The Effect of Incentives on Internet Surveys: Response Rate Changes After the Introduction of Incentives

John M. Kennedy
Judith A. Ouimet
Indiana University Bloomington

Abstract

Incentives are often included in survey design because they are known to improve response rates, at least moderately. This paper describes the changes in the response rates when incentives were introduced into a longitudinal survey. The National Survey of Student Engagement was conducted annually at Indiana University Bloomington from 2000 through 2012. In 2010, incentives were introduced in an attempt to reverse the declining response rates. The incentives performed as expected, raising the AAPOR Response Rate 3 from 24% in 2009 to 36% in 2010. From 2010 through 2012, different types of incentives were tried but the response rates did not change substantially. The results from the changes in incentives can help survey practitioners decide the number and types of incentives that might be used effectively to increase response rates.

Keywords: Internet survey; Incentive; Response Rate
Introduction

The value of incentives has been studied extensively in survey research. The research generally focuses on the effect of incentives on improvements in response rates and limited research also examines their effect on overall data quality. However in some research, incentives that improve response rates may actually decrease data quality (Merkle & Edelman, 2009). The results of incentive research are often based on a single survey, and multiple tests over repeated surveys are rarely done. This paper reports on the use of incentives over multiple administrations of the same survey. As part of the project, respondents and non-respondents participated in follow-up surveys that asked about the importance of incentives and their preferred incentives. The implications of the results of this ongoing research on the value of incentives are also included.

The overall assessment of incentives is that they improve response and possibly improve data quality, but this assumption requires more empirical research to support it. This paper analyzes the impact of incentives used as part of an Internet survey. In recent years, Internet surveys have become an important mode in survey research. As the costs of other survey modes have increased, researchers have turned to the Internet to provide information once provided in telephone, face-to-face, and postal surveys. Internet surveys can be less expensive than other modes, but are not without serious problems. Among others, these problems include access to the appropriate technology for both researchers and participants and lack of adequate sampling frames. Survey researchers are further challenged by a lack of research into the most effective survey practices since little research shows that practices can be converted from other modes to Internet surveys without causing data quality problems. Research on the effectiveness of incentives can be helpful to survey practitioners as they develop procedures for high quality Internet surveys.

This paper documents the changes in the response rates for a longitudinal survey after incentives were introduced. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) conducted on the Bloomington campus of Indiana University experienced a steady decline in response rates from 2000 through 2009. In 2010, incentives were introduced as a means to increase response. As with many projects, the incentives were introduced without testing
and based on the literature about the effect of incentives. This paper focuses on the changes over three years of incentives to help survey practitioners anticipate possible benefits and costs of incentives.

**Types of Incentives**

Survey incentives can be organized roughly along two dimensions: 1) contingent and non-contingent; and 2) types of awards such as lotteries, cash, and gifts. Contingent incentives are given to those who respond to the questionnaire; non-contingent incentives are provided to all who are recruited for the survey. Contingent incentives include cash and gifts and they tend to have more value than non-contingent incentives. Sometimes, electronic coupons are used as incentives. These coupons are convenient but limited to a select group of retailers. Some respondents are suspicious of coupons because they think that if they redeem them, they will later receive solicitations to buy from the vendor or will not open them in fear the attachment contains a virus.

Perhaps the most common contingent incentive is a lottery where all participants are entered into a prize drawing. The drawings can be for cash or gifts. Many times, small cash amounts are used as non-contingent incentives but gifts may also be used. Some surveys may offer both contingent and non-contingent incentives.

**Incentives and Response Rates**

The primary purpose of providing incentives in surveys is to improve the data quality. While many measures of data quality exist, survey researchers do not always agree on the best measures. Most research on the effect of incentives use higher response rates as a measure of data quality because they are an easily quantified measure. Some research indicates response rates alone are not necessarily good measures of survey data quality (Groves & Peytcheva, 2008). By themselves, response rates do not necessarily indicate higher quality data. For example, incentives that increase the non-response differential
across groups would further distort the survey data. In addition, random samples may produce different response rates because of the selection of persons or groups who are more or less likely to participate in surveys.

