Response Rates for Mail Surveys of Nonprofit Organizations: A Review and Empirical Test

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Response Rates for Mail Surveys of Nonprofit Organizations: A Review and Empirical Test

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The failure of a substantial portion of mail survey recipients to respond to invitations to participate in research projects raises issues of nonresponse error. Because this error is difficult to quantify, survey researchers seek high rates of return to signal legitimacy and reduce questions regarding nonresponse bias. Research on survey method indicates that the design of the survey research process has a measurable influence on the rate of survey returns. This article focuses on three aspects of research design that are expected to influence mail survey returns in surveys of nonprofit organizations: questionnaire complexity, use of Federal Express versus standard mail, and the use of monetary incentives. Using an experimental design, the research concludes that questionnaire complexity and the use of monetary incentives generate no difference in returns, whereas the use of Federal Express to deliver the survey to nonprofit executives has a measurable positive effect.

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Researchers who study nonprofit organizations draw on a wide range of empirical research methods. One common approach—geared toward comparing the same information for a large number of cases—is the survey research method. The general approach involves defining a population of

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cases that are the topic of study, creating a list of those cases (the sampling frame), selecting a random sample of those cases, and collecting data on the sampled cases. Adherents to this method hold that random selection of cases from the sampling frame provides the best chance that the selected cases will be representative of the population. To the extent that the selected cases are representative, researchers can validly infer characteristics of the larger population based on the characteristics of the sample.

A number of circumstances can create differences between the characteristics of the sample and characteristics of the population. Survey researchers term this difference *error* or *bias*, and they pay particular attention to it because this error compromises their ability to make valid population claims from their sample. One source of error, known technically as *sampling variability*, is bad luck— a random selection of elements occasionally produces a sample that differs substantially from the population. In theory, this kind of error is eliminated if one averages the error over a large number of samples. In practice, however, researchers take their chances with one random draw.

Additional error can creep into a survey project in a number of ways. One prominent source of error, and the main topic underlying this article, is known as *nonresponse bias*. For almost any survey project, a proportion of selected cases will choose not to participate. If the cases that respond to the survey are somehow different from the cases that do not respond, error is introduced into the sample. If the differences are severe, the bias can compromise a researcher's ability to make valid claims about the population of interest.

Unfortunately, because the interview or questionnaire is the means by which we learn about the cases, the failure of some cases to submit to an interview or respond to a survey usually means that we have very limited information about nonrespondents. Without more information, we cannot compare the characteristics of respondents and nonrespondents to determine the seriousness of nonresponse bias. Researchers sometimes compare the characteristics of respondents to known characteristics of the population, but this rarely addresses the issue of research-relevant differences between respondents and nonrespondents. Consequently, to satisfy their own concerns and the potential concerns of their readers, researchers try to attain as high a rate of return on their surveys as possible. When the return rate reaches 100%, there is no nonresponse and no threat of difference between respondents and nonrespondents. However, absent a true measure of differences between respondents and nonrespondents, a low rate of return raises concern about

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Foundation, and the Mott Foundation. This team has been engaged in a multiyear study of fund-raising and administrative costs by nonprofit organizations, involving analysis of Form 990 data, collection and analysis of original survey data, and case studies. This article is a research note from this project. We anticipate that the substantive work stemming from this project will not only illustrate how nonprofit organizations spend their money but also point out the difficulties organizations have in tracking and reporting their various expenses. We acknowledge helpful commentary from Elizabeth Boris and four anonymous *NVSQ* reviewers, as well as the encouragement of Steven Rathgeb Smith.

potentially serious nonresponse bias. Even though true nonresponse bias may be minimal, a low return rate raises serious questions for many researchers. That is, valid or not, the survey return rate is frequently interpreted as a proxy for response bias—the lower the proportion of returns, the greater the threat of bias. For this reason, claims from survey projects with low return rates are frequently viewed with skepticism or even rejected by the scholarly community.

The issue of improving return rates is common in the survey research literature. However, except for Smith's (1997) comparison of the characteristics of responding and nonresponding peace nonprofits and her subsequent discussion of the prospects of response bias, and Kennedy and Vargus's (2001) overview of challenges of survey research in philanthropic research, the issue is virtually absent from the nonprofits literature. This article helps to address this research gap. This article is presented in three sections. First, we provide a brief overview of relevant issues and research on survey return rates. Second, we advance three hypotheses regarding how specific methodological choices might influence the rate of survey returns among nonprofit organizations. Third, we report on the results of an experiment designed to test those hypotheses. We conclude with a discussion of survey returns and the results of our experiment.

NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND SURVEY RETURNS

What constitutes an acceptable return rate? Research methods textbooks differ in their guidelines, although most argue strongly for securing a high rate of return as a means of minimizing nonresponse bias. Babbie (1990) contended that a return of 50% is adequate, although Bailey (1987) set the adequacy bar at 75%. More recently, Schutt (1999) instructed students that "a response rate below 60 percent is a disaster" and concluded that "it is hard to justify the representativeness of the sample if more than a third failed to respond" (pp. 254-255).

Unfortunately, the standards for acceptable return rates are shaped as much by how many responses a researcher *can* get as much as how many she or he *should* get. A number of factors influence the rate of return for a given research project, and the survey methods literature includes a number of caveats regarding return rate standards. The literature points to two factors that particularly influence the expected rate of return: the type of case or subject being investigated, and the method of data collection.

The type of subject under investigation regards the unit of analysis in a given study. The two most common subjects in survey research are individuals (i.e., people) and organizations (i.e., establishments or institutions, including businesses, nonprofits, governments, or major components of one of these). Surveys of individuals ask questions about individuals, such as their sex, age, or annual income. Surveys of organizations are also answered by individuals, but the questions are about the characteristics of organizations,

such as the number of employees, date of incorporation, or annual budget. Surveys of organizations typically receive substantially lower return rates than surveys of individuals, with 15% return rates sometimes reaching a level of acceptability for organizational surveys (Baldauf, Reisinger, & Moncrief, 1999; Tomaskovic-Devey, Leiter, & Thompson, 1994). Because organizational surveys are usually delivered to workplaces, factors such as preoccupation with work, confidentiality of information, or workplace rules and policies cause organizations to return surveys at low rates (Greer, Chuchinprakarn, & Seshadri, 2000).

A second factor influencing return rates is the way data are collected. The three most common methods are face-to-face interviews, phone interviews, and mailed questionnaires. Choice of method in a given project often hinges on the trade-off between costs and likely return rates. Face-to-face interviews, which require precontacts to arrange personal meetings, result in the highest rates of return. However, the multiple contacts, travel, and time involved in this method make it the most expensive. Phone interviews, even if long-distance charges are not involved, are time-consuming as well. Use of computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology for delivery and recording of responses in a phone survey can also increase costs. Nonetheless, refusals are generally higher in a phone survey than in requests for face-to-face interviews, and the costs are typically somewhat lower. Mailed questionnaires are the least expensive method in terms of time and money, but they typically yield the lowest return rates. Because mailed questionnaires allow researchers to obtain a large amount of information from a large sample, give respondents time to consider their answers, potentially allow respondents to remain anonymous, help reduce interviewer bias, and have geographic flexibility (Greer et al., 2000), mailed questionnaires are a common choice among survey researchers. Indeed, Kennedy and Vargus (2001; see also Christianson & Tortora, 1995) noted that mail surveys are the single most popular form of self-administered survey. Because low return rates and the consequent threat of nonresponse bias is among the greatest challenges to the success of mail surveys, the issue of improved return rates becomes paramount.

In this article, we consider the issue of mailed surveys to nonprofit organizations. To gain an understanding of the use of mailed surveys to collect primary research data on nonprofit organizations, we reviewed articles published in *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ)* from 1996 to 2001. Table 1 summarizes our results.

This summary prompted several observations among our research team. First, we were surprised to find only 17 articles based on mail surveys over a 6-year period in a leading nonprofits research journal. This finding suggests either that mail surveys are not as common as we suspected, or that nonprofit research based on mail surveys does not lead to publication in academic journals. The question of the prominence of different methods of inquiry in the nonprofits field requires future research.

