Dillman on
Respondent Contact Strategies

Professor Ron Fricker
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, California

Goals for this Lecture

• Learn about proven strategies for improving survey response rates
  – Based on Don A. Dillman’s “Tailored Design Method”
  – Focus will be on mail surveys, but principles generalize to other modes
• Basic principle: repeated (appropriate) contact with respondents will improve response rates
  – Without, expect a decrease of 20-40 percent!
Improving Survey Response Rates: Multiple Contacts Important

- Good response rates **not** just a function of survey instrument and question design
- Implementation procedures have a *much greater influence* on response rates
- Experimental research shows that multiple contacts with respondents is the primary factor in improving response rates
  - Pre-survey letter(s), survey cover letter, follow-up reminders, thank you cards, etc.
Improving Survey Response Rates: Token Incentives Can Help

• Second most important factor is the use of token (financial) incentives
  – Only needs to be a token, such as include a two dollar bill in a mail survey
  – Can also be a token gift, such as a pen or button
• Research shows that sending such tokens with no strings attached gives recipients a sense of obligation to complete the survey
• Unfortunately, financial incentives generally not allowed in federal government surveys
Improving Survey Response Rates:
Other Techniques

• Other techniques have a more modest effect
  – Professional appearance of correspondence and survey instrument
  – Personalization of correspondence
  – Introduction letter from person of authority
  – Stamped return envelopes
  – Etc.

• Should not focus on any one technique
  – Implement as many as relevant / appropriate to maximize response rates
Dillman’s “Five Needed Elements for Achieving High Response Rates”

1. Respondent friendly questionnaire
2. Four contacts by first class mail, with an additional “special” contact
3. Return envelopes with real first class stamps
4. Personalization of correspondence
5. Token prepaid financial incentive

➢ Clearly, these are for a mail surveys
  – Basic principles still apply to other modes
  – Can be more challenging to implement in other modes
“Four contacts by first class mail...”

- A brief **pre-notice letter** sent a few days prior to the survey
- The survey with a **cover letter**
- A **thank you postcard** sent a few days to a week after the questionnaire
  - Both expresses appreciation for responding as well as a request that, if not, will do so soon
- A **replacement survey** to nonrespondents 2-4 weeks after original survey
- A **final contact** – by telephone, FedEx, priority US mail, etc. – 2-4 weeks after previous mailing
Doing Fielding Well Requires Attention to Detail and Flexibility

- Attention to detail:
  - Require complete sampling frame with necessary contact information (addresses, e-mail addresses)
    - If personalizing materials, must have complete and accurate names (and ranks)
      - Must ensure materials are written well and are appropriate for respondents
      - Must track respondents and non-respondents
  - Flexibility: Must be prepared to lengthen or curtail fielding period, adjust (e-)mailing dates of materials, etc.
Sample Pre-notice Letter

• Sent a few days prior to the survey
  – Not too far in advance or recipients will forget / not connect it to survey itself

• Should specifically note:
  – Will receive an important survey in a couple of days
  – Participation / response is greatly appreciated

• Better if sent by a person of authority using recognizable letterhead and/or logo
  – If so, note in letter that the survey will be from _______ organization on behalf of the person
Sample Pre-notice Letter

Washington State University

Date → July 1, 1999

Inside address → L. T. Hansen
               2121 Lincoln Way East
               Uniontown, WA 99962-2056

What will happen → A few days from now you will receive in the mail a request to fill out a brief questionnaire for an important research project being conducted by Washington State University.

What it is about → It concerns the experience of people who have moved to Washington state, and how they feel about living here.

Usefulness of survey → I am writing in advance because we have found many people like to know ahead of time that they will be contacted. The study is an important one that will help government agencies as well as employers in Washington understand who is moving to Washington, and whether their expectations are being met.

Thank-you → Thank you for your time and consideration. It's only with the generous help of people like you that our research can be successful.

Sincerely,

Real signature → Don A. Dillman
                Professor and Deputy Director

Token incentive → P.S. We will be enclosing a small token of appreciation with the questionnaire as a way of saying thanks.
Survey Cover Letter

• Introduction should indicate:
  – Who is conducting the survey and why
  – (Short) explanation of why survey is important
  – Topics to be covered in the survey

• Administrative matters
  – State whether responses are confidential or not
  – Any IRB stipulations
  – Perhaps indicate how long the survey should take
  – Keep it to one page in length if at all possible

• Again, if possible, put on letterhead and have signed by someone considered an authority by respondents
  – Dillman calls them “trust-inducing elements”
Sample Survey Cover Letter

Inside address → L. T. Hanson
2121 Lincoln Way East
Unincity, WA 99362-2096

The request → I am writing to ask your help in a study of new residents being conducted for the state of Washington. This study is a part of an effort to learn what draws people to the state, and whether they are happy or unhappy with what they find here.

