Motivating to respond: effects of incentives versus a short message

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Abstract

It is customary to think that any increase in response rates costs money and / or effort. The current practices often use higher incentives, better training of interviewers, more contacts etc. In this paper we introduce a different cost-savvy method of increasing response rate through a short motivational message; and we compare its effects to those achieved through different incentives.

In a longitudinal setting where people are interviewed annually we included a very short message as an introduction to a module of questions about health and asked respondents to take time to think carefully through their answers reminding them of the importance of this for our research. This message was part of a randomized 2x3 experiment implemented on Innovation Panel of UKHLS at wave 7 with message /’no message’ groups crossed with £10/£15/£30 incentive groups. Looking at response retention in the subsequent 4 waves we find that the effect of the motivational message is present not only in the immediately following wave but remains important 4 years later; it is higher for males; and importantly for male respondents with £10 incentive motivational message works better than an increase of incentive to £15, but slightly less than an increase to incentive of £30. It of course doesn’t have to be an either/or situation as both motivational message and an increase in incentive can be used to achieve higher response rate. And finally, while the longitudinal context provides an ideal setting for the use of such motivational messages I would be interested in thoughts on how this idea can be utilised for a cross-sectional survey.

Introduction

It is customary to think that an increase in response rate implies an increase in costs and /or efforts. The frequent ways to boost response rate include different types of incentives, improved and/or increased amount of interviewer training for interviewer-based modes, more contacts, different types of contacts (pre-notifications, reminders), etc. All of these methods are known to improve response rates but they imply ‘you get what you pay for’.

A slightly different approach is taken by responsive design and tailored design where higher response rate may be achieved through improved planning and targeting fieldwork management procedures – so one possibly can achieve higher response rate gain per money unit than through the above procedures.

In this paper we explore a relatively low cost method of improving response rate (specifically retention rate in a longitudinal study) and compare it to a response rate gain through incentive. The method includes motivating panel members through a short message during an interview with a hope of improving retention in future waves of the panel. Motivation in survey methodology has been explored previously by Cannell et. al. (1981); and in this study a simple motivational message has been added as part of an interview, reading:

*In order for your answers to be most helpful to us, it is important that you try to be as thoughtful as you can. Since we need complete and accurate information from this research, we hope you will think hard to provide the information we need.*

The question of interest is whether providing such a simple motivational message helps retention and how this compares to an increase in incentive.

Method

The experiment was implemented in wave 7 of the Innovation Panel (IP) which runs alongside the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) (University of Essex, 2019). A 2x3 random experiment allocation was implemented with 2 motivational groups (motivational message vs. control group with no motivational message) and 3 incentive groups (unconditional £10; unconditional £10 + conditional £20 if every eligible member of a household completes; unconditional £30). The motivational message was placed as an introduction to a GHQ (general health questionnaire) part of a self-completion section. Waves 7-11 of the IP were collected in a mixed mode: part of the survey was face-to-face only, and part of it was web, followed by face-to-face for nonrespondents.

We are looking at short term retention – the following wave (wave 8) and long term retention (waves 8-11). Retention is defined as a full response to adult questionnaire conditional on participation in wave 7, excluding ineligible (those who died or moved out of the country). Long term retention requires response in each of the 4 following waves (wave 8-11). Note, innovation panel is an annual survey. The analysis excludes the most recent refreshment in ip7 as a different incentive treatment was used for them. Nevertheless, the results for this refreshment follow a similar pattern and magnitude.

Results

Overall retention rate in wave 8 conditional on response in wave 7 was 85.2%. From previous research (Kaminska, 2018) we know that motivational message has a different effect on females and males and therefore we present results for these groups separately. Table 1 demonstrates that both, incentive and motivational message have a positive impact on short term retention for males, but only incentive has a positive impact for females. Interestingly the effect of the motivational message among males is comparable to the effect of a conditional £20 incentive for the full household response (motivational message brings just under 10 percentage points extra retention than the control group while conditional £20 incentive brings an extra 7.4 percentage points). The best performing group among males is an unconditional £30 incentive bringing an extra almost 15 percentage points, but this is a very expensive method requiring high budget. Among females retention rate is generally higher but the message performs poorly.

*Table 1. Short term retention rate (wave 8) by gender and experimental group allocation*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Short Term Retention | |
|  | Males | Females |
| 10 incentive and no message (control) | 75.7 | 83.5 |
| 10+20 incentive and no message | 83.1 | 86.9 |
| 30 incentive and no message | 90.5 | 91.2 |
| 10 incentive and message | 85.4 | 81.5 |
| Total | 530 | 625 |

A long term retention rate over 4 waves (waves 8-11) was 59.0%. The impact of motivational message, although marginally significant (p-value=0.065), among males is still at 8 percentage points after 4 waves. Note, motivational message was only present at wave 7 and was never repeated, so this is an interesting long term effect. But the message effect is now much lower than the effect of the conditional or unconditional incentives for both, females and males. The best performing group is the one that received £30 incentive in each wave.

*Table 2 Long term retention rate (waves 8-11) by gender and experimental group allocation*

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Long term Retention | |
|  | Males | Females |
| 10 incentive and no message (control) | 50.3 | 52.2 |
| 10+20 incentive and no message | 64.9 | 62.4 |
| 30 incentive and no message | 70.4 | 74.1 |
| 10 incentive and message | 58.3 | 55.6 |
| Total | 513 | 604 |

Motivational message is not an alternative to incentive and could be used alongside it. Table 3 presents results of incentive by message retention rates among males. A short-term retention can be increased by 21.4 percentage points (from 75.7% to 90.5%) with the help of unconditional £30 incentive and a motivational message in comparison to only unconditional £10 incentive among males. The motivational message adds almost 7 percentage points to the already significant effect of the £30 incentive. But the long term effect of motivational message for the high incentive group decreases over time and is less than one percentage point for the £30 incentive group. Nevertheless effect of the message is more important for the £10 incentive group where it still adds 8 percentage points after 4 waves.

*Table 3. Interaction of incentive and message treatment effect on short and long term retention among males*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Retention among males | | | |
|  | short-term | | long term | |
|  | message | no message | message | no message |
| 10 incentive | 75.7 | 85.4 | 50.3 | 58.3 |
| 10+20 incentive | 83.1 | 87.5 | 64.9 | 68.4 |
| 30 incentive | 90.5 | 97.4 | 70.4 | 71.1 |
| Total | 338 | 349 | 326 | 339 |

Conclusions

Our findings show that a motivational message may be an important method to improve retention rate in a longitudinal panel among male respondents. Its effect compares to an increase in incentive by conditional £20 for full household response in a short term. But short term or long term effect of the message is lower than £30 unconditional incentive. This leads to a conclusion that if a survey has high budget and can afford high incentives in each wave, motivational message may not be the first choice method to improve retention, especially in a long term. But for surveys with a limited budget or looking to improve retention rate while redistributing budget to other parts of the survey process a motivational message may provide an additional cost-savvy help with retention.

Points for discussion

* Motivational message can naturally be used in a longitudinal study, but can the concept be transferred to a one off cross-sectional survey, and how?
* Why does motivational message work, and are we missing something in the communication between a respondent and a researcher?
* What are other potential cost-savvy methods to improve RR?

References

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