

Experience-Based Suggestions for Achieving a High Survey Response Rate

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Providing feedback to correct misperceptions of normative behavior begins with an accurate perception of normative behavior. The most efficient way to establish the norms of a particular group is through an anonymous survey. Thus, social norms interventions typically begin with a survey. Although survey researchers may argue about the response rate that is necessary for statistical validity, prevention and intervention specialists know that a high response rate is essential for face validity. High face validity can help break down some of the denial that those who engage in high-risk behaviors have and help them accept the positive (low-risk) norms as real. With a low response rate, it is too easy to dismiss the “norms” established by the survey as the behavior of only a small, unrepresentative sample within the larger group. For the past six years, one author has guest lectured to a group of 150 students on the social norms approach. Each year, one or two students say they don’t believe the statistics, saying something like, “The drinkers are too hung over to take your survey.” This experience emphasizes the need for a high response rate.

Achieving a high response rate can be quite a challenge. At a recent national meeting, several institutions reported response rates in the 25%-35% range for college student surveys. This response rate was even described as the “new norm” for response rates. However, in the Fall 2005, the Center for Alcohol and Substance Education (CASE) at the University of Virginia conducted a survey of drinking behavior and associated negative consequences among members of sororities and fraternities and achieved a 92% (2283/2482) response rate from participating

chapters. We therefore thought it worthwhile to report the factors that we perceived to be essential in achieving this response rate, and one important factor to take into account that negatively impacts response rate. There are eight positive factors:

1. Student involvement in the design of the survey and the implementation plan: After drafting the survey and the implementation plan, focus groups were held with students from our target audience to obtain their input. One critical outcome of the focus groups was to change the administration plan from a paper-and-pencil survey administered at chapter meetings to an online format. Student input was also obtained through a student advisory committee with representatives from each of the Greek governing councils.
2. Approval from the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) Research Committee: Contact with the NPC Research Committee had to be initiated months ahead of the planned survey time, but greatly contributed to achieving a high participation rate.
3. Generous incentive structure, with incentives going to the chapters based on percent of chapter participation: Participants did not receive any individual incentive for completing the survey, instead a graduated monetary incentive was designed, with the incentive (maximum of \$400/chapter) going to the chapter itself. The graduated incentive plan was designed collaboratively with the students. Chapter presidents signed an honor statement agreeing "...that the monetary incentive...will not be used to purchase alcohol/alcohol-related items or support an alcohol-related event."
4. Strategy for chapter codes that kept the codes private to chapter members: A detailed and fairly complex strategy was necessary to allow project coordinators to track chapters over a two year period, provide normative feedback and reward participation at the chapter level, and yet keep the anonymous chapter codes confidential to chapter members.

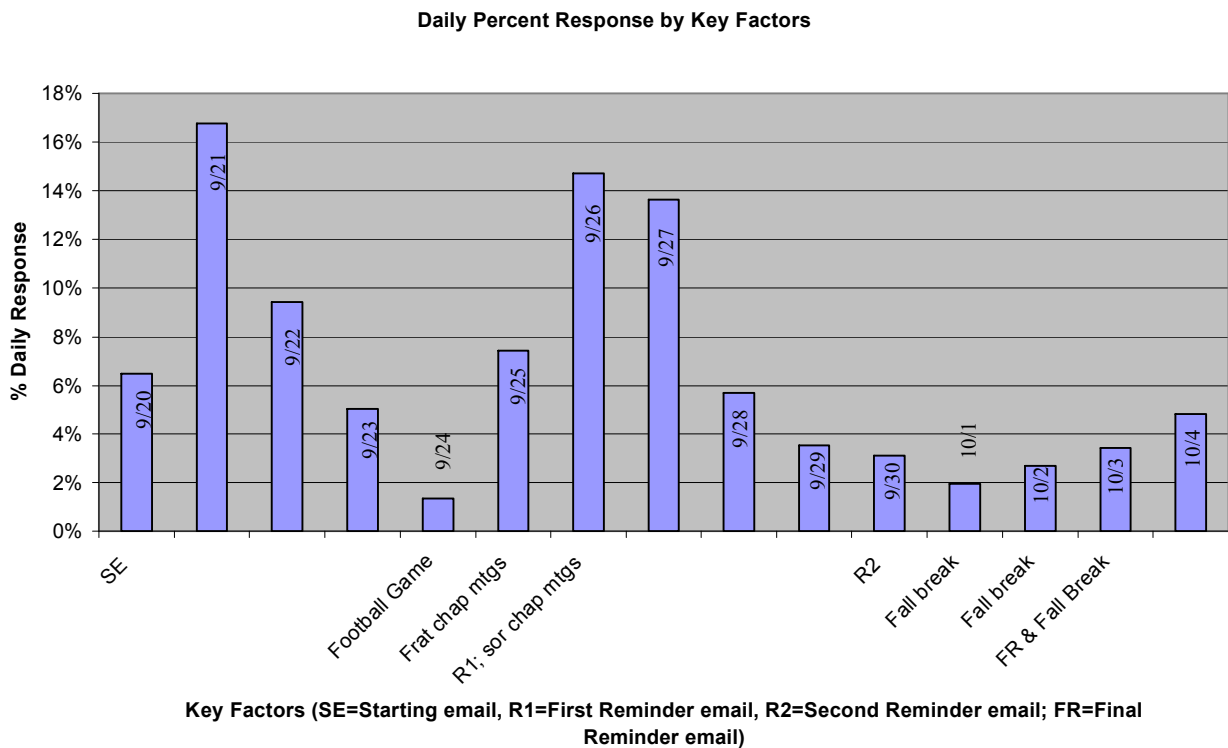
Presidents of chapters in this first year of the project selected a unique anonymous chapter code and provided project coordinators with duplicate codes, in sealed and signed envelopes with the chapter name on the outside of the envelope for successive presidents. We enlisted the help of the University Honor Office to liaise with the chapter presidents for the incentive rewards, based on the response rate that we provided to the Office. We provided the response rate associated with each code; the chapter presidents decoded the information for the Honor Office.

