2015 American Community Survey Mail Contact Strategy Modification Test

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AAPOR 71st Annual Conference
May 12 -15 2016
Austin, Texas

Introduction

The Census Bureau conducted the 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) Mail Contact Strategy Test to evaluate several modifications to mail materials and contact strategies in an effort to improve self-response to the Internet and mail modes. In this experiment, we tested the following:

- Eliminating the prenotice letter and sending the initial package four days earlier.
- Strengthening reminder contacts by: making the URL to the survey more prominent; highlighting the User ID; using direct wording; and stating the mandatory nature of the survey.
- Testing the impact of sending the additional reminder postcard to all nonrespondents (including CATI eligible).

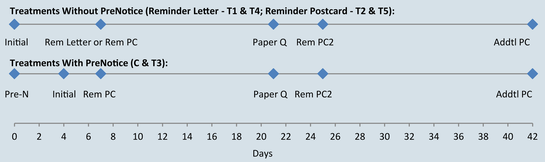
Experimental Design

Figure 1. List of Mailings by Treatment

Treatment	Prenotice	Initial Package Early	Initial Package Normal Time	1st Reminder Letter	1st Reminder Postcard	Additional Addresses Get 3rd Postcard
Control	X		X		X	
T1		X		X		
T2		X			X	
T3	X		X		X	X
T4		X		X		X
T5		X			X	X

Sample size: Control ~226,000 addresses and each Test Treatment ~12,000 addresses

Figure 2. Timing and Sequence of Mailings for the Treatments with a Prenotice versus those Without



Research Methodology

The goal of the research was to study the impact of the changes on self-response behavior by comparing return rates between treatments and to conduct a cost analysis to estimate savings.

Calculated total self-response, Internet, and Mail return rates using following formula:

$$\text{Return Rate} = \frac{\text{\# of sample addresses that provided a response}}{\text{Total \# of eligible sample addresses}} * 100$$

Cost model used estimated workloads and average mailing and operation costs to predict cost differences.

Universes: RQ#1-4: Total # of mailable and deliverable sampled addresses
RQ#5: Total # CATI eligible addresses

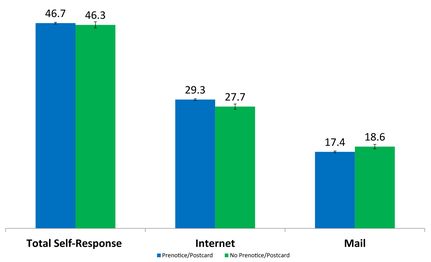
Source: 2015 Mail Contact Strategy Test, using data from April 2015 ACS panel

Results

#1- Can we eliminate the prenotice letter?

Maybe. Total self-response statistically the same. Higher mail, but lower Internet return rates without the prenotice.

Figure 2. Return Rates by Mode Before Nonresponse Follow-up: Prenotice vs No Prenotice

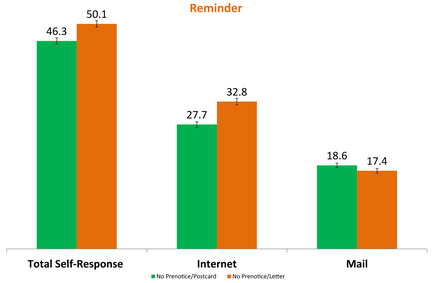


Prenotice Letter

#2- Should we use a postcard or letter reminder?

Reminder Letter. Total self-response 3.8 percentage points higher. Higher Internet return rates, but lower mail return rates.

Figure 3. Return Rates by Mode Before Nonresponse Follow-up: No Prenotice Treatments -- Postcard Reminder vs Letter Reminder



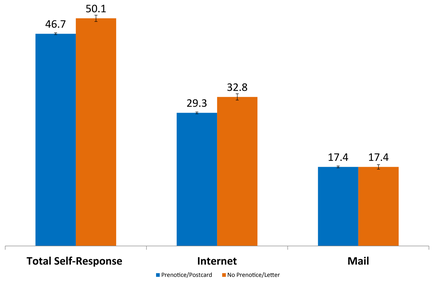
Postcard Reminder

Letter Reminder

#3- Can we increase Internet response for the No Prenotice group by using a reminder letter?

Yes. Total self-response 3.4 percentage points higher with letter. Higher Internet return rates and mail rates statistically the same.

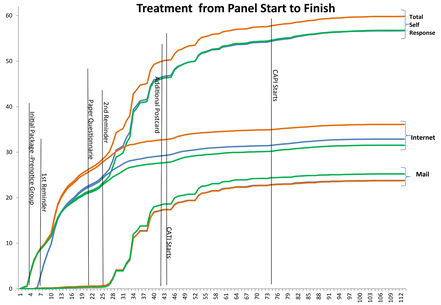
Figure 4. Return Rates by Mode Before Nonresponse Follow-up: Prenotice / Postcard vs No Prenotice / Letter



#4- How do the strategies compare throughout the data collection cycle?

Letter reminder takes off around day 10 and remains higher throughout cycle.

Figure 5. Total Self-Response, Internet, and Mail Return Rates by Treatment from Panel Start to Finish



#5- Can we save money by eliminating the prenotice and using the reminder letter?

Yes, estimated savings between $5.7 million and $9.0 million!

Figure 6. Simulated Estimate of Annual Cost Savings-Difference (Prenotice/Postcard-No Prenotice/Letter)

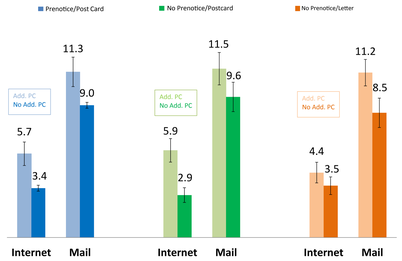
	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Mail savings	$1,381,000	$1,357,000
CATI/CAPI savings	$4,282,000	$7,713,000
Total savings	$5,663,000	$9,070,000

Source: DiFiglia (2015)

#6- Should we send additional reminder postcards to CATI eligible addresses?

Maybe. Appears to improve return rates, however more research is necessary to research cost effectiveness.

Figure 7. Return Rates by Contact Strategy by Mode after CATI Follow-UP (universe: CATI sample addresses) **Additional Postcard Reminder VS No Additional Postcard Reminder**



Conclusions

- **Eliminating the prenotice:**
  - No effect on total self-response
  - Lower Internet return rates and higher mail return rates
  - The prenotice is an additional mailing that prompts earlier Internet response
- **Replacing postcard with modified letter for 1st reminder:**
  - Increased total self-response
  - Higher Internet response lower mail response
  - Encouraged earlier response to Internet – appears to pick up some would-be mail responders in Internet and additional self-responders
- **Eliminating prenotice AND using modified letter reminder:**
  - Increased total self-response
  - Higher Internet response, with no effect on mail response
  - Results in cost savings
  - Implemented in August 2015 ACS panel
- **Sending additional reminder postcard to CATI eligible addresses:**
  - Increased self-response return rates
  - No impact on CATI response
  - Further research needed to determine cost effectiveness

For more information see report at: https://www.census.gov/acs/www/Downloads/library/2015_Clark_03.pdf

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