

Why Won't You Answer My Questions?

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Introduction

Energy efficiency program evaluations can require a considerable amount of data collection. Evaluators need to speak with program participants and nonparticipants to assess a variety of issues, including verification of installation, program impacts, process experiences, awareness, and participation barriers. Collecting high quality data and maximizing response rates (to minimize potential for nonresponse bias) can be expensive. This is particularly true for nonparticipant and general population studies where customers do not have a connection to the survey topic through program participation. Decreasing use of land-lines and higher incidence of call-screening exacerbate the difficulties of achieving representative samples. We have been experimenting with different survey methods to identify procedures that will increase response rate and help control data collection costs.

Study Experiments

Midwest Utility Residential Nonparticipant Study: Incentive Amount and Notification Type Experiment. Households were randomly assigned to receive no incentive, a \$5 prepaid incentive, or a \$10 prepaid incentive. Households receiving no incentive were also randomly assigned to receive an advance postcard or an advance letter. When no incentive was offered, an advance letter was slightly more effective than a postcard. Response increased with the \$5 incentive and increased further with the \$10 incentive.

Midwest Utility Residential HVAC and Water Heating Participant Study: Incentive Type Experiment. To encourage participation in a telephone survey, a Midwest utility offered a \$20 incentive using different types of gift cards. Each sampled participant was randomly assigned to receive, upon completion of the telephone survey, a \$20 gift card from their utility, a gift card for Meijers, or for Walgreens. Neither the \$20 incentive itself nor the type of gift card had a large impact on the survey response; in fact, the telephone survey response rate was somewhat lower this year over last year, when an incentive was not offered.

Midwest Utility Residential Direct Load Control Study: Mode Experiment. The client requested a 100 percent response rate on a seven question general population study. A \$10 cash prepaid incentive was included with a mail survey, and households could participate by telephone or on-line if they preferred. When offered an advance incentive along with options for completing the survey, an 86 percent response rate was achieved. More than 75 percent of completed surveys were from the mail survey.

Midwest Utility Education Study: Teacher Incentive Experiment: Contact information for students' parents is seldom available due to confidentiality, but parent surveys can be requested in materials sent home with students from school. To increase parent survey participation, teachers were offered an incentive if 25 percent of their students' parents completed the survey. Offering this incentive doubled parent survey completion over the prior year.

Midwest Recreation Study: Incentive Placement Experiment: A prepaid \$5 cash incentive was included in a mail survey and placed in various locations on the cover letter and survey booklet. Results indicated that the placement of the five dollar bill, whether visible or not visible before removing contents from the envelope, did not have a large impact on the survey response rate.