

Will a Personalized Alert Letter Impact Mail Survey Participation?

There is often debate about the value of an alert mailing as part of a mail survey. Whether the alert takes the form of a post card or letter, either one adds time and expense for set up, production and postage. So does it really matter if this treatment is used? While it is difficult to come down with a hard and fast rule, the general answer is that an alert can't hurt, but how much lift to response that is created may depend on the nature of the survey and audience.

A client conducted a large-scale mail survey directed to a sample of customers and the methodology included a personalized alert letter from the firm's president sent one week in advance of the survey kit mailing. It should also be noted the method included an online response option. At the conclusion of fieldwork four weeks later, response by mode was as follows:

1582 usable online responses-29% of the total
3920 usable mail responses-71% of the total

Several months later, an ad hoc, smaller mail survey was deployed, once again with an online response option, but no alert letter. Since the sample was much smaller, there was a significant initiative to get sample members to respond online. This is certainly a mitigating factor and the final impact on response is hard to measure. This said, final results were:

50 usable online responses-86% of the total
8 usable mail responses-14% of the total

While the online "push" in the smaller survey cannot be ignored, the shift in response metrics give us pause. Traditional wisdom is that an alert, if affordable and possible given timing, can be beneficial. Again, the absolute impact on participation is difficult to predict. However, this example leads us to conclude, as Don Dillman indicated years ago, an alert notification should be used if feasible.