Table 1. Research Based on Mailed Surveys to Nonprofit Organizations Published in *Nonprofit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 1996-2001

Authors	*Type of Organization*	*Sample Size*	*Responses*	*Return Rate (%)*
Froelich and Knoepfle (1996)	Cultural and human services nonprofits	702	426	61
Hall and Hall (1996)	Nonprofits funded by the Campaign for Human Development	360	360	100
Sheehan (1996)	Ohio nonprofits	639	101	16
Emanuele (1997)	Michigan nonprofits	Not reported	Not reported[a]	Unknown
Benjamin (1997)	Grantmakers under the sponsorship of the Donor's Forum	150	72	48
Nitterhouse (1997)	Small religious nonprofits	Unknown	35	Unknown
Smith (1997)	Nonprofits working for peace	811	411	51
Grønbjerg and Nelson (1998)	Illinois human service organizations	1,410[b]	480	34
Raskoff and Sundeen (1998)	Secondary schools	293	Not reported	55
Saidel (1998)	New York nonprofits	400	249	62
Cordes, Henig, Twombly, and Saunders (1999)	United Way affiliated nonprofits in Washington, D.C., metro area	258	102	40
McNutt and Boland (1999)	Chapters of a social work professional association	54	48	89
Alexander, Nank, and Stivers (1999)	Ohio youth service organizations	239	124	52
Crittenden (2000)	Social service organizations	58	31	53
Froelich, Knoepfle, and Pollak (2000)	Nonprofits, requests for audited financials	933	399	43
Olson (2000)	Members of the Council of Independent Colleges	420	43	10
Edwards, Mooney, and Heald (2001)	Nonprofits in a mid-Atlantic community	56	39	70

a. Emanuele does not report sample sizes and number of returns but does assert that "A potentially serious problem was encountered in the responses to this project" (p. 58).
b. Sample size is not reported in this article but can be found in Grønbjerg, 1994.

Second, we observed a range of return rates that appear to be related to the nature of the population studied. When the population is associated with a larger identifying body, such as Hall and Hall's (1996) study of grantees and McNutt and Boland's (1999) study of association chapters, the return rates are quite high. Olson's (2000) study is an exception, however, wherein member institutions reported at very low levels. Typically, the lower return rates are found in random samples of nonprofits not associated with an identifying body.

Third, we observed a wide range of return rates for various projects, with a median of 52%. However, this median value may be an overestimate because the larger studies tend to have lower rates of return, presumably because smaller studies are more amenable to extensive and personal follow-up of nonrespondents. If we remove Hall and Hall because their respondents were required by their funder to participate, remove Emanuele (1997) and Nitterhouse (1997) due to missing information, and assume 161 responses for Raskoff and Sundeen (1998), the 14 projects surveyed 6,423 entities and heard back from 2,686 of them.[1] This results in a grand return rate of 42%. Although the textbooks describe this standard as one that likely reflects serious nonresponse bias, only 3 of the 17 studies offer a defense for their relatively low return rates. Smith (1997) found that her respondents and nonrespondents are similar on a variety of measures and concludes that nonresponse bias stemming from low returns is less of a concern for surveys of organizations than for surveys of individuals. Cordes, Henig, Twombly, & Saunders (1999) cited several other studies (i.e., Haycock, 1992; Henig, DeCamp, Kugler, & Saunders, 1995) as part of their conclusion that return rates of 25% to 50% are not atypical for organizational surveys. Crittenden (2000) claimed that his 53% return rate compares favorably with other strategic management mail survey results. On the other hand, Edwards, Mooney, & Heald (2001) touted their 70% return rate as "rather high for organizational surveys" (p. 449).

Finally, drawing on Crittenden's (2000) conclusion regarding the comparison of his nonprofits survey to work on other kinds of organizations, we observed that the mail return rates found in surveys of nonprofit organizations are not atypical of other types of organizational surveys. Paxson, Dillman, and Tarnai (1995) summarized return rates for 26 mail surveys conducted among businesses. They found that response rates averaged 51%, but ranged from 26% to 95%. Additional evidence comes from three other *NVSQ* studies that rely on mail surveys, but do not study nonprofit organizations. Marx (1999) studied businesses as part of his study of corporate giving and achieved a return rate of 10%. Litz and Stewart (2000) studied hardware stores as part of their study on community involvement and achieved a return rate of 45%. Brudney and Kellough (2000) studied state agencies as part of a study on volunteerism and managed a return rate of 54%. These studies suggest that the low return rates on mail surveys to nonprofit organizations are not unique

to the nonprofit studies field, but are part of an overall problem of achieving high return rates on organizational mail surveys.

