Research Brief Series #7: Impact of Using Personalized Solicitation During Mail Contact When Recruiting to a Probability-Based Panel

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There is a myriad of literature related to the impact of envelope and letter design strategies on survey response during mail contact in ABS studies (see Dillman et al. 2014 for a compiled list). The consensus in these studies is that personalization of contact materials will make the survey request mailing standout from junk mail. One way to achieve personalization is to append auxiliary information (such as name and socio-demographic information) to the address-based sample (ABS) frame and use appended names when addressing households during mail outreach. In theory, naming may increase survey response as we tend to pay more attention to our own name rather than a generic salutation (or other people's names). Additionally, during within-household selection process, strategically selecting and naming the harder to reach person in the household can potentially improve representativeness and decrease nonresponse bias. However, the match (a.k.a. incidence) and accuracy rates of the appended auxiliary information impact the success of the outreach efforts in ABS studies. Perhaps partly because of that, the literature regarding the impact of using name on contact materials also provides mixed results in terms of this strategy's effectiveness on unit and item response rates.

While at least one study found that naming a householder slightly increased unit response rates (Dillman et al., 2007), others found that it had no significant impact (Dykema et al., 2019; Link et al. 2008). Additionally, while some studies found that utilizing names significantly increased item nonresponse (e.g., Dykema et al., 2019), others found no relationship to item nonresponse (Gendall 2005). Overall, as a number of these authors point out, use of names increases operational costs with uncertainty as to its efficacy. However, NORC's Center of Panel

Survey Sciences has continued research on naming to explore a more refined implementation of the strategy: the use of big data classifiers to predict household and person-level characteristics and strategically select and name the harder to reach person in the household. Such a process adds a new potential benefit to naming householders, namely, to reduce systematic nonresponse by key demographic attributes of survey respondents. Accordingly, we conducted experiments using NORC's AmeriSpeak probability-based panel to explore the potential improvement of both overall recruitment yield and recruitment rate among hard to reach/hard to retain panelists by experimenting with personalized solicitation. Specifically, we examined the following research questions:

- Does using a personalized salutation (names) during mail contact increase overall recruitment rates in a probability-based panel?

- Does utilizing big data classifiers when strategically naming persons in households who are harder to reach/recruit improve recruitment rates among these groups (hence panel representation)? In other words, are the modeling strategies effective when strategically selecting the named individuals who are harder to recruit segments of the sample?

- In which stages, if any, of the recruitment process (initial versus nonresponse follow-up contact stage) is personalized salutation more effective in terms of overall recruitment rates and panel representation?

AmeriSpeak recruitment uses an ABS design and USPS mailings are used in the initial contact mode when inviting sample HHs to join the AmeriSpeak panel. Specifically, AmeriSpeak's panel recruitment is a two-stage process: 1) initial recruitment using U.S. Postal Service (USPS) mailings, telephone contact, and modest incentives, and 2) a more elaborate non-response follow-up (hereafter "NRFU") recruitment using FedEx mailings, enhanced incentives, and in-person (face-to-face) visits by NORC field interviewers. During the 2020 initial AmeriSpeak panel recruitment and 2022 NRFU AmeriSpeak panel recruitment stages, we randomly assigned sampled households to mailings that received personalized versus generic solicitation. During these AmeriSpeak recruitment years, we also utilized auxiliary vendor data and big data modeling procedures. Based on the appended auxiliary information we built models designed to predict household and person-level characteristics, oversampled households that are predicted to include hard to reach/recruit groups, and if the sampled household is assigned to the personalized solicitation treatment group, we strategically named persons in the household that are considered harder to reach.

Results:

Our findings show that using personalized salutation decision depends on other data collection/survey fielding decisions. We found that overall, 93% of our sample had a name appended to the sample file but note that not all appended names were accurate. Additionally, results indicate no significant improvement in overall recruitment response rates when using names, except during FedEx recruitment: Personalized salutations slightly decreased recruitment rates when sending FedEx mailings. Nonetheless, the use of names improved the recruitment rates among harder to reach groups and panel representation. Strategically naming persons in the HH that are harder to reach/recruit (e.g., Hispanic, Spanish speaking, younger, African American, and/or high income) significantly increased the chance of that named individual responding to our panel recruitment request. Specifically, we were 1.5 times more likely to recruit the named individual and 2 times more likely to get the named younger adult in the household in comparison to the control group. Additionally, we found that strategically naming harder to reach/recruit persons is more effective when sending FedEx mailings. While we did not see too many significant composition differences among the control and experiment groups during the initial mailing (via USPS), we observed significant differences during the NRFU stage (Fed-Ex recruitment) among reluctant groups.

The Center's Perspective

Departing from a random selection method within households has been shown to improve total survey error in past studies (cite). Our findings further underscore that while encouraging a specific person to participate via naming that person on survey collaterals is a departure from true random selection, it too can reduce the overall total survey error by attaining a more representative overall sample. The results from this study will shed light on future panel recruitment strategies as well as whether, and in what ways, using names on recruitment mailing materials may impact panel recruitment and composition.

References

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