'Rounding Up' Responses to Mailed Questionnaires

Most Extension programs cannot be adequately evaluated using an end-of-session questionnaire if we are interested in the impact of our educational effort. Often the participants don't know whether they will actually adopt the innovations or practices taught in the program. They never know what the future result of any adoption will be. Therefore, follow-up is necessary to determine the actual impacts of programs.

I've found that one of the reasons many county professionals are reluctant to use mailed questionnaire for follow-up evaluations is the poor response rate they expect to obtain from the participants and resulting concerns of nonresponse bias. As evaluation specialists, we can help our county professionals understand response rates and what they mean to their evaluations. Our advice could be summarized in two points: First, increase the response rate; second, check for nonresponse bias.

First, Increase the Response Rate

While nonresponse bias is always a concern, it becomes less and less of a concern as the response rate increases (Miller & Smith, 1983). Survey researchers have successfully used several methods to increase response rates; and, based on a meta-analysis of techniques (Fox, Crask, & Kim, 1988) there appears to be little or no overlap of the techniques in terms of their effect on response rates. Each one of these techniques can increase response rate by a small amount. If many techniques are used together, they can increase the response rate by a large amount. The key is making the respondent feel like his/her response is important!

Use Salient Questions

The most important factor in response rate is asking questions that matter to the respondents (Dillman, 1978). A very common reason given for nonresponse is that the survey doesn't mean anything to the person receiving it (Falconer & Hodgett, 1999). County professionals have a great advantage in this regard. If they send the surveys only to program participants, and focus only on outcomes related to the program, the questions should be important to the recipients.

Keep the Questionnaire Short and Simple

Another common excuse for not responding to questionnaires is lack of time (Falconer & Hodgett, 1999). Numerous experiments have shown that questionnaire length, type of questions, and subject of questions are all factors in response rates (e.g., Kaldenberg, Koenig, & Becker, 1994; Berdie, 1973). In general, to obtain the highest response, do three things: use short questionnaires; use scales rather than have respondents write long answers to questions; and avoid questions of a personal nature whenever possible.

Use University Letterhead for Cover Letter

In the meta-analysis by Fox, Crask, and Kim (1988), the largest effect size of any technique for increasing response rates was to indicate university sponsorship of the survey (typically by using university letterhead). People have good feelings about the benefits provided by the university and place more importance on the survey as a result.

Send a Pre-Notification Letter

Sending a prenotification letter generated the second highest effect size in the meta-analysis by Fox, Crask, and Kim (1988). This may keep the recipient from inadvertently discarding the questionnaire upon receipt.

Personalize Letters

Use a person's name in the inside address and salutation of the letters (Dillman, 1978). Do not address letters to "Participant" or "Citizen of Yalobusha County." This is easy enough to do with modern word processing software. Chances are the county already has the participants' names and addresses in such a program to generate mailing labels. It is easy enough to do a mail-merge technique and put the names on the letters. Also, sign each letter in blue ink. You want the potential respondent to know you cared enough to sign each letter personally.

Use Stamps for Mailings and Return Envelopes

If you want people to treat your mail differently than "junk mail," use commemorative stamps on all envelopes and postcards. Do NOT use bulk mail, metered mail, or business reply mail (Harris & Guffey, 1978; McCrohan & Lowe, 1981).

Send a Follow-Up Letter or Postcard

Another common reason for not returning a questionnaire is that, "I forgot about it" or put it off because it wasn't a high priority at the time (Falconer & Hodgett, 1999). A follow-up letter or postcard reminds the person that they have not completed the questionnaire (Etzel & Walker, 1974). A second "thank you" in this correspondence may make them feel a social obligation to respond (Dillman, 1978).

Use Colored Paper for the Questionnaire

Several studies have shown this to lead to small increases in response rate. Also, some authors advocate making the questionnaire in booklet rather than flat form (Dillman, 1978).

Send Additional Follow-Up Mailings

Dillman (1978) says up to seven mailings may still show results in increasing the response. I've found that one or two follow-ups are often effective without dragging out the length of the study too long.

Make the Cover Letter Great

The cover letter should make the person realize why the survey is important and why their response is needed. Don't focus on reporting requirements of the county professional but on program improvement and impact. The cover letter may include the following:

- A date for submission (Has been shown to increase response rate in some studies; but don't call it a cutoff date);
- A promise of a future incentive (Don't promise if you can't deliver);
- Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements such as confidentiality, ability to quit at any time, benefits received, etc. (These differ by institution.);
- Directions about what to do with a completed survey. (For example, "return in the enclosed, stamped, self-addressed envelope");
- A "thank you in advance" for participating;
- A handwritten postscript asking for their response. (Not shown to be effective in the meta-analysis by Fox, Crask, and Kim; but recommended by some experts.)

Monetary Incentives?

Studies vary on the benefits of monetary incentives. Several show an increase in response rate with small incentives (up to $1) but a decreasing return as the amount goes up. I've heard that some people recommend a stick of gum or packet of instant coffee, but there is disagreement as to incentives being effective. Armstrong (1975) said that, overall, an incentive is less important than the other items mentioned above. Salant and Dillman (1994) indicated that incentives should be a first option. According to Salant and Dillman (1994) response rates will increase with amount of incentive, especially when combined with multiple contacts.

Second, Check for Nonresponse Bias

Once you have done all of the things necessary to obtain a good response rate, those completed surveys will start rolling in quickly. Sometimes the rate is not as good as you would like (at or near 100%), so you start to worry about nonresponse bias. Miller and Smith (1983) wrote an article in the *Journal of Extension* that is still widely cited about handling nonresponse issues. I will briefly summarize these below. Perhaps I can expand on these if I am allowed to write a "Hear it from the Board" next year.

Ignore Nonrespondents

While this is the most common approach used by county professionals (based on my experience), it is the least scientifically acceptable. I recommend this approach only be used with response rates of 90% or above.

Compare Respondents to Population

County professionals may have access to data regarding the general population being studied. Then they can use these data to see how similar the respondents are to the population; perhaps allowing their results to be more generalizable.

Compare Respondents to Nonrespondents

This technique is possible when the county professional has information about the characteristics of the respondents and nonrespondents. These characteristics should be related to the factors covered in the questionnaire.

Compare Early to Late Respondents

This technique is the most "iffy" of those proposed by Miller and Smith (1983). (Some of the references they cite do not advocate this technique, e.g., Newman, 1962.) The only time I recommend using this technique is when the evaluator has information that the technique works with this particular population and type of questionnaire (Lin & Schaeffer, 1995).

"Double Dip" Respondents

This technique involves taking a sample of nonrespondents and contacting them in person or by telephone to obtain answers to some or all of the questions on the questionnaire. While this is often the most costly in terms of time and effort to the evaluator, it is probably the most sound scientifically. (Some would argue that you are combining methods with this technique, which may skew results.)

Summary

Conducting follow-up of programs using mailed questionnaires is important enough that we shouldn't shy away from it. Using a few proven techniques to improve response rates and check for nonresponse bias can make follow-up mail surveys more reliable and useful.

On the other hand, alternatives are available and their feasibility should be explored. At Mississippi State University, we have used our Social Science Research Center's telephone survey unit to conduct several surveys via telephone during the past few years. This technique has been successful for us but is something we use more with statewide programs than local programs.

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