IMPROVING RETURNS

Most of the mail surveys discussed in this article adhere generally to an approach outlined by Dillman (1978, 2000). The Dillman method is premised on a theory of social exchange, wherein survey researchers receive survey responses in exchange for information, monetary or nonmonetary incentives, or goodwill. Consequently, Dillman stressed the worth of explaining the value of the research program to potential respondents and of sharing information and other incentives. Dillman also outlined a process of precontacts, mailouts of attractive cover letters and carefully constructed surveys, follow-ups with postcards or reminder letters, additional follow-ups with personal contacts via phone, and grateful acknowledgement of the receipt of completed surveys.

This general method has become the standard in the survey research field in the United States and has spurred a field of research on how such factors as the nature and timing of incentives, the length and complexity of questionnaires, the color and timing of reminder postcards, and the number of follow-up phone calls influence return rates of mail surveys. However, study results are not always consistent, varying substantially depending on the unit of analysis and survey conditions. Turley (1999) argued that attempts to make generalizations about responses from individual and organizational surveys or general and special interest populations may not be appropriate. Rather, she argued that response rates are affected by a combination of factors and interactive characteristics that are not stable across sampled populations. These observations argue strongly for specific research on mail surveys among nonprofit organizations so that nonprofits researchers can make informed choices in the development of their methodologies. To begin the debate, we offer three hypotheses regarding the influence of design choices on return rates of mail surveys to nonprofit organizations.

Hypothesis 1. A shorter, less complicated survey will result in higher return rates than a longer, more complicated survey.

In his review of the survey length question, Mangione (1995) concluded that most research on survey length is based on surveys of individuals, and that the results are mixed. Only a handful of studies have investigated the survey length/complexity question among organizations. Jobber (1989) experimented with differences between a nine-page and a five-page questionnaire in a business survey and found no statistically significant differences between return rates for the two questionnaires. On the other hand, Greer et al. (2000) distributed surveys of varying pages and questions to firms and found higher

returns among questionnaires with fewer pages and questions. Similarly, Diamantopoulos and Schlegelmilch (1996) found that questionnaire content and format are particularly important to getting organizations to respond to mail surveys.

Our own experience in the nonprofits survey research field suggests that nonprofit executives are busy and may not make time to fill out a lengthy or complicated survey when they might otherwise fill out a simpler one. We also theorize that detailed surveys that require executives to consult internal financial documents or annual reports, or that require multiple people in an organization to fill out different parts of a survey, will result in lower returns. Absent past research on survey length among nonprofit mail surveys, we surmise that length and complexity are likely to influence the rate of returns.

Hypothesis 2. A survey delivered to a specific respondent via Federal Express will result in more returns than a survey delivered to a specific respondent via regular mail.

Dillman (1978, 2000) stressed the value of sending surveys to the attention of specific respondents rather than generically to an organization or a title within an organization. This information is often generated from a precall to this person, which itself contributes to improved return rates (Dillman, Clark, & Sinclair, 1995). However, Dillman stressed only the value of first-class mailings over bulk mailings and gave no guidance on the value of registered or other specialty mail delivery.

Nonetheless, Dillman's methods stress the value of professionalism and the creation of a package that emphasizes the value of a returned survey. We theorize that the delivery of a survey via Federal Express (especially after alerting respondents about the survey via phone before the mailout) will help create and reinforce an image of professionalism and project importance. In addition, the uniqueness of the delivery will distinguish the survey and its cover letter from most other business mail received on a given day.

Hypothesis 3a. A survey package that includes a $5 bill will result in more returns than a survey package that includes no financial incentives.

The use of financial incentives—especially up-front incentives with no guarantee of a returned survey—stems from Dillman's theory of social exchange. Sending a small amount of money (or other incentive) with a survey package is a goodwill gesture that puts the sponsor and questionnaire in a positive light and sets the stage for the respondent to reciprocate by completing the questionnaire. The value of small financial incentives has been demonstrated in surveys of individuals (James & Bolstein, 1990; Singer, VanHoewyk, & Maher, 2000) and organizations (Angur & Nataraajan, 1995; Armstrong & Yokum, 1994).

Hypothesis 3b. A survey package that includes a $5 bill and promises $50 donation for a completed survey will not produce a higher return rate than a survey package that includes a $5 bill only.

Research is mixed on the value of larger incentives and postreceipt payments. Dillman contended that postpayments change the survey relationship from an environment of social exchange to one of economic exchange, which may result in lower returns. Consistent with this thesis, James and Bolstein (1990) found that even a $1 incentive improved responses whereas a promise of $50 for a completed survey did not. Church (1993) concluded that incentives included with a survey to individuals is better than the promise of higher future returns. Consequently, we hypothesize that the promise of a $50 donation to organizations in return for a completed survey will not substantially influence the rate of return.

