The Impact of Survey Communications on Response Rates

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2013 Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Research Conference
November 4 to 6, 2013
Introduction

- Past research has shown that the design and presentation of survey communications can affect survey response rates.

- Much of this work has focused on mailed prenotifications and invitations.

- Less research has focused on design decisions in email communications and the impact on response rates to web surveys.
Introduction

- This study builds on findings from our previous research – Falcone, Thomas, and Mack (2012) – which looked at invitation length and location of web survey consent button on the survey landing page
In the previous study, respondents were randomly assigned to one of four groups:

- Short email & consent at top of landing page
- Short email & consent at bottom of landing page
- Long email & consent at top of landing page
- Long email & consent at bottom of landing page
Background: Previous Experiment

- Results:
  - No difference in survey link click rate between long and short emails
  - No difference in consent button clicks between those with button at top and those with button at bottom of landing page
  - Those with long survey invitation email and the button at the top of the landing page were significantly more likely to complete survey than other three groups.
Web Survey URL – Top or Bottom?

- Guidance on location of web survey URL supports putting the link near the top of email communication to avoid the need for scrolling (Couper, 2008).
- Findings from our past study supported putting link at top of landing page.
- However, 2012 study by Kaplowitz, Lupi, Couper, and Thorp found higher response rates from faculty and students who received email with link at bottom, no difference among staff.
Maybe Long Emails Aren’t So Bad

- Guidance on the length of emails typically supports keeping them short and to the point (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2009).

- However, our previous study found that those with the long email invitation were more likely to complete the survey.

- And the 2012 study by Kaplowitz, Lupi, Couper, and Thorp found higher response rates for faculty and staff sent longer invitations, no difference among students.
Can We Eliminate Landing Page?

- Given some evidence of positive, or at least no detrimental, impact of long emails on response rates, we wondered can the language that we typically include on the landing page be moved from the landing page to the email?

- If we can eliminate the landing page, respondents only have to decide once to participate, rather than twice by:
  1) clicking link in email, and then
  2) clicking consent on landing page
What’s on the Landing Page?

- Federally sponsored surveys:
  - Office of Management and Budget (OMB) Standards and Guidelines for Statistical Surveys requires that researchers notify respondents of a number of factors, including the OMB control number.
  - In addition, Human Subjects Protection and Internal Review Boards (IRB) require voluntary consent language.
Current Experiment: Methodology

▪ In this study, we look at:
  • Email length:
    – Does the length of an email invitation or reminder, short with a landing page versus long without a landing page, affect response rates?
  • Web survey URL location:
    – Does the location of the web survey URL, at the top or bottom of an email invitation or reminder, affect response rates?
Current Experiment: Methodology

- Respondents were randomly assigned to one of four groups:
  - **Short email & URL at top of email** directed to web survey landing page
  - **Short email & URL at bottom of email** directed to web survey landing page
  - **Long email & URL at top of email** directed to first page of survey questions
  - **Long email & URL at bottom of email** directed to first page of survey questions
You have been selected to participate in an important web-based survey on your experiences with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) Disaster Technical Assistance Center (DTAC).

Please read the information below. To complete the survey, please click on the following link or copy and paste it into your web browser:


SAMHSA DTAC supports SAMHSA’s efforts to prepare states, territories, and local entities to deliver effective behavioral health (mental health and substance abuse) responses to disasters.

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Participation in this survey is completely voluntary. You can decide whether or not to take the survey and which questions to answer if you decide to take the survey. If you choose to participate in the survey, any information you provide will be treated as confidential and all information collected will be reported only at an aggregate level.

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For any questions about SAMHSA’s research on this topic, please contact Nikki Bellamy, Ph.D., SAMHSA DTAC Project Officer, by phone at 240-276-2418 or by email at nikki.bellamy@samhsa.hhs.gov.

OMB No. 0930-0325
Expiration Date: 06/30/14
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Please complete this important survey today!

Thank you,
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Survey Landing Page

- **LONG EMAIL:** Skipped this page
- **SHORT EMAIL:** Viewed this page after clicking the web survey URL in the email

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**Voluntary consent**

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**OMB Statement**

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First Page of the Survey

- **LONG EMAIL:** Viewed this page directly after clicking the web survey URL in the email
- **SHORT EMAIL:** Viewed this page after clicking “I agree” button on the landing page
Current Experiment

- Data from the 2013 Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Disaster Technical Assistance Center (SAMHSA DTAC) Customer Satisfaction Survey
- Administered to coordinators and providers of disaster behavioral health services
- 345 customers invited to complete the survey
- Survey contained 32 questions, included skip logic
- Fielded for 7 weeks, respondents sent a pre-notification, invitation, and 4 reminders
A larger percentage of those with the URL at top of the email began the survey, however, the difference was not statistically significant.
Response Rate by Link Location

- No difference in response rate by location of URL at top or bottom of email

Percent Completed Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Completed</th>
<th>Link at Top</th>
<th>Link at Bottom</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.4%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Larger percentage of those who received the short email and saw the landing page began the survey, however the difference was not statistically significant.
Response Rate by Email Length

- Difference in response rate by email length not statistically significant

Percent Completed Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long Email</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Email</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Discussion and Next Steps

- The direction of differences in response rates did not confirm prior research which supported the long email.

- Findings for locating web survey URL at top was consistent with our prior research, not consistent with Kaplowitz et al. 2012 study.

- However, differences were not statistically significant.
Discussion and Next Steps

- Failure to replicate past research could be due to sample size, population, study topic.

- More research testing the impact of the design of email communications on survey response rates is needed: with a larger sample size, different populations, different topics to better inform communication protocols.
Thank you!

For further information contact:

Amy Falcone
Amy.Falcone@icfi.com