Singer and Yu (2013) reviewed a large number of studies that examined the relationships between incentives and response rates. While they mention that the research is limited, their summary of the research indicates that incentives increase response rates over no incentive control groups. They further mention that little is known about how incentives affect non-response bias (p. 125).

**Incentives and Other Measures of Data Quality**

**Breakoffs:** One measure of data quality is the number of breakoffs before finishing the questionnaire. Ideally, providing incentives would encourage survey participants to persevere to the end of the questionnaire. Internet surveys are a good mode to test the impact of incentives on breakoffs because interviewer administered surveys generally have few breakoffs and postal surveys are not returned if the participant did not complete the questionnaire. However, breakoffs are not easy to use as a measure of data quality. For example, a participant who completes the questionnaire by paging through it might be counted as completed, even though few usable responses were provided. Other breakoffs may not be intentional but the result of various technological problems. Some respondents may answer all but the last few questions but without submitting the final page, so they may be classified as a participant breakoff.

**Item non-response.** Another measure of the effect of incentives is the number of questions not answered. Incentives are assumed to encourage respondents to answer all applicable questions.

**Non-differentiation:** Incentives should reduce straightlining, i.e., the tendency to use the same response for multiple questions in a series, and also reduce satisficing, i.e., respondents giving little thought to their responses or not answering all items in a series.
Both measures assume lower quality data when present but without some external empirical evidence, neither can be determined as completely accurate measures of data quality.

**The respondent experience:** Another reason for providing incentives is to improve the respondent experience with the survey process. Survey researchers ask respondents for their information and time. Most often, they promise some vague good in return, such as the data can be used for policy purposes. Many respondents recognize that their efforts may not necessarily produce a public good so the request for participation does not show respect for their time and cooperation. Properly used incentives can improve the respondent experience.

In summary, survey researchers have mostly imperfect measures to use to assess the improvements in data quality that may result from providing incentives. Without good measures, the resource tradeoffs between providing incentives and our available resources cannot be accurately assessed.

**Incentives and Tradeoffs**

Incentives may not be a cost effective method to improve data quality. The resources used for incentives, which include the costs of managing the incentives, might be used in other ways to improve data quality. For example, the resources might be used to conduct more tests of the survey questions by including more pretests, asking for peer review of questions, or interviewing pretest participants about the survey experience.

Incentives may also reduce survey data quality. A contingent incentive may encourage respondents to complete the questionnaire in order to receive the incentive but the respondent may not respond accurately, straightline responses, or satisfice. The mention of incentives in email recruitment messages may trigger spam filters that would reduce the number of potential respondents who receive the message.
Incentives under Differing Survey Conditions

The research on incentives does not indicate which incentives work best under which set of conditions. As a result, survey researchers provide the incentives that fit into a survey budget or those incentives that the researchers believe might improve data quality. The research comparing incentive types demonstrates that some types appear to work better but not in all conditions and with all respondents. This research is limited because the survey participants are not consulted on which incentives they would like. We generally assume more fungible incentives such as cash would be preferred but respondents may be happier if a donation was given to a charity as a reward for participating. For survey researchers to more effectively use incentives that show respect for participants and reflect their choices, a different kind of research on incentives is needed.

Incentive Distribution

The distribution of incentives in Internet surveys can be more challenging and costly than other survey modes. Internet survey researchers do not always have the information needed to distribute incentives except through email addresses. This problem may partially explain the reliance on lotteries as incentives.

One attractive feature of Internet surveys is the low cost. The incentive distribution may require postal mailings that will substantially increase the survey cost with relatively little improvement in data quality. In addition, other management costs may reduce the resources available for survey data collection.