RESULTS FROM AN EMPIRICAL TEST

During the summer of 2001, we conducted an experiment aimed at testing the hypotheses developed in the previous section. The experiment was a pretest for a mail survey project on fund-raising and administrative costs among nonprofit organizations. We drew a random sample of nonprofit organizations that are recent filers of IRS Form 990. Because we were interested in studying organizations that are most likely to have and account for fund-raising and administrative costs, we limited the study to organizations with more than $100,000 in annual revenues. The sample was stratified by size and industry to increase our chances that the organizations in the study would be represented proportionally by size and industry of activity.

Our sample numbered 141 organizations. We obtained phone numbers for these organizations by consulting phone directories or searching the Internet for organizational web pages. We called the organizations to verify the mailing address, to obtain the name of an appropriate executive contact, and, if possible, to briefly describe the project with the executive contact. For some of the organizations, we were unable to reach any representative by phone. Several others had nonworking phone numbers, suggesting that the organization is inactive or defunct. Two specifically asked us not to include their organization in the study. At the end of the precall stage, we had 120 active organizations with executive contact names, most of whom had been alerted to the imminent arrival of our survey.

We randomly assigned the 120 cases to 1 of 12 different treatment conditions. These conditions are illustrated in Table 2.

The three main treatments—survey length/complexity, mode of delivery, and financial incentive—follow directly from the discussion of earlier hypotheses. The only treatment that bears additional discussion is the matrix versus no-matrix condition that constitutes our test of survey length and complexity.

Table 2. Number of Sample Organizations in Each Treatment Condition

	No Incentive		*$5 in Mailout*		*$5 in Mailout, Promise of $50*	
	Matrix	*No Matrix*	*Matrix*	*No Matrix*	*Matrix*	*No Matrix*
Fed-Ex	10	10	10	10	10	10
Plain envelope	10	10	10	10	10	10

More than a dozen nonprofit research professionals gave input on content and refinements to our survey instrument, but our final test of its appropriateness was a set of cognitive interviews with nonprofit executives. In these interviews, we sat with an executive and asked her (a female in all three cases) to read through the questionnaire and comment aloud on her reactions. The first seven pages of our eight-page instrument proceeded smoothly in all cases, but the eighth page—a matrix of fund-raising methods by expense information—met with much trepidation. Said one, "When I turned the page, my brain shut down." All three agreed that once they became familiar with the matrix it seemed much less intimidating, but they could not deny their initial reactions. Consequently, we sought to test whether the simplification of the instrument by elimination of this page (the no-matrix questionnaire) would result in higher returns.

Our survey packets included a cover letter that described the larger project, one of the two versions of the survey, and a self-addressed stamped return envelope.[2] As a good-faith effort to allow anonymity to organizations that wished to reply anonymously, we did not number the surveys or envelopes to track anonymous responses. Two out of three packets contained a $5 bill and a brief note reiterating our appreciation for returned surveys. Two weeks after sending out the surveys, we mailed a reminder postcard to all nonrespondents. After an additional 2 weeks, we mailed a new cover letter and replacement survey to nonrespondents. One week later, we called nonrespondents with an offer to fax an additional copy of the survey. Two weeks later, we called the nonrespondents a final time to request the return of the survey. By the end of the study period, we had received 60 completed surveys, a 50% return rate.

LENGTH AND COMPLEXITY OF SURVEY INSTRUMENT

One half of the study sample (60 organizations) received a seven-page instrument with questions that would not necessarily require them to consult internal records or reports. The other half of the sample received the same seven pages plus an additional page that substantially complicated the survey instrument. Of the 60 relatively short surveys, 32 surveys were returned (53.3%). Of the 60 longer surveys, 28 surveys were returned (46.7%). This

difference is not statistically significant at the .05 level (χ^2 = 0.533; critical value = 3.841) and does not lead to the conclusion that the shorter and less complicated instrument leads to greater returns. Hypothesis 1 is not supported.

