

# Qualitative Research on Ways to Maximize Response Rates in HINTS

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# Overview

- ▶ Focus group testing of draft advance letters for HINTS 2007
- ▶ In-depth interviews examining reactions to potential survey booklet covers

# Background

- ▶ Across all types of surveys, cooperation with survey requests has fallen over the past decade.
  - We observed a notable decrease in response rate from HINTS 2003 to 2005 (telephone RDD).
- ▶ HINTS 2007 implemented a dual sample frame mode design (phone/mail)

# Focus groups

- ▶ Examined focus group participant reactions to materials (advance letters) designed to communicate the purpose and importance of HINTS and encourage response
- ▶ Ideas for variations in letters developed from a “brainstorming” meeting with several HINTS data users at NCI (Summer, 2006)

# Methods

- ▶ Four focus groups (Fall, 2006)
  - 2 rounds of 2 groups each, 3 weeks apart
- ▶ In each round, one group focused on letters designed for the HINTS mail sample, the other on letters for the HINTS telephone sample
- ▶ Materials revised after the first two groups for additional testing in next two groups

# Focus Group Participants

- ▶ Each group consisted of 9-10 persons living in Washington, DC area
- ▶ Almost equal numbers of males/females
- ▶ Half were white, rest were Hispanic, Asian, or African-American
- ▶ Mix of age groups
- ▶ Mix of education levels (somewhat higher than U.S. average)

# First Round of 2 Groups

- We obtained reactions to three versions of an advance letter...

# Advance Letter Versions (First Round)

- ▶ Version 1: Included two “factoids” based on previous HINTS findings
- ▶ Version 2: A more “conversational” approach – notes we have access to lots of health information, but we don’t always know how to find what’s needed
- ▶ Version 3: Very brief letter, with a detailed FAQ sheet attached

# Version 1

Dear Friend:

I'm writing to ask you to take part in an important national survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Health Information National Trends Survey has interviewed thousands of people in the last few years. From it we've learned that:

- **Most people don't know when to have tests to screen for certain types of cancer.**
- **Most people look for health information on the Internet before asking their doctors, even though they trust their doctors more.**

With information like this, the survey can help the government and private companies get valuable information on health to you and your family.

Your household was selected at random for this survey. An interviewer from Westat....

# Version 2

Dear Friend:

Americans today have access to more health information than ever. But we don't always know how to find what we really need to know. I hope you'll take part in an important survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. By taking part, you can help us do a better job of meeting the health information needs of the nation.

Your household was selected at random for the Health Information National Trends Survey. An interviewer from Westat....

# Version 3

Dear Friend:

Americans today have access to more health information than ever. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services needs your help in finding better ways to provide this information to all Americans.

I hope you'll take part in the Health Information National Trends Survey to help us find out how people get their health information and how they would like to get it in the future. Your input can help us do a better job of meeting the health information needs of the nation. Please see the attached sheet for more information about this study.

An interviewer from the research firm Westat will call...

# Version 3 – attached FAQ

**Q: What is the study about? What kind of questions will you be asking?**

A: The study concerns health and how people receive health information. For example, we will ask how you usually get information about how to stay healthy, the sources of information you most trust, and how you might like to get such information in the future. We will also ask about your beliefs on what contributes to good health, how best to prevent cancer, your participation in various health-related activities, and related topics.

**Q: How will the study results be used? What will be done with my information?**

A: Findings will help the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services promote good health and prevent disease, by determining ways of better communicating accurate health information to people.

**Q: How did you get my (unlisted) telephone number?**

A: Your number was randomly selected from among all of the possible telephone numbers in the nation. It was selected using scientific sampling methods. If your number was unlisted, it still is.

**Q: How did you get my address?**

A: An independent organization matched a list of published addresses to the randomly selected telephone numbers included in the sample for this survey. This letter was sent to every address that was matched with a telephone number in the sample. Address information is kept confidential and will be destroyed as soon as the survey is completed.

# Reactions to Advance Letters (First Round)

- ▶ Participants liked the factoids in Version 1

*"You're drawn in, and so you keep reading."*

- They give a more concrete idea of what the survey is about, as opposed to "a survey about health information"
- They make the survey seem more important, by showing that something of value has come from it

# Reactions to Advance Letters (First Round)

- ▶ The “conversational” first paragraph of Version 2 also viewed positively by most
  - Tone described as “warm” and “friendly”  
  
*“It’s sort of including us all together....it’s not just some government agency, it’s all of us.”*
- ▶ A small number of people were put off by this though - preferred the “direct” approach of Version 1 (“I’m writing to ask you to take part...”)

