

The Value of Mail and Paper Surveys.

Readex has been in the business of conducting surveys by mail since 1949. Clearly we know something about this methodology! Of course, with more and more work shifting online, we are frequently asked about the viability of mail/paper surveys going forward. We have a few random thoughts to share.

With so much online activity, are mail/paper surveys still effective?

The answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” Depending on the target audience and overall objectives, the mail survey can still be a reasonable alternative. In particular, we are seeing more activity with mail and paper surveys in the healthcare, insurance, financial services spaces along with employee surveys and lengthier customer surveys.

Results don’t represent people you cannot survey.

When results are meant to represent a specific population, the completeness of your sample frame will have an impact. There are definitely situations in which a mailing address file is a more complete enumeration of the target audience than, say, an email address file.

Higher response leads to more stable data.

The higher your response rate, the better job the data will do of describing your population as a whole. As response rates dwindle overall, the chances that those who respond to your survey are different from those that didn’t respond increases. In general, mailed surveys continue to yield respectable response rates. Also, mailed surveys can benefit from a variety of techniques designed to boost participation when working with a rather non-responsive sample.

Motivating circumstances.

A survey incentive works best when it invokes a feeling of reciprocity and obligation—you gave me this token gift and I feel obligated to return the favor by completing the survey. Furthermore, when the incentive is given to each respondent as part of the appeal, as is done with mailed surveys, it becomes more effective at boosting response rates.

The ease and immediacy of incentive delivery with mailed surveys provide an advantage. A dollar bill has been tested time and again and remains on top for return with incentive investment. The dollar is flat, so it easily slips into the mailed survey kit; is lightweight, so it doesn’t impact postage costs; has universal value; and has proven to be successful in eliciting the desired effect—a completed survey.

Deliverability.

Mailed surveys are delivered where the respondent receives mail, providing the best opportunity for receipt. Physical addresses tend to change less often than electronic addresses, and when street addresses do change, the post office provides forwarding for a period of time.

Cutting through the clutter.

This factor is a big one. When online surveys began to pop-up, one thing that made them attractive was that there was less electronic clutter than that delivered by the postal carrier. Today, many would argue that the opposite is true.

Personal attention reaps personal response.

A mailed letter shows more effort on the survey sponsor's part and is likely to gain the attention of the recipient. In addition, if the survey kit is designed to look like personal correspondence, it is even more likely to get a response. A classy, well-prepared survey kits stands out. Another benefit is that if a respondent is unable to complete a mailed survey immediately, it is apt to sit on a desk as a reminder to be filled out.

When taking the above advantages into consideration, mailed surveys shouldn't be discounted as a possible alternative.

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