Why you were selected → It’s my understanding that you may have moved to Washington state sometime in the last few years. We are contacting a random sample of new residents from every county in the state to ask why they moved, what their employment experience has been, and whether services are meeting their needs.

Usefulness of survey → Results from the survey will be used to help state and local government make Washington a better place for new residents like you. By understanding what people want when they move here, public officials can do a better job providing services and improving the state’s quality of life. And by knowing more about the job skills of new residents, public agencies and private businesses can help make the most of what new residents contribute to the state’s economy.

Confidentiality → Your answers are completely confidential and will be released only as summaries in which no individual’s answers can be identified. When you return your completed questionnaire, your name will be deleted from the mailing list and never connected to your answers in any way. This survey is voluntary. However, you can help as much or as little as you want by leaving a few minutes to share your experiences and opinions about Washington state. If for some reason you prefer not to respond, please let us know by returning the blank questionnaire in the enclosed stamped envelope.

Token of appreciation → We have enclosed a small token of appreciation as a way of saying thanks for your help.

Willingness to answer questions → If you have any questions or comments about this study, we’d be happy to talk with you. Our toll-free number is 1-800-833-0867, or you can write to us at the address on the letterhead.

Thank-you → Thank you very much for helping with this important study.

Sincerely,

Don A. Dillman
Professor and Deputy Director

P.S. If by some chance we made a mistake and you have not moved to Washington (or back to Washington after living somewhere else) since January 1990, please answer only the first question in the questionnaire and return the rest of it blank. Many thanks.
Another Sample Survey Cover Letter

THE ADVISORY PANEL TO ASSESS DOMESTIC RESPONSE CAPABILITIES FOR TERRORISM INVOLVING WEAPONS OF MASS DESTRUCTION

March 12, 2001

James S. Gilmore, III
Chairman
James Clapper, Jr.
Vice Chairman
L. Paul Bremer
Raymond Downey
George Foresman
William Gortman
M. Patricia Quinn
Patrick Ridgely
William Reno
Kenneth Shina
Ellen Embrey*

*U.S. Department of Defense Representative

Dear [HEAD_TITTLE] [HEAD_L_NAME]:

As chairman of the Advisory Panel to Assess Domestic Response Capabilities for Terrorism Involving Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), I am writing to solicit your participation in a survey to evaluate Federal WMD preparedness programs. This survey is not an assessment of your capabilities—it is your assessment of the Federal government’s efforts to improve local preparations for domestic terrorist incidents involving weapons of mass destruction.

The Panel was chartered by the United States Congress to assess capabilities across the nation for responding to domestic terrorist incidents involving weapons of mass destruction, particularly at the state and local levels. As a local responder organization, your input will ensure the Panel’s report to the President of the United States and Congress comprehensively reflects local assessments, requirements, and opinions of Federal programs.

Your participation is vital to our effort. Domestic terrorism preparedness transcends any single level of government, including the Federal government. It is a national issue that can only be effectively addressed through close cooperation at all levels—Federal, state, and local. The work of this Panel concerns nothing less than the security of our nation, the protection of our citizens’ civil liberties, and the ideals of our democratic society.

Your organization has been randomly selected to represent [ORG_TYPE_TEXT] throughout the United States. The survey is being conducted by RAND, an internationally renowned research institute. Please complete the enclosed survey and return it directly to RAND. It should take about one-half hour of your time.

If you prefer to have someone else in your organization complete the survey, please take a moment to fill out the enclosed postcard, indicating the individual in your organization who is most appropriate/qualified, return the postcard to RAND, and forward the survey on to your designee. This information will allow RAND to directly contact the person you designate to follow-up with them as needed.

Please be assured that RAND will keep your organization’s identity and survey responses strictly confidential. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to contact Drs. Ron Frecker and Lois Davis of RAND at 888-767-4758.

Thank you for your support of this important endeavor.

