

Can A Verbal Prompt About Importance Reduce Item Nonresponse For Demographic Items?¹

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Abstract

Conventional wisdom leads to placing demographic items at the end of a questionnaire. A recent study by Teclaw, Price and Osatuke (2012) found that item response for demographic items at the beginning of a questionnaire was higher than when the items were at the end. This raises the question of whether there are other equally effective approaches to stimulating responses for demographic questions. This experiment tests whether a verbal prompt about the importance of answering the demographic questions improves item response rates when the items are placed at the end of the survey. Using data from a customer satisfaction survey, the item response rates were no higher for the questionnaire with the verbal prompt than the one without it. These results indicate that a verbal prompt about importance is not a viable strategy for reducing nonresponse of demographic items.

Introduction

Demographic items are often included in questionnaires to allow researchers to conduct in-depth analysis of subgroups. However, nonresponse to demographic questions can be a problem, more so for people responding by mail than those using the Web (Israel & Lamm, 2012). Item nonresponse adversely affects the available sample for analysis by reducing power of the test and introducing bias. Consequently, identifying strategies to limit item nonresponse can help improve the accuracy and usefulness of surveys.

A common practice is to place demographic items toward the end of the questionnaire because many researchers believe these items are less important. The survey design might, however, call for placing them at the beginning to screen out ineligibles or to ease the respondent into the questionnaire (Dillman et al., 2009).

A recent study by Teclaw, Prince, and Osatuke (2012) found that item response for demographic questions was higher when positioned at the beginning of the survey than at the end. This raises the question of whether there are other equally effective strategies to stimulating a high item response rate for demographic questions.

Conceptual Framework

Beatty and Herrmann (2002) assert that the decision to respond to a question is influenced by a person's cognitive state (which refers to the accessibility of the information and effort needed to retrieve it), perceptions about the desired accuracy of an answer, and intentions to communicate requested information. With regard to demographic questions, the first two influences should be a minor consideration while the third likely drives the response decision. Anecdotal evidence from previous surveys suggests that some respondents feel demographic items are intrusive (e.g., "It's none of your business") while others appear to not be motivated enough to avoid skipping over any items. So, a question is how can respondent motivation be increased?

Using verbal prompts is a strategy that has been successfully employed during telephone surveys to encourage respondents to provide more information (Miller and Cannell 1982). Likewise, including a verbal prompt about the importance of the question and to "take your time" in answering produced longer responses for open-ended questions among late respondents (Smyth, Dillman, Christian, and McBride 2009).

Thus, this study explores whether an importance prompt can similarly motivate respondents and, thereby, increase item response rates for demographic questions

Methods

- Data were collected for the 2012 survey of Florida Cooperative Extension Service's (FCES) clients.
- A sample of 2,641 participants were selected and invited to respond to a mixed-mode survey.
- A unified mode design was used for the mail and Web instruments to provide the same verbal and visual presentation (Dillman et al., 2009).
- The overall response rate was 54.0%, with 1,426 partial and complete responses.
- Participants were randomly assigned one of two experimental treatments. One included a prompt

Experimental Treatments

Version 1. With importance prompt.

It is very important for you to give answers to all of the following questions so that we can determine how different groups of clients feel about our services. Please answer all of the questions below.

10. How many times during the past 2 months have you attended an Extension program or contacted the Extension office? Times

Version 2. Without importance prompt.

Finally, we would like to ask a few questions for statistical purposes.

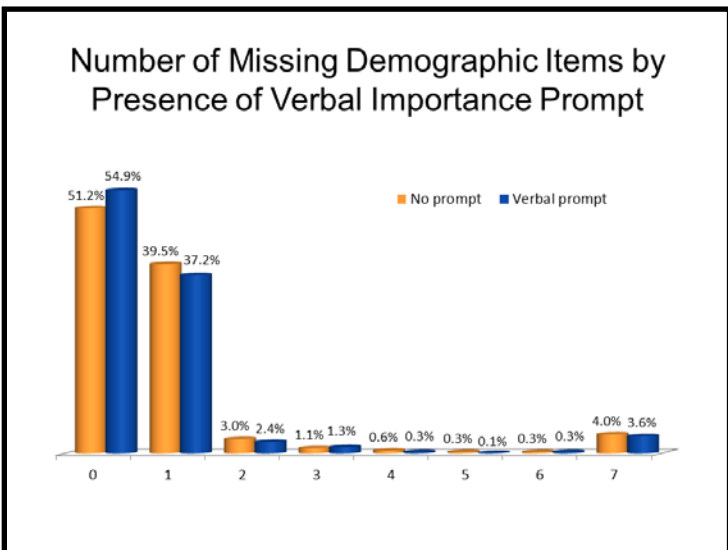
10. How many times during the past 2 months have you attended an Extension program or contacted the Extension office? Times

describing the importance of answering all of the demographic questions and the second did not.

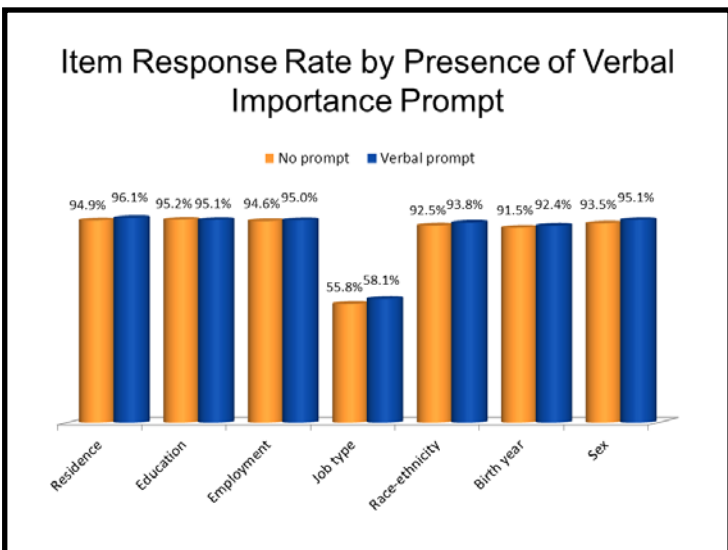
- Data analysis was conducted with SAS statistical software, using Chi-square tests.

Findings

- Although the verbal prompt slightly improved the percent of respondents who provided answers to all of the demographic items, this was not statistically significant (Chisq = 3.157, df = 7, Exact Chisq p-value = .879).
- In addition, item response rates were not different for either the mail or Web modes (although the latter showed a higher item responses rate with the prompt, it was not statistically significant).



- Likewise, the verbal prompt to complete the demographic items did not significantly improve the response rate for any of the individual items, including the items most proximate to the prompt (i.e., residence and education).



Conclusions

Overall, the item response rate was no higher for the questionnaire with the verbal prompt than for the one without it. From the findings in this study we can conclude that a verbal prompt about the importance of answering the demographic questions is not a viable strategy for reducing item nonresponse.

Acknowledgement

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