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How to Get a Respectable Response Rate

$$\frac{\text{\# that answered}}{\text{\# you contacted}} = \text{Response Rate}$$

It can get more complicated than this, but let's start with this basic assumption. The higher the response rate, the better the data describes the people in the sample or census.

If you get a low response rate to your survey, your survey could suffer from "nonresponse error."¹ In other words, your results will be biased towards describing your respondents and ignoring those who did not respond.

While there is no "magic number" response rate, you should try for a response rate of at least 70 percent for most surveys. Generally speaking, higher response rates make better evaluation studies.

Use a combination of the following techniques to increase response rates to mail, e-mail and telephone surveys :

- Send an advance notice letter or e-mail or make an advance phone call asking them to participate.
- Explain why their response to the survey is important.
- Enclose a self-addressed, stamped envelope so respondents don't have to use their own postage.
- Send a reminder postcard 7 to 10 days after the first mailing to thank them for their response and encourage them to respond if they have not yet done so.
- Send a second questionnaire (with cover letter and stamped return envelope) 7 days or so after the reminder postcard.
- Telephone respondents if they have not responded to the second survey.
- Give respondents the option to fax a response or give answers by telephone.
- Hand-address the envelope instead of using computerized labels and use a first-class stamp.
- Offer to send a brief summary of the results, so they know their information will be used.
- Include a token incentive in the mailing for their completed questionnaire – a voucher for a publication; a few dollars, if your budget allows; an opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a prize.

¹ See Dillman, D. (2000). *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 2nd Edition. New York: John Wiley & Sons for more information on improving response rates.