5. Tight survey design, with a limited number of questions, allowing completion in 15 minutes or less: The student participants in the focus groups were quite clear about this. Their opinions were that students were asked to respond to a lot of surveys, many of which had redundant or wide-ranging questions. They strongly advised us to eliminate as many questions as possible. Consequently, we became ruthless, including only information that directly related to our normative feedback, to assessing our desired outcome (reduction in negative consequences associated with drinking) and to describing our participants.
6. Web-based administration: Because of the sensitive nature of the information, the students in the focus groups felt that web-based administration was absolutely crucial to achieve a high response rate. In addition to the enhanced anonymity and privacy of response, web-based administration eliminated many of the troublesome logistics of paper-based survey responses and, we suspect, decreased discussion of answers and the tendency to give socially desirable responses.
7. Reminders sent during the time the survey was live: Reminders are a standard part of mailed and online surveys. In this instance, all reminders were emails sent to the chapter

presidents who then forwarded them to chapter members, after inserting their unique chapter code in the body of the scripted email. With the first reminder email, one week into the survey, chapter presidents received a web address and instructions for checking the rate of participation for their chapter using their unique chapter code.

8. Personal relationships count! Because the University does not maintain a central list of chapter members, we relied heavily on chapter presidents as the gate-keepers for their chapters. We worked hard to establish personal relationships with the chapter presidents. Starting three weeks prior to the survey going live, we attended presidents' meetings of the four Greek Governing Councils to explain the survey in detail. We used email for regular communication with chapter presidents and we entrusted them with the confidential chapter codes. We also attended the chapter meetings of all 49 fraternal organizations at the University within the ten days prior to the survey going live. The project goal, timeline and incentive structure was described in detail during these meetings and project representatives were able to answer any questions. Students attending these meetings received the only individual incentives given – coupons for a small cone at a local ice cream shop.

Conversely, our recent survey experience also illustrates the importance of understanding competing activities in the environment. We illustrate the impact of reminders and competing events with a graph of the daily response rate during the two weeks the survey was live. Each bar represents one day with the date inside the bar; bars are labeled to show key events.



As can be seen in this graph, the three peaks in response rate are associated with (1) the day after we sent an email to chapter presidents advising them the survey was live and asking them to send an email to members with the chapter codes and the link to the survey site, (2) the day of the first reminder email (which also corresponded to the day that all sorority chapters held meetings) and (3) the day after the first reminder email. Conversely, responses plummeted during the days of a home football game and during Fall Break. The second reminder, coming the day before the beginning of Fall Break, did not seem to have much effect on response rate. However, the third and final reminder, at the end of Fall Break, is associated with a small increase in response rate.

Our experience suggests that achieving a very high response rate is possible, but it takes months of advance planning, participation of members of your target audience in planning the design and execution of the survey, a generous incentive structure (though not necessarily

directly to individual participants), sensitivity to mechanisms for ensuring anonymity and ease of participation (such as online surveys), personal contact with potential participants and awareness of competing activities during the survey timeframe. It's not rocket science, but it is careful, thoughtful and thorough project management – and TEAMWORK.