LORE methodological note 2015:6

Survey reminder timing – the effect of time between contact attempts

Elias Markstedt
LORE
Johan Martinsson
LORE

ABSTRACT

An experiment with 9,000 respondents divided into three treatment groups with two reminders with different frequency, i.e. the "density" of reminders, show that the length of the data collection period matters very little. Only a 2.5 percent higher participation rate, a statistically non-significant result, was produced with a 4 week data collection period rather than 2 weeks.

Introduction

The list of factors that affects survey response rates is long, but not all of those elements are easy to influence as a survey practitioner. Field work related factors include 1) number of reminders, which was previously examined experimentally in LORE methodological note 2014:3 and 2014:5. Results show, unsurprisingly, that the number of reminders matters for participation rates, but that there are diminishing returns with each added reminder. Other factors are 2) reminder frequency/density and the closely linked 3) length of field work period, both of which will be examined in this note. Finally, 4) day of the week and 5) time during the day both might affect participation rates, but methodological note 2014:17 (day of the week experiment) and 2014:20 (time of the day experiment) both reveal that such effects disappear after a week or 24 hours, respectively.

Design, data and results

Data collection was carried out in Citizen Panel wave 14-2 between March 5 and April 3 2015. 9,000 of the panelists were randomly assigned to one of the three treatment groups. All respondents received two reminders each, but those were distributed as evenly as possible during the hypothetical data collection periods of 2, 3 or 4 weeks, see table 1 below. They are called hypothetical because they were not actually closed until the last date for the longest period, which allows us to examine whether it is the field work length which produces any results we find, rather than the reminder frequency.

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Table 1. Reminder experiment design

	Length of field work		
	2 weeks	**3 weeks**	**4 weeks**
Survey invitation date	2015-03-05	2015-03-05	2015-03-05
First reminder date	2015-03-09	2015-03-11	2015-03-13
Second reminder date	2015-03-13	2015-03-18	2015-03-23
Intended last field day	2015-03-17	2015-03-24	2015-04-01

As in the earlier LORE methodological notes that study effects of reminders we choose to use a measure of survey participation that includes partial responses but excludes e mail bounces from the invited sample size which we call the net participation rate (NPR). This is because we our main purpose is to examine whether contact attempts are successful in making those invited take the survey; our main interest in this study is not how many of these that actually complete the entire survey. This means that our measure of survey participation is similar to the AAPOR RR6 standard, except that we do not include e-mail bounces (a type of non-contact) in the invited sample size. If we would focus on only complete responses AAPORs RR5 would instead be a better choice. However, very few of those who start taking the survey used for this study do not complete the survey. The share of break-offs is only 2.5 percent.

Table 2 shows that there is a positive effect of collecting data during a longer period rather than during a shorter period, controlling for the number of reminders used. This effect is small however with a difference of 2.5 percentage points between two and four weeks field work length. This difference is only barely significant (p = 0.053), which underscores the fact that the relative gains of increasing the length of the data collection period are small.

Table 2. Reminder effects

	NPR after the intended period	**NPR after 4 weeks**	**n**
2 weeks	45,9	47,0	2,933
3 weeks	47,3	47,6	2,937
4 weeks	48,4	48,4	2,904

Comments: All treatment groups were originally 3,000 strong, but due to e-mail bounces they were reduced to the reported sizes.

Two ANOVAs confirm this finding: *NPR after the intended period*: F(2, 8,771 = 1.88, p = 0.15); *NPR after 4 weeks*: F(2, 8,771 = 0.57, p = 0.56). When examining subgroups such as gender, age and education no effect differences were found. The general impression this experiment paints is again that the number of reminders is the most important factor in this type of panel-based surveys rather than how long a period is used for the data collection.

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info@lore.gu.se