# Reactions to Advance Letters (First Round)

- ▶ Version 3 disliked by almost all
  - Too impersonal
  - Too much material, much of it unnecessary

# Advance Letters: Other Reactions (First Round)

- ▶ Most of the discussion was centered around letters on DHHS letterhead, with DHHS indicated as the survey sponsor
- ▶ But we also showed them a letter (their preferred version) on NCI letterhead, indicating NCI as the sponsor
  - Letters presented to participants in DHHS vs. NCI envelopes

# Advance Letters: Other Reactions (First Round)

- ▶ DHHS viewed as much more effective
  - Some said they would open an envelope from DHHS, but not from NCI (would assume it's a solicitation)
  - People know DHHS is a government agency
  - They don't know NCI is a government agency (many types of organizations call themselves an "Institute")

# Advance Letters: Other Reactions (First Round)

- ▶ Some participants put off by the salutation "Dear Friend"
  - Viewed as inappropriate:  
*"That's just overstepping the boundaries, they don't know me!"*  
*"I'm not your friend, so why are you calling me that?"*
  - It sounds like a solicitation

# Advance Letters: Other Reactions (First Round)

- ▶ The FAQ sheet attached to Version 3
  - Though many thought it was too much material, some felt it was valuable.
  - It was suggested that such a sheet could be included no matter which version of the letter we used
  - We decided to gather more reactions to an FAQ in the next two groups

# Advance Letter Versions (Second Round)

- ▶ Version 1: Included three "factoids"
- ▶ Version 2: The more "conversational" approach
- ▶ Version 3: The group's preferred version (1 or 2) with FAQ printed on reverse

# Version 1

I'm writing to ask you to take part in an important national survey sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Health Information National Trends Survey has interviewed thousands of people in the last few years. From it we've learned that:

- **Many people look for health information on the Internet before asking their doctors, even though they trust their doctors more.**
- **About one in four Americans read the health section of a newspaper or magazine every week.**
- **Many people don't know when to have tests to screen for certain types of cancer.**

With information like this, the survey can help the government and companies get valuable information on health to you and your family.

# Reactions to Advance Letters (Second Round)

- Both groups felt that Version 1 was the stronger letter, largely because of the factoids:

*"The statistics make a difference...it gives a purpose."*

*"It gives examples of the kinds of questions that you're going to ask."*

*"Version 1 gives the appearance that more thought and effort has gone into it."*

*"It makes me feel like I'm a part of something."*

# Reactions to Advance Letters (Second Round)

- ▶ When shown Version 3 (i.e., Version 1 with the FAQ on the reverse side), most were impressed
  - Some liked the additional information
  - Others liked the Q&A format (easy to take in)
- ▶ Some felt it was too much information, and noted redundancies between letter and FAQ

# Conclusions: Advance Letters

- ▶ Presenting some simple straightforward findings from previous surveys in an advance letter seems effective at facilitating interest in a survey request
- ▶ Thus, the advance letters used in HINTS 2007 presented factoids

# Conclusions: Advance Letters

- ▶ Including a set of FAQs on the reverse side of the letter seems to be a good idea
  - Some won't look at it
  - But others may pay more attention to it than the letter, due to its Q&A format

# Conclusions: Advance Letters

- ▶ From the standpoint of getting people's attention and maximizing response rates, DHHS should be identified as the sponsor of a survey, rather than NCI
  - In the first two groups, virtually everyone recognized DHHS as a government agency
  - But few recognized NCI as such

# Survey Booklet Covers

- ▶ You may wonder how we arrived at the design of the HINTS survey booklet cover  
[page 1 of pdf file]
- ▶ Visually dominated by...
  - The title
  - DHHS logo
- ▶ Very much a “government look”

# Survey Booklet Covers

- ▶ We initially began with something very different in mind, with photos reflecting a communication theme [page 2 of pdf file]
- ▶ But in a round of cognitive interviews focused on testing the design of the mail survey questionnaire, reactions caused us to think twice about it...

# Survey Booklet Covers

- ▶ Most participants liked the cover, but its communication-oriented photos were not clearly health-related
  - TV watching, computer use, newspaper reading
  - Woman at computer said to be "looking for a job"
- ▶ Some thought it looked too "commercial" (could be from a health insurance plan)
  - Our focus groups suggested that government and DHHS sponsorship should be emphasized to maximize cooperation.

