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Quick Tips

What You Should Do If You Haven't Gotten a Respectable Response Rate

If you got a poor response to your mail, e-mail or telephone survey:

Use follow-up methods for improving response.

Most surveys will take more than one follow-up method to reach a respectable response rate. See Quick Tips #1 for techniques to improve response rate.

Use other methods to get the information you need.

For example, if you get a low response rate from a mail survey, call people on the phone. If you used a telephone survey, try a visit or an appointment.

Compare those who responded to those who did not.

Describe the characteristics of people who did not respond. Are they different from those who did? This can help you address "non-response error."¹ You might already have information from a mailing list, administrative data base or another source that would tell you their age, gender, work status or other information that is important to the outcomes you are measuring.

Ask for information less often or ask other people.

Perhaps you recently asked for information from them about this or a different program. Maybe you are asking too many questions or questions that they have answered for other evaluations. Try other sources of information who may be able to answer your questions.

Ask questions that are important or relevant to your respondents.

Perhaps the evaluation questions do not interest them. If this is the case, maybe the program did not interest them. Try to find out why.

Demonstrate how you will use the information.

Share past, if any, results and/or how the information will be used to make improvements to the program.

If what information you have gives a skewed picture of your program, don't use it.

If you have a poor response rate, consider not using the results to report successes or to make decisions about program improvement. Your best decision might be to use a different method or methods to evaluate your program. Fewer high quality evaluations are better than many poor quality evaluations.

¹ See Dillman, D. (2000). *Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method*, 2nd Edition. New York: John Wiley & Sons for more information.