Literature Review

Much research on survey incentives has shown that non-contingent incentives are more effective than contingent incentives (Millar & Dillman, 2011). In general, non-contingent incentives are used only when accurate postal addresses are available and participants recruited for Internet surveys recruited through email messages may not have useable postal addresses needed to send incentives in advance of the survey. Non-contingent
small gifts can be provided through Internet services that broker electronic coupons but these are rarely used as non-contingent incentives. In a study conducted by Sánchez-Fernández, Muñoz-Leiva, Montoro-Ríos, and Ibáñez-Zapata (2010), one experimental condition allowed all members in the sample to be included in a lottery. This incentive generated slightly higher response and retention rates.

Contingent incentives appear to be less effective than non-contingent incentives but the cost can be much lower, especially for a low response survey. Often, contingent incentives have greater value than non-contingent since they are provided only to participants. Contingent incentives may be easier to administer, primarily because adequate information can be gathered to send the incentive through the mail but the postal rates can significantly increase the survey budget.

Singer and Ye (2013) provide a comprehensive and detailed summary of the research literature on survey incentives. As part of the review, approximately 25 articles focused solely or primarily on incentives for Internet surveys. Most research focused on attempts to improve response rates. Some focused on reducing item non-response and breakoffs. Many focused on more than one measure of change that could be attributed to incentives or different forms of incentives. Some research compared multiple incentives to determine which were most effective.

Their review could be briefly summarized: Non-contingent incentives almost always improve response rates. Incentives do not always improve outcomes but they are generally positive, especially for improving response rates. The outcomes for other measures of data quality are mixed but generally positive. Incentives may produce different outcomes across groups and for different stages of the survey process, e.g., converting refusals or reluctant respondents. Cash is more effective than gifts. Lotteries can improve response rates often but the improvements are generally small and they do not always work as intended.

Singer and Ye also reviewed a small number of studies that examined the effects of incentives on web survey data quality as measured by item non-response and sample composition. They found that incentives do not appear to change the amount of item non-
response (p. 127). They also summarized the studies on sample composition and found that incentives have only a small effect on the sample composition (p. 129).

Incentives research has rarely examined the cost effectiveness of incentives and especially against other methods that might also produce improved survey data. In addition, survey researchers do not understand why incentives work, only that they do. While both the leverage-salience theory (Groves, Singer, & Corning, 2000) and social exchange theory (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009) provide possible explanations, neither has been tested consistently.

Leverage-salience theory states that both the importance of design features (leverage) and survey topic (salience) interact to influence the potential survey respondents’ decision to participate in a survey. Incentives are a form of leverage that would help to induce participation. Social exchange theory as used in survey research posits that survey participation depends on the benefits the respondents receive from participating in a survey relative to costs. Incentives increase the benefits from participation.

The incentive research, in general, and more specifically the research on the effectiveness of incentives for Internet surveys, has been relatively haphazard. Much testing is the byproduct of attempts to improve data quality and not necessarily specifically testing the conditions when incentives work and for whom. Much of the research uses college students and online panels in as the target group so the applicability to other groups is not known. Little research has been conducted to survey participants and non-participants to determine how the offer of incentives affected their decision to participate and if incentives were effective in generating other measures of survey data quality such as reduced item non-response and non-differentiation.

The next section of the paper analyzes the changes in response rates that follow the introduction of incentives. We found that the changes in response rates are consistent with the literature. The analysis also shows that incentive preferences are not a good predictor of improved response rates.
Methods and Analysis

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) is large-scale Internet survey conducted at colleges and universities in the US and Canada. The survey has been conducted annually since 2000. From 2008-2012, the number of participating institutions ranged from 584 to 772. The number of students recruited for the survey during 2008-2012 period ranged from just under 1.3 million to more than 2 million. The survey is conducted by Indiana University Center for Post-Secondary Research. The participating schools send lists of their first-year and senior students and the student recruiting is done by the staff at Indiana University.

Indiana University Bloomington (IUB) participated in NSSE from 2001 through 2012. In 2008 and 2009, 5000 students were sampled and from 2010 through 2012, approximately 14,000 IUB first-year and senior students were invited to participate each year. In 2010, 2011, and 2012, follow-up surveys were conducted at IUB with 10 percent samples of NSSE participants and non-participants to measure the effect of incentives on the decision to participate in NSSE and incentive preferences.

