent research suggests that monetary incentives produce results but are generally less effective for government-sponsored research.

Of note, the finding that mail surveys work for most types of non-completions holds again this year. Below we compare response rates for different types of incomplete dispositions to the telephone survey. Once again we see that the improvement rate for tough cases+ refusals, hang-ups, never call list people, and communications problems are better than those for mobility and other problems. Lowest rates are still for passive refusals (no answer and answering machine).

Return Rates by Disposition Code



Contact

Address questions/comments to James E. Dannemiller, jdannemiller@sms-hawaii.com or call at 808-440-0701.

References

CDC, Publications, research, & methodology: Improvements to BRFSS methodology, design, and implementation at www.cdc.gov/brfss/pubs/methodology.html.

Link, Michael W., Ali Mokdad, Ruth Jiles, Jodie Weiner, and David Roe, Augmenting the BRFSS design with mail and Web modes: Results from a multi-state experiment, presented at AAPOR Conference, 2009.

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