



Using Advance Letters in RDD Surveys: Results of Two Experiments

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In telephone surveys with list samples, it is common practice to send respondents a letter in advance of the call to explain the purpose of the study. The assumption is that the advance letters lend legitimacy to the study and increase the likelihood that the respondent will cooperate. In response to steadily declining response rates in RDD surveys and refusals that typically come before interviewers are able to explain that it is a research call, we decided to look at the effect of sending advance letters to households for which an address could be identified in RDD surveys. In this article, we present the results of two experiments to assess the effect of advance letters on response rates.

Our approach was based on the results of dual-frame designs reported several years ago (Traugott, Groves, & Lepkowski, 1987). A traditional dual-frame design involves selecting a list frame sample from a set of numbers based on telephone directories and combining this frame with a separate RDD sample. In our modified approach, RDD samples were ordered from Genesys Sampling Systems. For an additional fee, Genesys appended addresses for cases that were in their listed database. On average, we receive addresses for about 40% of the RDD sample. Regardless of the name associated with the telephone number, the letters were

addressed to "Resident." as we do not know who the respondent will be until a household is rostered and a respondent randomly selected. These advance letters were printed on Survey Research Laboratory (SRL) letterhead and were written in English on one side and Spanish on the other. In both surveys reported here, as is standard SRL protocol, up to 20 contact attempts were made, as well as up to two refusal conversion attempts if necessary.

One of the studies that examined the effect of advance letters on response rates was a statewide omnibus poll conducted in Illinois in April 1999. An advance letter was mailed to a random 75% of the households in the listed stratum. The cover letter stressed that we were conducting a survey of Illinois residents regarding "important issues facing the state today." We completed 605 interviews; the average length of interview was 27.5 minutes. The results are displayed in Table 1. The most notable finding is that listed households in both treatment conditions had much higher response and cooperation rates than did unlisted households. In contrast, the experimental advance letter had no effect on response and cooperation rates (the tiny differences apparent in Table 1 were not statistically significant), even though 57.8% of respondents who were mailed a letter reported that they remembered receiving it.

At the same time we were designing the Illinois omnibus poll, we were planning an RDD survey of City of Chicago residents concerning the city's community policing program, known as "CAPS" (Chicago Alternative Policing Strategy). Northwestern University's ongoing CAPS evaluation monitors trends in public assessments of the quality of police service in Chicago. The 1999 survey was conducted between March 6 and June 20, 1999, and the interview averaged 20 minutes in length. The advance letter began, "Many residents are

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Table 1. Statewide Omnibus Survey

Stratum	Response Rate	Cooperation Rate
Unlisted RDD	36.2%	53.1%
Listed RDD - Letter	56.4%	63.3%
Listed RDD - No letter	57.1%	67.1%
TOTAL	45.3%	59.2%

[Note: Response and cooperation rates are calculated according to AAPOR's Standard Definitions (AAPOR, 2000)]

concerned about safety in their neighborhood. In response, the University of Illinois at Chicago and Northwestern University are conducting an important study of crime and safety in Chicago neighborhoods. For this study, we will be conducting telephone interviews with residents in your neighborhood to ask opinions on safety, police patrol, and other concerns." As with the omnibus survey, 75% of the listed households in the sample frame were mailed advance letters.

The results of this experiment are in Table 2. Unlike the statewide omnibus survey, we found significantly greater response and cooperation rates among the listed households that received an advance letter. The response rate was 5.3% higher among households that were sent an advance letter, and the cooperation rate was 6.2% higher. This was true despite the fact that fewer Chicago respondents (50%) remembered receiving the advance letter, and about 7% of the letters that were sent were returned as undeliverable. Both the response rate and cooperation rate differences were statistically significant ($p < .05$), and—for the client—certainly worth the cost of the advance letter.

Table 2. City of Chicago CAPS Survey

Stratum	Response Rate	Cooperation Rate
Unlisted RDD	40.3%	60.7%
Listed RDD - Letter	48.7%	64.2%
Listed RDD - No letter	43.4%	58.0%
TOTAL	42.7%	61.3%

The two tables also highlight important response differences between listed and unlisted households that call for further research. Demographic comparisons of the unlisted and listed households show that listed households are significantly more likely to be white (47.7% in listed households vs. 35.8% of unlisted, $p < .001$), older (23% age 60 and older in listed households vs. 14.9% in unlisted households, $p < .001$), college educated (39.4% in listed households and 32% unlisted, $p < .001$) and less likely to be married (32.6% of respondents in listed households compared to 42.1% of those in unlisted households). A logistic regression analysis to predict the characteristics of listed households found the same characteristics to be significant. We found similar

associations in the listed vs. unlisted households in the omnibus poll, suggesting that listed households may be more cooperative to telephone survey requests in part because of demographic differences in the two populations.

The studies cannot reveal why we found a substantial effect of an advance letter in the Chicago project but not the statewide omnibus poll. The letter may have sparked interest in the topics to be discussed. CAPS is a widely-recognized and popular program, and the topic may have appeared more compelling to respondents than that of the omnibus poll. Future RDD surveys at the state and city levels will explore these factors before deciding whether the expense of producing and mailing advance letters is generally cost-effective.

References

- American Association for Public Opinion Research (2000). *Standard definitions: Final dispositions of case codes and outcome rates for surveys*. Ann Arbor, MI: Author.
- Traugott, M., Groves, R., & Lepkowski, J. (1987). Using dual frame designs to reduce nonresponse in telephone surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51(4), 522–39.

PATRONS

- Abt Associates, Inc.
- American Association for Public Opinion Research
- U.S. Bureau of the Census
- Institute for Policy Research, University of Cincinnati
- Institute for Survey Research, Temple University
- Marketing Systems Group
- Mathematica Policy Research
- National Center for Education Statistics
- National Center for Health Statistics
- National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago
- Opinion Research Corporation
- Research Triangle Institute
- Section on Survey Research Methods, American Statistical Association
- Survey Research Center, University of Michigan
- Survey Research Laboratory, University of Illinois at Chicago
- Survey Section Statistics Laboratory, Iowa State University
- Westat