Very truly yours,

James S. Gilmore, III
Chairman
Governor of Virginia

March 12, 2001
Page Two
Anonymous Survey Return Cards

• Generally, paper surveys contain a code so that we can know who has responded

• For surveys about very sensitive topics, where anonymity is crucial, include a postcard to be mailed back separately
  – See Dillman for paragraph to include in cover letter

Figure 4.3 Example of separate return postcard used to facilitate anonymous return of questionnaires.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identification number:</th>
<th>Questionnaire #3456</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose:</td>
<td>This postcard is being returned to let you know that my questionnaire has been returned in a separate envelope.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Your name (please print)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation:</td>
<td>Thank you very much for your help with this important study. We really appreciate it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Don A. Dillman
The Social & Economic Sciences Research Center at Washington State University
Generally, people either respond immediately to a survey or not at all (to the initial mailing)

Postcard designed to jog memories of those who intended but forgot to do the survey
- It’s not for converting those that chose not to do it
- Postcard format deliberately supports this purpose

Sent to all potential respondents and arrives shortly after the original survey
- Re-conveys a sense of importance for the survey
- Has contact information for getting a replacement
July 15, 1999

Last week a questionnaire seeking your opinions about moving to Washington state was mailed to you. Your name was drawn randomly from a list of all new Washington state driver's license holders.

If you have already completed and returned the questionnaire to us, please accept our sincere thanks. If not, please do so today. We are especially grateful for your help because it is only by asking people like you to share your experiences that we can understand why people decide to move here, and the consequences of doing so.

If you did not receive a questionnaire, or if it was misplaced, please call us toll-free at 1-800-833-0867 and we will get another one in the mail to you today.

Don A. Dillman, Professor and Deputy Director
Social & Economic Sciences Research Center
Washington State University
Pullman, WA  99164-4014
Cover Letter with First Replacement Questionnaire

• Fielding strategy changes here with a focus on only nonrespondents
• Send out once survey returns start to tail off
• Cover letter has a tone of insistence
  – First paragraph in particular specifically states that the person’s survey has not yet been received
  – It’s an attempt to convert those who seem to have decided not to respond
    • Must be careful to neither under- or over-sell
• For mail surveys, always include a replacement questionnaire
Cover Letter with First Replacement Questionnaire

Washington State University

Date → July 29, 1999

Inside address → L.T. Hansen
2121 Lincoln Way East
Umatilla, WA 99962-2056

Feedback: We've not heard from you → About three weeks ago I sent a questionnaire to you that asked about your experiences of living in Washington state. To the best of our knowledge, it's not yet been returned.

Others have responded → The comments of people who have already responded include a wide variety of reasons for moving to (or back to) Washington. Many have described their experiences, both good and bad, in trying to find work. We think the results are going to be very useful to state leaders and others.

Usefulness of your response → We are writing again because of the importance that your questionnaire has for helping to get accurate results. Although we sent questionnaires to people living in every county in the state, it's only by hearing from nearly everyone in the sample that we can be sure that the results are truly representative.

Are you eligible? More feedback → A few people have written to say that they should not have received the questionnaire because they no longer live in Washington or that they moved here before 1995. If either of these concerns apply to you, please let us know on the cover of the questionnaire and return it in the enclosed envelope so that we can delete your name from the mailing list.

Confidentiality → A comment on our survey procedures: A questionnaire identification number is printed on the back cover of the questionnaire so that we can check your name off of the mailing list when it is returned. The list of names is then destroyed so that individual names can never be connected to the results in any way. Protecting the confidentiality of people's answers is very important to us, as well as the University.

Voluntary → We hope that you will fill out and return the questionnaire soon, but if for any reason you prefer not to answer it, please let us know by returning a note or blank questionnaire in the enclosed stamped envelope.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Don A. Dilliard
Professor and Deputy Director

P.S. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. The toll-free number where I can be reached in Pullman is 1-800-933-6060.
• Continued focus on nonrespondents with an increased insistence
  – Increased insistence achieved *not* by tone of letter, but by repeated try and priority mailing
  – Since previous approaches failed, change the stimulus with new priority packaging

