

Using Incentives to Boost Response Rates

People are one of our greatest sources of information and data. Individuals provide data by answering questionnaires, focus group, and interview questions; by taking skills and knowledge tests; and through personal testimonials. Adequate response rates to these data collection methods are imperative for the data to be informative and useful. To ensure that sufficient, quality data are collected, a common practice is to use incentives to increase response rates.

Why Use Incentives?

The use of an incentive:

- Improves response rates through increased participant buy-in,
- Increases good will between respondents and the agency collecting the data, and
- Recognizes the value of the time respondents contribute when participating in data collection.

Types of Incentives

The two most basic types of incentives are financial and material. Financial incentives include things such as cash, gift certificates, coupons, or financial donations to a charity. Material incentives include non-monetary prizes, gifts, or resources such as books, DVDs, and CDs. Material incentives do not increase response rates as much as financial incentives.

When deciding on what kind of incentive to offer, consider the characteristics, motivations, and interests of your target group and the value the potential respondents place on incentives. For example, imagine that an organization wants to administer a survey to rural educators. Because of their geographical barriers, respondents would likely value a cash incentive as opposed to a gift certificate to a restaurant in the city.

Timing of Incentives

Incentives can be given to respondents in a variety of ways and at different times during the data collection process. Some options, with pros and cons, are listed below:

Time Incentive Offered	Pros	Cons
At the completion of the data collection	Everyone is rewarded for participating	Rewarding everyone can be expensive
By lottery (all participants are entered in random drawing for reward)	Costs are controlled because a fixed number of incentives is used	Not everyone is rewarded. Lotteries are not legal in all places so need to check state laws and policies.
As a prepayment (small monetary incentive sent with the initial invitation to participate)	Everyone is rewarded for participating	Individuals may elect not to participate even though reward was prepaid

Pre-paid, unconditional incentives that are given **before** an individual participates in any type of data collection seem to have a large impact on response rates, especially when used with written and mail questionnaires. There is no significant difference in response rates between \$5 or \$20 prepayments, so lower dollar amounts are appropriate with prepaid incentives.

However, with online questionnaires, a prepaid incentive is more difficult to implement, and therefore incentives for completing an online questionnaire are usually given **after** the completion of the questionnaire. In the case of a questionnaire administered online, a promised incentive may still increase response rates, although to a lesser extent than a pre-paid incentive.

Important things to keep in mind

- Look for internal and external sources to finance the use of incentives. For example, include incentives in the budget, solicit cash and/or instructional materials from local or state health organizations, or solicit gifts from area merchants (chain stores and outlets or local vendors).
- When choosing the type of incentive think about:
 - Who is responding? (Is the respondent a child, individual, family, school, or group? What are the demographics of your respondents?)
 - What is the mode of the survey? (Is it online, in-person, mail, phone interview?)
 - What types of questions are asked? (Are questions embarrassing, low risk, easy, high risk?)
 - What is the length of the survey? How much time is needed to complete the survey?
 - Is the survey mandatory?
- A pre-paid incentive should be sent only once; sending it more than once has not shown to increase response rates.

Sources:

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