The response rates across the colleges that participate in NSSE vary substantially from more than 70 percent to about 10 percent. The overall NSSE AAPOR response rates for 2008 – 2012 ranged from 33 to 26 percent (Table 1). The response rates for most participating colleges are lower than desired, so many colleges make local efforts to improve response by advertising, making announcements, and offering incentives. Due to the large number of participants, many schools conduct lotteries as incentives.

Table 1 displays the response rate for IUB from 2001 through 2012. From 2001 through 2009, the AAPOR RR3 declined from about 38% to 24%. This decline was not smooth but was consistent over this period. Many colleges in NSSE experienced the same pattern of response rate decline.
Table 1  
*NSSE Response Rates by Year (AAPOR RR4)*

| Year | IUB NSSE Response Rate | Overall NSSE Response Rate |
|------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| 2001 | 38                     | NA                        |
| 2002 | 26                     | NA                        |
| 2003 | 29                     | NA                        |
| 2004 | 24                     | 35                        |
| 2005 | 31                     | 35                        |
| 2006 | 27                     | 35                        |
| 2007 | 32                     | 31                        |
| 2008 | 26                     | 33                        |
| 2009 | 24                     | 31                        |
| 2010 | 35                     | 33                        |
| 2011 | 32                     | 29                        |
| 2012 | 30                     | 26                        |

The declining IUB NSSE response triggered an effort to improve response and better understand the factors that influenced students’ decisions to participate. For the 2010 administration of NSSE, IUB offered incentives for the first time and did more advertising to improve response. In 2010, two types of incentives were offered to NSSE IUB participants. All participants received a coupon for a free soft drink at an on-campus location. In addition, a lottery was held which offered the prizes listed in Table 2.
Table 2
Incentives Offered in 2010 to IUB NSSE Participants

- Every student who completed the questionnaire received a coupon for a free soda at a campus location

- Lottery Prizes:
  - 5 iPods
  - 2 lunches for 4 people at a campus restaurant
  - 50 Lockers and towel service at the campus fitness center
  - 25 fitness classes

Table 1 shows that the response rate increased substantially when incentives were introduced and more advertising was used. The declining response rates were reversed and much improved. From 2009-2010, the response increased from 24% to 36%. (AAPOR RR3)

The incentives were introduced to the study to increase response and their possible impact was not tested prior to the introduction. Ideally, the impact of incentives would have been tested prior to their introduction, e.g., by randomly assigning students to different incentive conditions. However, the survey sponsors wanted an immediate increase in response and did not believe extensive testing was necessary because of the evidence available from the research literature.

The response rate change between 2009 and later might be attributed to other causes not tested. For example, the survey procedures did not include controls to detect the impact of incentives. Statistical tests were not conducted because in 2010, NSSE conducted a census of students, so statistical tests would not be appropriate. In addition, the samples are so large that small differences would be statistically significant but not substantively significant. At the same time, the 50 percent increase in response rates after they were introduced provides strong but not conclusive evidence that the incentives had their intended effect.
However, relatively few students took advantage of the free soft drink. While many students walk by and through the campus location daily, few participants were interested enough to claim their prize. Also, many lottery prizes were not collected by the winners.

A sample of participants in the 2010 NSSE survey were asked their reasons for participating and 444 students responded. The responses for are listed in Chart 1.