• Tone of letter about the same as previous
  – Focus on importance of survey and the possibility that these individuals have something important to contribute
**Final Contact Letter (Priority Mail)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>September 5, 1999</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inside address</td>
<td>L. T. Hansen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2131 Lincoln Way East</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uniontown, WA 99662-2056</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to previous mailings</td>
<td>During the last two months we have sent you several mailings about an important research study we are conducting for the state of Washington.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose and usefulness</td>
<td>Its purpose is to help state agencies understand the reasons people are moving to Washington state, and their experiences after coming here that might be relevant to improving state services.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is running out</td>
<td>The study is drawing to a close, and this is the last contact that will be made with the random sample of people who we think, based on driver’s license records, moved here in the last year.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation for special contact</td>
<td>We are sending this final contact by priority mail because of our concern that people who have not responded may have had different experiences than those who have. Hearing from everyone in this small statewide sample helps assure that the survey results are as accurate as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidentiality</td>
<td>We also want to assure you that your response to this study is voluntary, and if you prefer not to respond that’s fine. If you are not a recent mover to Washington state, and you feel that we have made a mistake including you in this study, please let us know by returning the blank questionnaire with a note indicating so. This would be very helpful.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you</td>
<td>Finally, we appreciate your willingness to consider our request as we conclude this effort to better understand job, living, and other issues facing new Washington state residents. Thank you very much.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Real signature</td>
<td>Don A. Dillman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professor and Deputy Director</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
My Take

• Potential respondents pick up on small details
  – You’re asking them to spend valuable time – you have to make it look like it’s worth their time
  – For me, all it takes is one thing being “off” and I may judge survey not worth my time

• With sensitive information, you’re also asking respondents to trust you to safeguard their data
  – Why should they trust you if they see sloppiness in the survey or the fielding materials???

• During fielding, flexibility important
  – Have to be able to adjust as the fielding unfolds
  – Have back-up plan(s)
Remember: There are Lots of Ways One Can Fail to Complete a Survey

Breakdowns in Implementation:

1. Receive
2. Open
3. Start
4. Finish
5. Return

Kulka, Holt, Carter, and Dowd (1991)
OA4109 Class Project

Survey objectives:

1. Provide body of evidence from new NPS students to support WASC accreditation
2. Provide NPS administration with feedback from the new student experience
3. Provide baseline information for future studies

- 11 week class project
- Conducted entirely electronically
Dear Rank Firstname Lastname,

Tomorrow you will receive a request to fill out a brief survey in support of an important research project being conducted by the Naval Postgraduate School. The survey is being sent to all new students and will ask questions regarding your experiences with NPS.

Please find a request to accomplish this survey from your Dean of Students, CAPT Hobbs. The study being performed will help NPS determine how well it is communicating with and supporting the needs of new students, and assist NPS with the constant improvement process.

Thank you in advance for your time. Only with the assistance of students like you can this research project be successful, and can NPS continue to improve the experience of new students.

Sincerely,

Dr. Fran Horvath
Director of Institutional Planning and Communications
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA  93943

831-656-2228
rfhorvat@nps.edu
February 4, 2008

Dear Naval Postgraduate School Student

SUBJECT: NEW STUDENT SURVEY

You have been selected to participate in a study to determine how effectively the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) is supporting the needs of its students. The results of this study will be used to improve the academic experience at NPS and to aid NPS in preparing for its upcoming accreditation. This study is sponsored by Dr. Fran Horvath, NPS’ Director of Institutional Planning and Communications.

Only with the input of students like you can NPS fully assess its programs and support services, learning conditions and academic effectiveness, and the overall student experience. By knowing your impressions, we hope to improve the experiences of future students as well as make the rest of your time here as successful as possible.

In the next few days you will be contacted by Professor Ron Fricker and Maj Carlos Rascon, USMC to take a survey about your experiences since arriving at NPS. Please complete the questionnaire as soon as possible. I understand that your personal time is important to you and so the survey has been kept short – it should only take about twenty minutes to complete.

Note that all information you provide will be kept completely confidential and will be released only as summaries with no identifying information. Once you have completed the survey, your name will be removed from the survey mailing list and upon completion of the study all records of your participation in the survey will be destroyed.

If you experience any difficulties, have any questions or comments about this study, or for some reason you would prefer not to participate, please contact Dr. Fricker of the Operations Research department at rdfricke@nps.edu or Maj Carlos Rascon at cgrascon@nps.edu.

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Bob Hendrickson

Director, U.S. Navy

Naval Postgraduate School
From: rfhorvat@nps.edu
To: flastnam@nps.edu
Subject: NPS New Student Survey

Dear Rank Firstname Lastname,

As I mentioned in my E-mail to you yesterday, this is my request for you to complete the new student survey. Here is a link to the survey: http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=0iU_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d

This link is uniquely tied to this survey and your email address, please do not forward this message.

Again, thank you for your participation!

Sincerely,

Dr. Fran Horvath
Director of Institutional Planning and Communications
Naval Postgraduate School
Monterey, CA 93943
831-656-2228
rhovat@nps.edu

Please note: If you are NOT an NPS student in your first quarter please click here: http://www.surveymonkey.com/optout.aspx?sm=0iU_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d
Dear Rank Firstname Lastname,

Several days ago I sent you an E-mail link to a questionnaire that asked you about your initial experiences here at the Naval Postgraduate School. To the best of my knowledge, that questionnaire has not yet been completed.