MAIL VEHICLE

One half of the survey packets were mailed via Federal Express. The other half were mailed via regular mail in 9×12" white envelopes. Of the 60 packets sent via Federal Express, 37 were returned (61.7%). Of the 60 packets sent via regular mail, 23 surveys were returned (38.3%). This difference is statistically significant at the .05 level (χ^2 = 6.533) and approaches the critical value for $p < .01$ (6.635). Consequently, we conclude that use of Federal Express for the initial survey mailouts has a positive effect on returns. Hypothesis 2 is supported.[3]

FINANCIAL INCENTIVES

As indicated in Table 2, we divided the survey sample into three groups of 40 organizations so that we could test our two questions regarding financial incentives. Of the 40 that received no financial incentives, 19 surveys were returned (47.5%). Of the 40 that received a $5 bill with their survey, 18 surveys were returned (45.0%). This difference is not significant at the .05 level (χ^2 = 0.050) and is not substantial enough to claim a difference between treatment conditions. Consequently, Hypothesis 3a is not supported.

The remaining 40 organizations in the study sample received a $5 bill with their survey and a promise of a $50 donation to their organization on delivery of a completed survey. This condition resulted in 23 returned surveys (57.5%). Compared to the group that received the $5 and no promise of an additional donation, the difference in returns is not statistically significant at the .05 level (χ^2 = 1.251). Because we hypothesized that a promise of $50 would not raise returns substantially over the initial $5 prepayment, Hypothesis 3b is supported.[4]

These hypothesis tests rely on the assumption that the treatments are independent and do not work together to result in greater returns. Our design ensured that, for example, the group that received FedEx had the same number of $5 recipients as the group that received their survey packets via regular mail. However, this approach does not rule out the prospect that $5 and a FedEx packet combine to result in greater returns than the $5 or FedEx alone. Unfortunately, the small size of our treatment cells do not allow us to test for these kinds of interaction effects. We encourage future research that is able to investigate the influence of these potential interactions.

DISCUSSION

Quality survey research on the activities and behaviors of nonprofit organizations requires attention to the ability to successfully collect data from sampled organizations. Too often, survey researchers judge the success of their work on the raw numbers of returns and give short thrift to potential problems of nonresponse bias. However, even the most sophisticated data analysis cannot redeem a biased sample because the degree to which its conclusions can be applied to its population are unknown. Mail surveys of nonprofit organizations are at risk of rates of return that methodologists label as "unacceptable." What, then, can be done to improve return rates?

We raise this question in a time when nonprofit executives are inundated with surveys. Many nonprofit directors acknowledge the value of sector research, but even the most well-meaning leaders often cannot make room in their already busy schedules to respond to our requests for data. If at one time survey science inspired awe in our publics, and respondents felt honored to be drawn into survey samples, those days are gone. Despite desktop publishing advances that have increased the attractiveness and layout of questionnaires, the ability to personalize mass cover letters with mail merge procedures, an increasing array of options for following up with nonrespondents, and new modes for mass dissemination of relevant results, securing an adequate survey response rate is as hard now as ever.

Among a broad array of methodological questions that survey researchers confront, our research pointed to three issues that survey researchers contemplating data collection among nonprofit organizations should consider. The first issue concerns the length and complexity of the survey instrument. Although we found that the rates of return for our simpler and more complicated instruments were essentially the same, this finding almost certainly has its limits. We suspect that many more executives would take the time to fill out a 1-page questionnaire with four focused questions than would take the time to fill out a 20-page questionnaire that covered a broad array of organizational issues. However, we also suspect that most questionnaires are rather like ours—a moderate size survey that falls in between the extremes of short and long. Due to the results of our experiment, we chose to use the more complicated instrument in our broader study of administrative and fund-raising costs. The finding, however, points to a broader conclusion that nonprofit survey respondents are not put off by a moderately complex survey instrument. The reasons why some organizations choose not to respond lie elsewhere.

A second issue we take up in this article regards a strategy for signaling the professionalism and importance of a survey package: the use of Federal Express as a mail vehicle. We found that organizations that received the survey via FedEx were more likely to fill out and return the survey than organizations that received the survey through more conventional means. We suspect that this finding stems largely from the legitimacy conferred by the use of a mail source that people associate with important mail. We believe that receipt

of the survey via FedEx tells respondents that we think the survey is so important that we are willing to spend more money to get it there quickly. Consistent with Dillman's notion of social exchange, respondents reciprocate by treating the project seriously and returning the survey.

