

SURVEYS 153

Nonresponse Error

Nonresponse error occurs when those who did not respond to the survey are in some ways different from those who did respond and that difference is relevant to the research study. An obvious example would be an e-survey to determine workload levels of school principals. The principals with the heaviest workloads may be the ones least likely to take the time to complete an e-survey and thus their critical information will be lost, resulting in considerable nonresponse error.

Response Bias

Response bias occurs when survey respondents deliberately or inadvertently falsify or misrepresent their answers. Respondents may falsify answers to give socially acceptable answers, to avoid potential embarrassment, or to conceal personal or confidential information. Misrepresentations occur when respondents provide incorrect responses to questions to which there is a correct answer.

ACHIEVING A HIGH RESPONSE RATE

Although there is no absolute minimum for an acceptable response rate, the higher the response rate, the more accurately the survey sample results will reflect the opinions of the target population. Researchers use theories to help explain and predict a variety of communication, interaction, and other human behaviors. For example, in the field of social sciences, social exchange theory has been usefully adapted to provide guidelines for the construction and administration of surveys (Dillman, 2000). Underlying this theory is the premise that human behavior occurs and is channeled by the rewards that result from these behaviors. If the behavior is to continue, the rewards to the individual must exceed the costs of engaging in the behavior. Further, since the rewards may be long term or delayed in arriving, the participant must have trust (in the researcher) that the benefits will outweigh the costs. In the following section, we describe the general means by which these three important variables—rewards, risks, and trust—can be used by the researcher to increase the response rates of e-surveys.

Rewards

There are a variety of techniques by which the e-researcher can enhance the respondents' perception of reward for participating in the e-survey. Most obviously, the e-researcher may wish to build in tangible incentives such as gift certificates, promises of cash, discounts, or prizes. Reward is also engendered by the respondents' perception that the survey is useful and worthwhile and that their participation in the survey is important. Efforts should also be made to validate the position of respondents by acknowledging their inclusion in the important group selected for this study. Engaging participants immediately in the text of a cover letter and in the first few questions is vitally important to this perception of reward. Engagement is