![Chart 1: Reasons for Participating in NSSE 2010](chart)

In 2011, incentives were again offered to IUB students. Based on the responses to the 2010 post-NSSE survey, more incentives were offered (Table 3). Non-contingent incentives were not available, and those who completed the survey were eligible for the gifts. In total, more than 1200 gifts were included in the lottery and the total value of the gifts was more than $17,500 USD.
Table 3

Incentives offered to NSSE IUB participants in 2011

| Offers                                             | Values | No. of Winner |
|---------------------------------------------------|--------|--------------|
| Apple iPad 32 GB                                  | $599   | 1            |
| Apple IPod Touch                                  | $199   | 3            |
| IU hooded sweatshirt                              | $40    | 48           |
| Lunch for two at a campus restaurant              | $26    | 8            |
| Indiana University T-shirt                        | $18    | 145          |
| Pizza at a local restaurant                       | $14    | 250          |
| Indiana University umbrellas                       | $13    | 50           |
| Cycling class                                     | $12    | 5            |
| Circuit Training class                            | $12    | 5            |
| Gift card for a local bookstore                   | $10    | 250          |
| Gift card for a local restaurant                  | $10    | 125          |
| Exercise T-shirt                                  | $10    | 10           |
| Gift card—Target, Amazon, or Starbucks            | $10    | 100          |
| Gift cards for a local bakery                      | $5 (total) | 257         |

The 2011 results were disappointing because the response rate declined from 2010 (Table 1). The larger number of incentives did not appear to improve the response rate and in fact, the rate decreased by three percentage points. The small decrease may have been attributable to a change in recruitment procedures. One recruitment message was sent on a Friday and prior evidence from NSSE indicates that Friday contacts are not as effective as messages sent on other weekdays. However, changing the incentive structure based on the student recommendations did not increase response.

Sauerman (2012) and Deutskens, Ruyter, and Wetzels (2004) showed that a large number of small incentives may be more effective in increasing response than a small
number of large incentives. While the iPad and iPod could be considered large incentives, the perception may have been that mostly small incentives were offered which may have made students think their chances of winning a good prize were very small.

The administrative costs of managing 1200 incentives were substantial. Many students did not claim their prizes but the prizes had to be maintained for some time in case they decided later to ask for them. In 2012, incentives were again offered but the distribution was simplified to reduce administrative burden and costs. Every student who completed the questionnaire was sent a PDF with a coupon for an ice cream cone at a local gourmet ice cream shop or could get a coupon for a bagel from a local bakery. In addition, all students who completed the survey were entered into a lottery for the prizes listed in Table 4.

Table 4

*Lottery prizes for NSSE 2012*

| Prizes                                | Number |
|---------------------------------------|--------|
| iPad 32 GB                            | 1      |
| $10 Gift Card                         | 6      |
| Indiana University sweatshirt         | 13     |
| Pizza at a local restaurant           | 150    |
| Lunch for two at a campus restaurant  | 12     |
| Indiana University umbrella           | 16     |
| $10 gift card for a local bookstore   | 47     |
| $10 gift card for a local restaurant  | 55     |
| Indiana University T-shirt            | 67     |
| Baseball Cap                          | 1      |
| T-shirts                               | 10     |

The 2012 response rate was also disappointing because it decreased again by two percentage points. The amount of advertising was similar to or higher than the previous
years. However, the decrease was not surprising because the field period started later in the semester. IUB was among a group of schools testing a new questionnaire along with the current questionnaire and the field period for the new questionnaire began later than the standard NSSE administration. Data collected from multiple years of NSSE indicates that later field periods are associated with lower response rates.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The results from this research are consistent with the multitude of research studies on incentives. The data indicate that incentives can increase response rates. The substantial increase for NSSE from 2009 to 2010 can likely be attributed to the introduction of incentives. The response rate declines in the two subsequent years are likely explained by differences in survey administration but the response rates for both years are much higher than before incentives were offered.

While most, but not all, prior research indicates that incentives improve response rates, the literature is not consistent on which forms of incentives to use. Most incentives are introduced because they are available to the researchers, not to test their effects. Systematic research that involves continued testing across multiple survey administrations and alternative forms of incentives is not done because the incentive research is generally an “add-on” to a project and not the focus of the project. This research is similar in that the incentives were an “add-on” but it differs in that it was documented over multiple administrations and with a variety of incentives. Survey practitioners can benefit from the thoughtful rather than ad-hoc use of incentives and the results of this research should help when considering whether to use incentives and which kind to use.

