

CAN MAIL SURVEY RECIPIENTS BE TEASED INTO RESPONDING?

ABSTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

The outer envelope of a mail survey is the first item noticed by a mail survey recipient. If the messages conveyed by the outer envelope do not arouse the interest of the recipient, the mailing may be discarded unopened.

Research on the outer envelope of a mail survey has focused primarily on form of postage, addressing procedures, the sponsor listed in the return address, and envelope size. No attention, however, has been given to the use of a teaser on the outer envelope of a mail survey.

A teaser is typically a short question printed on the outer envelope that is designed to lure the recipient into examining the contents of the envelope. While direct marketers claim that a well-designed envelope teaser can significantly increase the response to a promotional mailing, it is not clear how an envelope teaser would affect the response to a mail survey. It, on the one hand, could stimulate survey response by arousing the curiosity of potential respondents. On the other hand, it could dampen survey response by causing the survey envelope to look too much like direct mail.

The purpose of the present study is to examine how an envelope teaser affects the response to a mail survey.

RESEARCH METHOD

Subjects

Some U.S. homeowners who paid a one-time mortgage insurance premium to the Federal

Housing Administration (FHA) were eligible for a refund of the unused portion of the prepaid premium. A list of all California residents who were entitled to a refund ($N = 13,000$) was obtained from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). A systematic random sampling procedure was used to select 200 people from this list for a mail survey.

Experimental procedures

Persons selected for the study were randomly assigned to either a control group or treatment group. Both groups were mailed a questionnaire, cover letter, and return envelope in a plain white outer envelope that used a first class postage stamp, had the return home address of one of the authors, and had the addressee's name and address typed directly on the envelope. Only the treatment group had the following teaser hand stamped in black ink on the outer envelope: DID YOU KNOW YOU ARE ENTITLED TO MORE MONEY?

RESULTS

The envelope teaser increased the response rate almost three-fold (from 8% to 21%), and it dramatically increased the speed of response: 47% of the treatment group responded within the first week of the survey while none of the control group responded within that period. While the two groups did not exhibit any significant difference on the item omission rate, they did differ when sample bias was examined. Median tests revealed that those responding to the envelope teaser were younger ($p < .03$) and had less income ($p < .08$) than those responding to the control appeal.