# Survey Booklet Covers

- ▶ So in another round of interviews, we chose to focus on three other cover possibilities
  - Two from Westat's Graphics Dept. (#1, #2)
  - One developed emphasizing DHHS logo (#3)

# Comparing The 3 Covers

- ▶ Interviewer read a series of attributes and asked participant to say which cover looks most like the attribute. For example...

Most Serious

Most Government-looking

Most Official

Most Scientific

Most Important

Most Attractive

Most Professional

Most Interesting

Most Impressive

Most like Advertising

Most Commercial

Most Silly

Most Trivial

Most Annoying

Most Ugly

# Comparing The 3 Covers

► Participants saw Cover #3 as the....

- Most "government-looking" (8 of 9)
- Most "official" (7 of 9)
- Most important (6 of 9)
- Most serious (5 of 9)

# Comparing The 3 Covers

- ▶ Participants viewed Cover #1 as the....
  - Most Impressive (7 of 9)
  - Most Interesting (6 of 9)
  - Most Attractive (6 of 9)
- ▶ But also...
  - Most like Advertising (7 of 9)
  - Most Commercial (7 of 9)

# Comparing The 3 Covers

- ▶ The most negative attributes (most silly, ugly, annoying, etc.) were fairly evenly distributed across the three covers
- ▶ Interestingly, participants frequently indicated that these negative attributes applied to none of the three covers

# Conclusions Regarding the Covers

- ▶ Past research on survey response rates (as well as our focus groups) suggest that the attributes attached to Cover #3 (government-looking, important) maximize response rates. As one person put it, when pointing to #3....
  - *"If they're gonna send me something, I should at least look at it."*

# Conclusions Regarding the Covers

- ▶ Some criticism was aimed at Cover #3 that we felt was worth heeding
  - DHHS logo too big relative to the survey title (this seems to promote the agency rather than the survey)
  - Black and white
- ▶ Addressing these criticisms resulted in the survey booklet cover we ultimately used

END

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# Health Information

## National Trends Survey

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National Institutes of Health  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services



