Survey Administration Best Practices: Lessons Learned from the 2015 Ithaka S+R Faculty Survey

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Introduction

Since 2000, Ithaka S+R has fielded the US Faculty Survey, which tracks the evolution of faculty members' research and teaching practices against the backdrop of increasing digital resources and other systemic changes in higher education, on a triennial basis. In 2012, we saw the response rate to the survey decline from previous cycles, and so we employed a variety of strategies to stop this downward trend with the 2015 cycle.

The strategies worked: the rate of response nearly doubled, from 3.5% to 6.7%.[1] We have now employed these strategies with 80-plus local surveys of students and faculty members fielded at individual colleges and universities and have identified many ways to encourage survey participation as well as elements that can potentially derail participants.

By increasing response rates, and thus decreasing the rate of non-response, we are able to decrease the effects of non-response bias, which can occur when individuals who do not respond to the survey are systematically different from those who do. Thus, increased response rates often lead to more diverse, representative perspectives from respondents and lend validity to survey results by decreasing non-response bias.

The following paper outlines a number of the strategies that Ithaka S+R employed in the 2015 US Faculty Survey as well as with surveys of faculty members at individual colleges and universities.

Strategies

To increase the response rate to the 2015 US Faculty Survey, Ithaka S+R recognized that we needed to maximize action in each of the steps in the survey response process depicted in the funnel graphic below. Increasing engagement in each stage of this process has a ripple effect on all subsequent steps, with action in each step being contingent on the previous step(s). The following paper details strategies that were employed in each of these parts of the process to successfully increase the response rate from the previous cycle of the survey.

Effective subject lines

The first challenge in convincing invitees to complete our survey involved making sure that the e-mail invitation we sent was both received and opened. Considering the overwhelming amount of e-mail that many faculty members receive on a daily basis, doing so is not an easy task. We knew that crafting enticing subject lines and selecting appropriate signatories could mean the difference between garnering valuable survey responses and having our invitation messages ignored or deleted.

Before we sent invitations for the US Faculty Survey 2015 in October 2015, we designed an A/B test in August to pilot two versions of the questionnaire. We used these pilot versions to test (1) the efficacy of various subject lines, and (2) changes to the questionnaire from the previous cycle, which will be discussed later in this paper. Research on e-mail marketing has shown that e-mails with subject lines containing words that imply time sensitivity, importance, and exclusivity (e.g., "urgent," "announcement," and "invitation") tend to obtain higher open rates.[2] Personalizing the subject line has also been shown to increase open rates, especially when both the recipient's first and last name were included.

With this in mind, we tested a number of subject lines across the A and B versions of the survey, while keeping all other variables (e.g., time of day that the e-mails were sent, from whom the e-mails were sent, the content of the e-mail) consistent across the versions. We found that subject lines that included personalization—that is, that contained the recipient's first and last name, or began with "RE:" or "Re:," indicating that the reminder was in response to another message—led to response rates 2–3 percentage points higher than those that did not meet these criteria, and therefore employed these subject lines when we fielded the national study in October.

Partnerships with scholarly societies

In fielding the previous cycle of the US Faculty Survey in 2012, we partnered with key leaders of five scholarly societies under whose name the invitation and reminder e-mails were sent to all individuals in respective disciplines and fields. From running previous national and institution-specific surveys, we recognized the importance of the signatory; choosing the right person from whom the e-mail comes is crucial for ensuring that the recipient will open the e-mail.

In 2012, we found that response rates were substantially higher for respondents who received these messages from scholarly societies as compared to those who received the invitation from the managing director of Ithaka S+R. Based on these findings, we sought out additional partnerships with scholarly societies for the 2015 cycle and were able to incorporate signatories from twelve societies.[3]

Indeed, the average response rate for respondents in disciplines who received invitations and reminders from our scholarly society partners was substantially higher than the average response rate for respondents who received invitations and reminders under Ithaka S+R's signatory—12.6% versus 5.7%, respectively.

Sending multiple reminder messages

Sending multiple reminders via e-mail provides Ithaka S+R with an opportunity to reach recipients who did not open the survey invitation, or did open it but did not have time to complete the survey. Ithaka S+R has found that for institution-specific surveys, sending multiple reminder messages at varied times is the best approach for capturing new audiences of respondents, as invitees tend to have the same habits around checking e-mail from week to week.

Due to contractual limitations in 2012, we were unable to send more than one reminder message while the survey was in the field. For 2015, we were able to obtain permission to send three reminder messages, and did so at varied times, typically during the late morning and early afternoon on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays.

Modifications to the questionnaire

Noting the declining response rates realized in previous cycles of the survey in conjunction with qualitative feedback on the length of the questionnaire as a major deterrent, the 2015 questionnaire was designed to condense items and remove items that were no longer valuable for tracking purposes.

Ithaka S+R reduced the overall length of the 2015 questionnaire as compared to the 2012 cycle by approximately 19%; during the 2012 cycle, the questionnaire was made up of up to 52 questions,

while the questionnaire in 2015 was made up of up to 42 questions.[4]

Furthermore, we removed much of what we considered to be redundant instructions for each response scale, as we found that this was leading to respondents becoming fatigued while taking the survey and dropping off before completing it. For example, in the previous cycles of the survey, all questions with a 10-point scale measuring importance included the following instructions: "Please use the scales below to rate from 10 to 1 how important each of the following methods is for staying current with new scholarship in your field, where 10 equals 'Extremely important' and 1 equals 'Not at all important.' Please select one rating for each item."

When we ran the pilot versions of the survey in August 2015, one version included the questions exactly as they appeared for the 2012 version of the survey with the lengthy instructional text included. The other version included the updated questions *without* the repeated lengthy instructions for the response scales and instead included labeled end points on all response scales; this significantly reduced the overall length of the survey.

We determined that the removal of the long instructions and the addition of the end point labels did not affect responses—that is, the revised shortened version of the questionnaire was comparable to previous iterations of the survey and thus enabled the continuation of tracking changes in responses over time—but *did* lead to shorter completion times (approximately 5% shorter) and higher completion rates. Based on these findings, we implemented the updated version for the 2015 national survey.

Concluding remarks

By employing the strategies outlined in this paper, Ithaka S+R was able to nearly double the rate of response in the 2015 US Faculty Survey from the previous cycle of the survey, allowing us to capture a greater share of faculty members' attitudes and behaviors, and thus decreasing the likelihood and effects of non-response bias.

Recommendations on survey design and administration should always be considered in the context of the recipients of the survey invitation and the organization, unit, and/or individual distributing the survey. By appropriately adapting and employing the strategies outlined in this paper, organizations within and outside of the higher education community can maximize their survey response rates and minimize the effects of non-response bias.

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Endnotes

1. Both response rate figures do not include medical faculty members for the purposes of drawing appropriate comparisons across the survey cycles; these faculty members were not included until the 2015 cycle.

2. Neel Shivdasani, "Subject Line Data: Choose Your Words Wisely," *MailChimp Blog*, November 13, 2013, http://blog.mailchimp.com/subject-line-data-choose-your-words-wisely/.

3. These scholarly societies included the American Anthropological Association; the Archaeological Institute of America; the American Historical Association; the American Sociological Association; the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies; the College Art Association; the Modern Language Association; the National Council of Teachers for English; the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages; the Society of Biblical Literature; the American Academy of Religion; and the American Musicological Society.

4. The actual number of questions displayed is contingent upon answers to questions in the survey.