Mail Surveys

RTI is experienced in designing and conducting mail surveys of persons, households, and business establishments in the United States, including subpopulations such as college graduates, nurses, school teachers, school administrators, elderly individuals, military personnel, unions, private employers, public agencies, and various industry groups. We use our experience and knowledge to design effective mail survey questionnaires and to carry out efficient mail survey procedures, which maximize response rates.

- **Survey Design:** We use the principles of *Total Survey Design* for each mail survey application. This approach involves multiple contacts with the survey sample, usually including a lead letter mailing, an initial questionnaire mailing, and a variety of follow-up contacts (e.g., thank you/reminder postcards, mail and telephone promptings, and follow-up mailings of the questionnaire) to maximize the overall response rate. Our mail survey experts are highly skilled at developing appropriate survey materials and determining the optimal combination, sequence, and timing of mail survey contacts.

- **Questionnaire Design and Development:** Our survey methodologists and substantive experts develop candidate questions using the wording thought best to convey the meaning of the question to respondents. We evaluate candidate questions in our cognitive laboratory to identify items that are difficult to answer and suggest improvements in concepts or wording. We revise questions as needed to make sure the language is simple, easily understood, and effective in obtaining the desired information from respondents. To obtain high mail response rates, we format and order the items into a questionnaire that respondents will find attractive, interesting, understandable, non-threatening, and easy to read.

Once we have assembled the questionnaire, we often use focus groups to improve question wording, test the extent to which the questions elicit accurate responses, and evaluate the ability and willingness of population members to respond appropriately to the questionnaire. Focus groups are also used to gauge positive and negative reactions to the instructions, endorsement letters, respondent incentives, follow-up efforts, and other features of the survey design. We often use pretests with a small number of actual respondents to identify problems. Additionally, we may conduct pilot surveys with fairly large sample sizes to test the design under real survey conditions. Pilot tests help us to evaluate important methodological alternatives and to accurately predict response rate levels for the full survey.

- **Data Collection Design:** We recruit survey endorsers (agencies or individuals) to legitimize surveys and help motivate sample members to thoughtfully complete the inquiry. We carefully word and tailor brief endorsement letters, which we enclose with questionnaire mailouts, to the population of interest to maximize the letters’ effectiveness. The questionnaires and accompanying instructions are formatted and printed using color to make them attractive to the sample members. We enclose monetary or other respondent incentives with the initial mailing for some
surveys. Research and our experience show that prepaid incentives are more effective than promised incentives, and that monetary incentives are usually more effective than other forms of incentives, such as a lottery ticket or a pen.

We carefully consider initial and follow-up mailing plans to maximize a survey’s success. For example, we often mail postcards to the entire sample five days after the initial mailout thanking those who have already responded. The postcard also reminds those who have not responded to please do so. Survey specialists carefully determine the content, sequence, number, and timing of follow-ups, such as mail promptings, second questionnaire mailouts, telephone reminder calls, etc.

In many cases, a mixed-mode design produces high response rates while reducing the cost of data collection. For example, in a study of the Medicare population, we satisfied our client’s need for a large sample while remaining within predetermined budgetary parameters by developing a data collection plan that used a combination of mail and telephone interviewing. Collecting the majority of the data by mail kept project costs low, while the nonrespondent telephone follow-up maximized the final response rate.

- **On-site Mailout:** RTI has an on-site Data Preparation Unit, that aids in the preparation of questionnaires and data collection instruments for mailouts. Data Preparation staff prepare questionnaire mailings or packages for respondents and field interviewers; open, sort and maintain daily receipt records of incoming questionnaires; and edit and code questionnaire data. We use a fully automated survey control system to monitor the flow of data collection instruments from their initial distribution or mailing through all the stages of data collection--receipt, editing, coding, data entry, and computer editing and processing.

- **Methodological Experiments:** Our survey methodologists are experts in designing experimental research to add to the body of survey methodology knowledge. We have incorporated methodological experiments into many past projects. For example, we conducted a major pilot survey prior to the 1995 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey, in which the sample of 2,300 households was split equally into three parts. Examining the results, we compared the effect of using an activity diary, an activity/trip diary, or cold recall interviews. The results favored the diaries and our client adopted a travel diary for the main survey.

- **Selected Projects:** RTI conducted the *Sixth National Sample Survey of Registered Nurses*, a congressionally mandated survey that involved mailing a lead letter and questionnaire to 45,000 registered nurses. Follow-up of nonrespondents was carried out by telephone. For the *Medicare Beneficiary Health Status Registry Pilot Study*, RTI tested the feasibility of large-scale data collection on health status of the elderly using a mailed self-administered questionnaire with telephone follow-up of nonrespondents. Two age cohorts and three different questionnaires were tested.