

What's a Good Response for a Mail Survey?

Over the last nearly 80 years, Readex has completed countless mail surveys in a broad spectrum of markets. Based on this experience, when a mail survey is needed, we are often asked about response rate expectations. The short answer is this: It depends.

What main factors influence response?

At a high level, the response rate will depend on such factors as the number of mailing events included in the mailing series, the survey topic, the nature of the audience, length of the survey instrument and incentive. While one could write a book on this subject (see Don Dillman's Total Survey Design Method), we'll give you the key ideas to keep in mind.

Overall, a good response to a mail survey is 30%-40%. While you may think it's impossible to get there, that is simply not true. Sometimes you have to work a bit harder, but this response rate goal can be attained and even exceeded. The number of elements to the mailing series will influence the response rate. For example, a single mailing of a community resident survey might get you 15% to 20%. Add an alert card and/or a follow-up survey to non-respondents and you may very well exceed 25%. The classic methodology is an alert letter, survey kit to all sample members and a follow-up kit to non-respondents about three weeks after the first kit mailing. Of course, the length of the survey and incentive use will also influence the outcome.

Speaking of the survey instrument, it stands to reason that the shorter the questionnaire, the better. A reasonable length is in the four-page range. We often are able to format surveys into a four-page booklet, meaning an 11" x 17" sheet of paper folded in half to create four-page sides. Going to eight pages may have some impact on the response; longer than that surely will. The response downside to a long survey can be positively influenced by a more robust mailing series and incentive use.

One rule we have is this: if a survey is going to someone having a financial relationship with the sponsor, such as a customer, member or employee, the response is always better than average. Under these circumstances 40%+ is attainable. In a more general B2B environment, again depending on the mailing series, incentive and survey topic, the average may be closer to 30%-35%. Some of the more difficult-responding markets include healthcare and retail. In these situations you're dealing with professionals who are on the go so capturing some of their time is more difficult, requiring you to be creative when you mix and match all of the variables.

Finally, incentives are a great way to say "Thank You" for completing the survey. These days, the dollar still works. Depending on the nature of the survey and market, other incentives can be powerful, such as offering a copy of the survey results. The main idea is this: Incentives can provide a lift to response rates. Determining just how much lift is always a guess, but a survey with an incentive is typically better than a survey without.

If you are considering a mail survey and want to discuss what might happen with your project and response, feel free to contact us so we can have a conversation.

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