

**Case article** Incentives  
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## **Incentives *cui bono*, or who needs 'em?**

It never ceases to amaze me how, whenever setting about doing a postal survey, clients always ask about incentives. It's not a major issue when we are doing telephone or household surveys, so why does it always crop up with postal ones? It's not as if their respective response rates are that much different; a standard in-home pre-selected random sample of addresses might yield a strike rate of 60%+ while a reasonable return rate for a postal survey could lie between 30-50%....and then it struck me.... we rarely know the strike rate for telephone or quota controlled surveys (indeed it may even be irrelevant or misleading with respect to quota samples) because unlike pre-selected samples or postal mail-outs it is not always so easy, or cheap, to establish just how many people in the initial sample frame were contacted meaningfully. For postal surveys this information is particularly accessible; we have an initial mail-out list of 4000 addresses and we got back 1200, so the response rate is 30%.....simple.

'But this appears to be low, so let's talk incentives!' And this is my somewhat extreme rant on the issue; it's extreme because I really do feel that the subject needs much more exploration and something in this case note might get you thinking.

## The dilemma

Generally, the primary aim of any sampling and fieldwork regime is to achieve as representative a sample as possible, but that does not mean necessarily achieving the highest possible response rate....though 100% would be good! If anything, one is seeking to achieve the broadest spread of response across all the demographics of the survey universe. Will incentives deal with this?...who really knows? It comes down to one simple issue - while an incentive might boost response rate, will it make the final sample more or less representative? Or to put it more bluntly, are the views and characteristics of those who have taken part simply to win a prize likely to be the same as those who would have taken part without there being an incentive? I know we might be talking about an increase in response rate of maybe 1 or 2%, but if that 1 or 2% is concentrated in a particularly incentive-driven part of the sample - say possibly teenagers - then it could have an impact on the results.

## Incentives in practice

The standard set of incentives is not particularly helpful because we have misunderstood what the very word 'incentive' originally meant. We will return to this later. The good thing about current incentives is that they have little influence on response rates.... bad for the concept, but good for the representativeness of the achieved sample. The effectiveness of any incentive lies in how well it encourages the 'right' or 'targeted' people to respond. And if they don't work, this suggests that there are serious weaknesses with the current incentives on offer.

The most common incentive is the prize draw; this has two aspects, namely the 'prize', and the 'draw'. Since it is rarely possible to offer every respondent a prize for taking part, or at least a prize that is of any merit, then the standard approach is to offer respondents the **chance to win** a major prize. Such prize draws can present moral and religious problems to a sizeable proportion of the population; indeed I remember not so long ago that we had to introduce an element of skill into the draw (write in no more than twenty words why you like living in XXXburgh) otherwise we fell foul of gambling laws. And to be totally realistic most respondents can see that their chances of winning are not that great.

As for the **'prize'**, it has to be something which will encourage but not skew participation. Simply, while an i-pod may attract teenagers, it is unlikely to stimulate the over '70's; encouraging participation in a survey on leisure pursuits would seriously compromise its results if the incentive were a year's free cinema tickets. Sometimes the prize is presented more as a group or 'community' challenge; the street with the highest response rate will get £1000 to spend on whatever local improvement it wants; the company department with the highest response rate in the employee survey will get a free night out on the town. Frankly, such group options require a degree of sense of common good or camaraderie which rarely exists, and in all likelihood is only felt by those who would take part in the survey anyway.

While I always suggest to clients that they should think about offering to send participants a summary of the survey findings, most dismiss this out of hand; "they will not be interested in seeing the results" is the common response, to which I have to ask myself, then why did they bother to complete the survey in the first place?

Over and above such concerns there is a technical dimension which is of particular relevance to postal surveys. Any prize draw needs a winner and so valuable space on the questionnaire, normally half a page, has to be sacrificed to the collection of respondent contact details and draw regulations. The former requirement can lead possible respondents to question the confidentiality of the survey.

## **So what is an incentive then?**

'Incentive' has a tortuous Latin derivation, which possibly comes from *incinere* or *incentivum* which relate to 'striking up', or 'setting the tune' and *canare* to 'sing'. I interpret this in today's idioms as being 'something which gets everybody singing from the same hymn sheet', or 'getting everyone tuned in'. Seems to me a bit like that in-word **engagement**. I think it helps to see incentives, not as blunt and stand-alone inducements to participate, but rather as **inherent attributes** of the survey which themselves justify the need, and engender the desire, to take part. In this light the most powerful incentives come in the forms of

- Telling respondents what the survey is all about
- Making sure the topics are relevant to the respondent
- Keeping everything direct, simple, and to-the-point

- Offering alternative ways of participating for those with health, mental, language or other difficulties
- Offering feedback.....

....yes, that's it, the best incentive is to produce a good questionnaire and survey method (see my earlier wee diatribe on survey abuse) where the respondent comes first. Remember, in most cases respondents give their opinion and their time for free; the greatest incentive then is to show **respondent respect**. If this is done, then the survey will be relevant, hence so will its results. In this case a summary of the results can then be offered to all participants....both a good incentive and excellent for generating **engagement**.

PS. If you still want a prize draw, for whatever reason, then consider positioning it as a 'thank you for taking part' rather than as a 'hey, look what you could win'. In that way you are showing some respondent respect.

## **Reductio ad absurdum**

Perhaps the best way to think about incentives is to extend the old adage 'You can take a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink'...so much then for incentivising it! But if you think about incentives in the way I have been setting out, then maybe, just maybe, you can make it thirsty! Indeed, to take this to the extreme, perhaps it is useful to visualise the ideal survey as one which is so relevant and so easy to complete that respondents are queuing up to take part; that is, the incentive is not an add-on goody but is embedded in all stages of the survey process. To push the Latin to the limit, if appreciated and applied properly, incentives should be a *sine qua non* of any survey, not its *deus ex machina*!

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