Many of your pier students have already provided us with valuable feedback, both good and bad, and additional feedback is continuing to be provided. We expect the results to be very useful to the Naval Postgraduate School.

You are being contacted again because the opinion of every new student is important, and only by obtaining the opinion of every new student can we ensure that the results of the survey are accurate. In case the original E-mail containing the link was inadvertently discarded, please follow the link below and complete the questionnaire today.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=0iUi_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d

Although we track who has responded to the survey using your email address, please be assured that all responses are completely confidential. Once your questionnaire is completed, your name will be removed from our list and you will not be contacted in connection with your answers.

This survey is completely voluntary, but highly encouraged. If for some reason you would prefer not to participate, please let us know by contacting Dr. Ronald Fricker of the Operations Research department in his office at (831)656-3048 or by email at rdfricke@nps.edu.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this important study.

Sincerely,

Dr. Fran Horvath
Director of Institutional Planning and Communications Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943

831-656-2228
rfhorvat@nps.edu

Please note: If you are NOT a NPS student in your first quarter please click here: http://www.surveymonkey.com/optout.aspx?sm=0iUi_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d
From: rfhorvat@nps.edu  
To: flastnam@nps.edu  
Subject: NPS New Student Survey  

Dear Rank Firstname Lastname,

Last week I sent you several emails that asked you to participate in an important research project to assess your initial experiences here at the Naval Postgraduate School.

The opinion of every new student is very important, and only by obtaining the opinion of every new student can we ensure that the results of the survey are accurate. The improvement of new student experiences can only be achieved by first learning about those experiences, so your participation is important.

Please follow the link below and complete the questionnaire right away. The time available for collecting data and completing this study is very limited, and the response of every student is important.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=0iUi_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d

This link is uniquely tied to this survey and your email address, please do not forward this message.

Please be assured that all responses are completely confidential. Once your questionnaire is completed, your name will be removed from our list and you will not be contacted in connection with your answers.

I appreciate your willingness to take the time to participate in this important study. As it draws to a close, the importance of obtaining responses from every new student is not reduced. Thank you again.

Sincerely,

Dr. Fran Horvath  
Director of Institutional Planning and Communications Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943  
831-656-2228  
rfhorvat@nps.edu

Please note: If you are NOT a NPS student in your first quarter please click here: http://www.surveymonkey.com/optout.aspx?sm=0iUi_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d
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Dr. Fran Horvath
Director of Institutional Planning and Communications Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943

831-656-2228
rfhorvat@nps.edu

Please note: If you are NOT a NPS student in your first quarter please click here:
http://www.surveymonkey.com/optout.aspx?sm=0iUi_2brLA2vivTCC_2b5MR_2bhw_3d_3d
Student Responses

- I apologize for not completing the survey yet. But this is a terrible week for most students. This is midterm week and I had 2 due on Thursday and Friday and working to complete the last one. If it is not too late, I can complete it by Monday, 18 Feb. Please let me know if this is satisfactory.
- I've done. First link you sent to me did not work. SORRY BEING LATE WITH THE ANSWERS.
- I've received your message and will certainly do so latest by tomorrow as I have 2 mid terms, lectures and discussion in the afternoon.
- Thank you for your continuous support to new students. I think it's a great chance to interact between NPS and students, but I have an exam tomorrow. So, if possible I would like to answer your survey via e-mail.
• One pre-announcement (e-mail with Dean’s endorsement)
• One invitation (electronic in SurveyMonkey)
• 3 Follow-ups (electronic in SurveyMonkey)

**New Student Survey (Daily)**

- **Number Responded**
- **Response Rate**

- **Date:**
  - Wed (13)
  - Thurs (14)
  - Fri (15)
  - Sat (16)
  - Sun (17)
  - Mon (18)
  - Tues (19)
  - Wed (20)
  - Thurs (21)
  - Fri (22)
  - Sat (23)
  - Sun (24)
  - Mon (25)

- **Final:** 93%
What We Have Covered

• Learned a number of proven strategies for improving survey response rates
  – Based on Don A. Dillman’s “Tailored Design Method”
  – Focused on mail surveys, but principles generalize to other modes

• Basic principle: repeated (appropriate) contact with respondents will improve response rates
  – Without, expect a decrease of 20-40 percent!