The data do not indicate what kinds of incentives are important to improving data quality. Non-contingent incentives were not offered, so their impact was not tested. Over the three years, small gifts to all respondents were offered in two years and lotteries were used in three years. The data do not indicate that one form of incentive was more important in increasing response. Because so many students did not claim their prizes, the availability of
either the gift to all participants or a lottery does not seem to make a difference in response rates. The data also do not indicate that the number or the value of the incentives substantially changes response rates. Altering the incentive distributions based on respondents’ preferences did not seem to change the response rates. The availability of incentives rather than the types or distribution appear to increase response rates.

In addition, survey researchers need to consider the costs of incentives and managing them. The time required of staff to find appropriate incentives, negotiate the costs and administration with vendors, and other tasks related to distribution are substantial. The large number of incentives required staff time that may have been used more effectively on other survey procedures such as analyzing the data more fully.

Overall, the data from these surveys demonstrate the challenges to understanding how incentives can improve the respondent experience and potentially improve data quality. Survey researchers generally use assumptions about respondents and their desires when planning survey incentives. But, we do not have good models that explain how incentives affect the decision to participate and the subsequent decisions to participate meaningfully in responding to survey question. This research does not further help us to understand how to use incentives most effectively to improve data quality. Adjusting the incentive structure based on the participants choices for incentives did not increase response.

The data show that incentives can improve rates but the results do not help survey researchers to understand better the reasons or the theories that might explain when incentives can be effective. Some combination of new theories and data about the impact of incentives is needed if we want incentives to improve data quality. We have few theories and data to explain the impact of incentives. For example, leverage-salience theory (Groves et al., 2000) implies that incentives would increase the “leverage” of the recruitment. However, the how, when, what, and why of the leverage is not well understood.

The limited research on incentives for Internet surveys indicates that incentives can improve response rates for Internet surveys. The data also indicate that data quality can be improved by reducing item non-response (Martin & Loes, 2010) and fewer breakoffs
(Bosnjak & Tuten, 2003; Heerwegh, 2004) However, absolute measures of data quality improvement are not often included in research on incentives. In contrast, not all incentives appear to improve data quality, so the cost trade-off may mean reduced quality if the resources were used in other ways to improve quality.

This research is another step to understanding better the effect of incentives. More focused research is needed to understand the impact on data quality and differences across groups. Survey researchers need to bring the respondents into the research. We need to better understand from them how they think about incentives and what kinds of incentives appeal to them and show respect for the time and effort needed to participate in surveys.

Survey researchers are continually looking for methods to improve data quality. This research supports the use of incentives to increase response rates but not necessarily increase data quality. The research also shows that types of incentives, the number of incentives, and the values of the incentives may have minimal effect over simply providing a lottery. These assertions need more rigorous empirical testing rather than documentation of changes as was done in this project.

Surveys of all types, including administrative surveys, public opinions surveys, and large scale national and international surveys need more information about the decision to participate. Incentives can help improve data quality but we first need to be certain that they do and that incentive costs are the most effective use of limited resources.

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Biographical Notes

John M. KENNEDY is the senior research director of the Indiana University Center for Survey Research. He directed the Center from 1987 through 2011. He is also an adjunct professor of sociology and teaches a graduate class in survey design. Dr. Kennedy chairs the Indiana University Bloomington Human Subjects Committee and has served on numerous NIH review panels on the ethics of human research. He is the founding editor of Survey Practice sponsored by the American Association for Public Opinion Research. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award given the Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations. This Award is named in his honor.

He can be reached at kennedyj@indiana.edu.

Judith A. OUIMET is the assistant vice provost for undergraduate education at Indiana University Bloomington. Her expertise is in survey research, design, and analysis. Dr. Ouimet’s focus is general education assessment and student engagement, primarily in post-secondary education—both public and private four-year institutions and community colleges. Dr. Ouimet has assisted in creating and validating numerous national surveys using both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

She can be reached at ouimet@indiana.edu.

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