The third issue we confront in this article regards the reaction of nonprofit organizations to up-front monetary incentives and further promises of donations on completion of the survey. Our first hypothesis regarding monetary incentives argued that a $5 bill in the initial survey mailout would foster a sense of social obligation in respondents that resulted in the return of the survey. Our first indication that nonprofit executives may react differently than recipients of consumer surveys or business executives came in our cognitive interviews. We asked two of the three nonprofit executives who reviewed our survey instrument how they might react to finding $5 in the survey package, or to a promise of $50 for a completed survey. One interviewee found the prospect of monetary incentives appealing but was much more interested in the $50 donation than the $5 cash incentive. A second interviewee reacted very negatively to the prospect of finding $5 with her survey. She said that she would find this highly odd and would regard the whole project with new suspicion. She could not elaborate on why she felt so strongly, but her reaction was unmistakable. Consequently, we perhaps should not be surprised that the results of our experiment run contrary to findings of similar tests among consumers and business executives. In short, we found that including a $5 bill does not increase returns in a nonprofit mail survey.

However, consistent with hypothesis 3b, we also found that combining a $5 bill and a promise of an additional $50 for a completed survey does not result in a substantially increased number of returns. Interestingly, many of our early returns were from organizations that had received the $50 incentive, which led us toward a premature conclusion that the $50 incentive has an influence on return rates. However, over time, the additional follow-up with all the nonrespondents caused those organizations that had not been offered the larger incentive to "catch up" with those that had. This finding suggests a hypothesis for future research regarding methods for timely return of organizational surveys. However, if the eventual return of a survey is the ultimate project goal, and if the project includes substantial follow-up with nonrespondents, a $50 monetary incentive appears to have no effect.

In sum, our results suggest that the length and complexity of the survey instrument has minimal influence on returns of mail surveys among nonprofit organizations, and that nonprofits are nonresponsive to small incentives ($5) mailed with a survey and larger incentives ($50) promised after return of the survey. Certainly, the most interesting result is the conspicuous improvement in the response rates from using FedEx over standard mail. These results demonstrate the need to do further experiments with survey techniques in the nonprofit studies field. Despite the implications for project design indicated in our simple experiment, our work covers only three issues amid a large number of variables that potentially influence rates of survey return. As we

indicate in our review of *NVSQ* articles earlier, studies that focus on a captive audience, a smaller sample, or a smaller geographic area appear to have greater potential for higher returns. The salience of the study topic to potential respondents also has a likely effect on the potential for returned surveys, a factor that interacts in unknown ways with the variables investigated here.

Our best hope is that researchers will be able to match research on variability in return rates with their understanding of their sample and research design so as to maximize the number of survey returns. The goal is still a 100% return rate, although that goal is likely to forever elude our best research designs. Although a low return rate does not automatically indicate serious response bias, it raises all of the flags that come with it. Consequently, we urge nonprofit researchers to give serious thought to the issue of return rates when they design their studies and, where practical, to adopt those conventions that are likely to increase returns.

Notes

1. Hall and Hall's study is not a typical case of the mail surveys we described in this article because their respondents did not have the option not to participate in the study, resulting in a 100% return rate that artificially inflates the estimates of typical return rates among nonprofit organizations. In addition, Hall and Hall's article is based primarily on personal interviews with 19 of their respondents rather than the survey data collected from the full 360.

2. The cover letter described our project on fund-raising and administrative expenses and invited their participation in the broader study. It did not alert respondents to the varying treatment conditions.

3. Our 60 survey respondents included 7 anonymous respondents. Because we knew whether anonymous respondents sent back a matrix or no-matrix survey, anonymity does not influence our ability to test Hypothesis 1. However, it does present potential problems for the remaining tests. Based on information provided in the survey, we assigned anonymous respondents to their most likely cases. In some cases, we were quite certain of our assignments, but in other cases we were somewhat less sure. Our conclusions regarding the influence of FedEx rests on the correct assignment of two particular anonymous cases: one that we are reasonably certain of and one that was assigned by our best guess. If both assignments are wrong, the (χ^2 value for the test of Hypothesis 2 falls below the critical value.

4. Misassignment of anonymous cases is again a potential issue for Hypothesis 3b. At worst, three $5 incentive organizations are incorrectly assigned $5 plus $50 incentive organizations, resulting in a significant difference between treatments and rejection of Hypothesis 3b. Even two misassignments result in rejection at the <Ip < .05 level, but one misassignment does not. We like to think that we got all three assignments right, but we have room for error in one assignment to justify our claim of support for Hypothesis 3b.

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