# Health Information

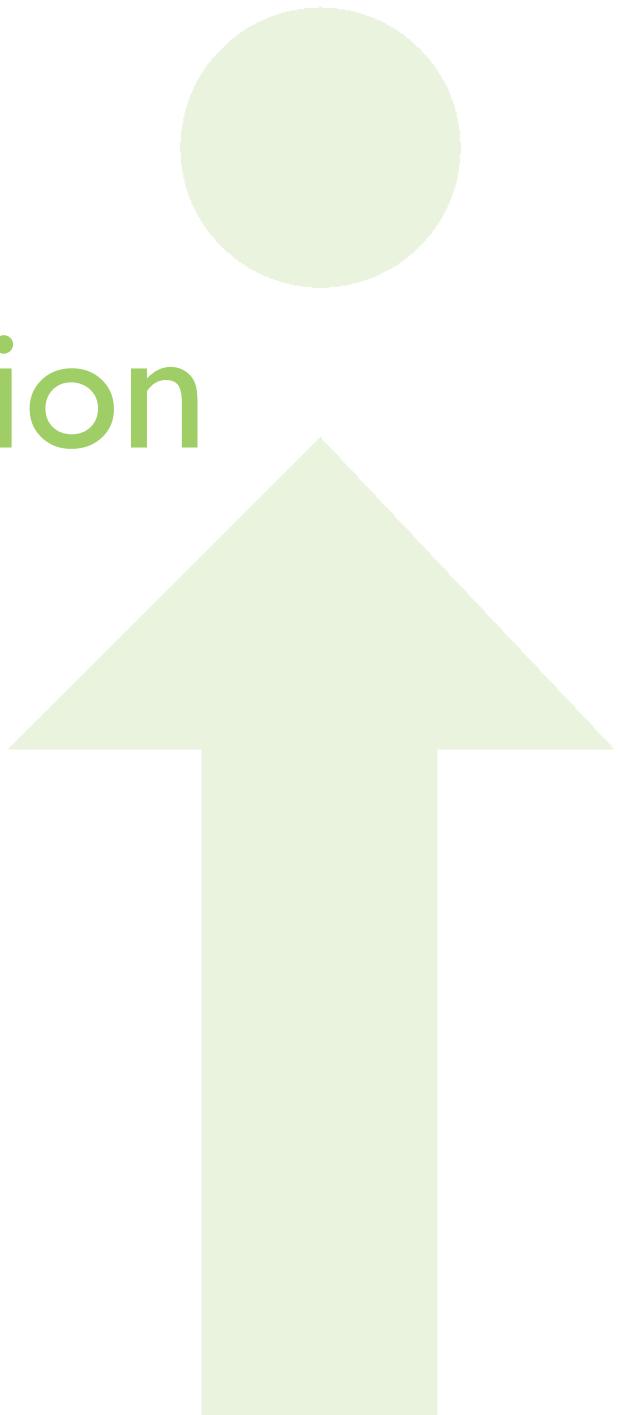
## National Trends Survey



Health  
Information  
National  
Trends  
Survey

The hints logo, identical to the one at the top of the page, consisting of the word "hints" in blue with a green arrow through the "i".

# Health Information National Trends Survey



National Institutes of Health  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

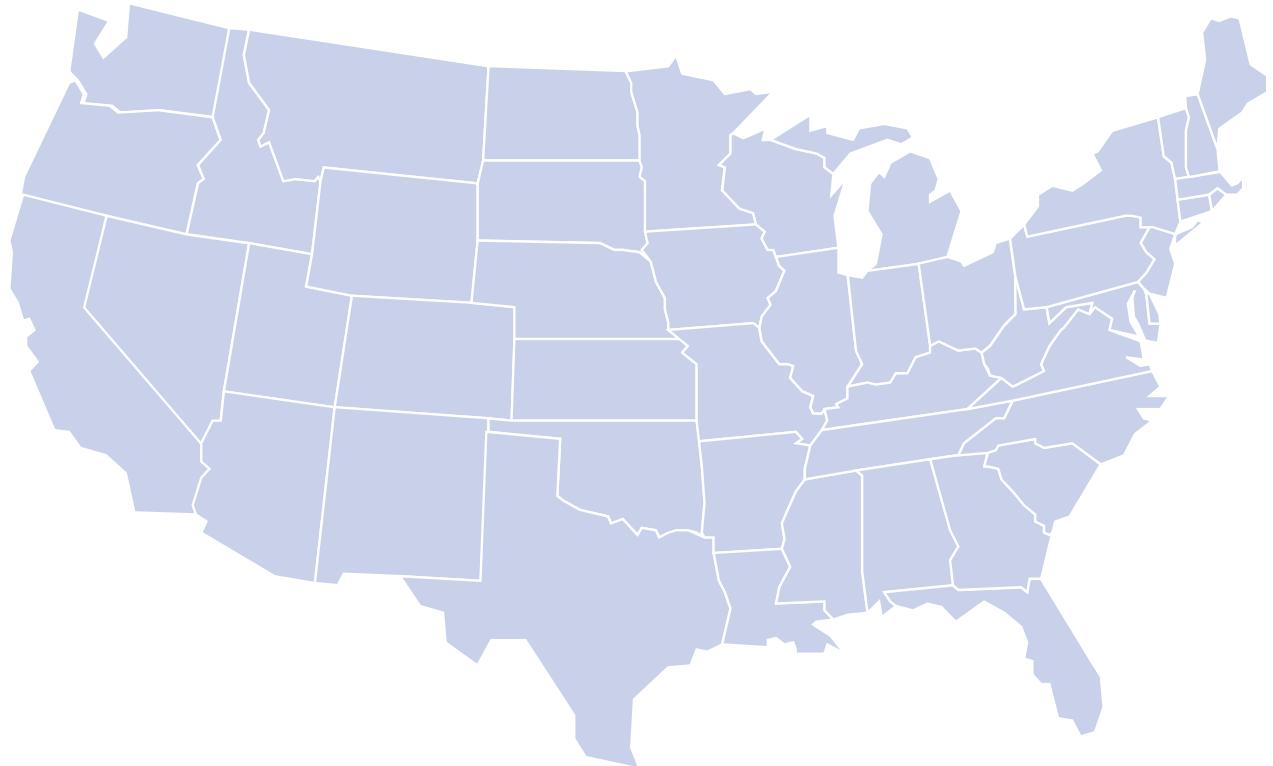
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# Health Information

## National Trends Survey

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National Institutes of Health  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

# Health Information National Trends Survey

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National Institutes of Health  
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