

Can Visual Design and A Verbal Importance Prompt 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 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 approaches to stimulating responses for demographic questions. Two experiments test whether a verbal prompt with visual design 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 and the version using visual design had a non-significant lower item response. These results indicate that a verbal prompt about importance is not a viable strategy for reducing nonresponse for demographic items.

Introduction

- Nonresponse to demographic items can be a problem, more so for responses by mail than by Web (Israel & Lamm 2012).
- Identifying strategies to limit nonresponse can help improve the accuracy of surveys.
- A common practice is to place demographic items at the end of the questionnaire.
- The survey design might, however, call for placing them at the beginning to screen out ineligibles or to ease the respondent into the questionnaire.
- Teclaw, Price and Osatuke (2012) found item response was higher when placed at the beginning.
- Given this, are there other equally effective approaches to stimulating a high item response rate for demographic questions?

Conceptual Framework

Beatty and Herrmann (2002) say that the decision to respond to an item is influenced by a person's cognitive state, perceptions about needed accuracy, and intentions to communicate requested information. With regard to demographics, the third likely drives the response decision. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some respondents feel demographic items are intrusive (e.g., "It's none of your business"). Others appear to not be motivated enough to avoid unintentionally skipping over one or more items.

So, can respondent motivation be increased for demographic questions?

- Verbal prompts have been successfully employed during telephone surveys to encourage respondents to provide more information (Miller & 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 et al. 2009).
- Optimal visual design can bring attention to key elements of the questionnaire – in this case, the demographic items.

Methods

- Data were collected for Florida Cooperative Extension Service's client survey in 2012 and 2013.
- Samples of 2,641 and 2,444, respectively, were selected and invited to respond to a mail/Web mixed-mode survey.
- A unified mode design was used for the instruments to provide the same verbal and visual presentation (Dillman et al. 2009).
- The 2012 response rate was 54.0%, with 1,426 partial and complete responses; in 2013, it was 54.8% with 1,410 responses.
- Participants were randomly assigned one of two experimental treatments. In 2012, version 1 included a verbal prompt describing the importance of answering all of the demographic questions and the second did not (version 2).
- In 2013, the visual design was changed by moving the '10.' to the beginning of instruction for the version with the prompt (version 3) and without (version 4)
- Data analysis was conducted with SAS statistical software, using Chi-square tests.

Findings

- Although the verbal prompt slightly improved the

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 12 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 demographic questions for statistical purposes.

10. How many times during the past 12 months have you attended an Extension program or contacted the Extension office? Times

Version 3. With importance prompt and visual design.

10. 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.

How many times during the past 12 months have you attended an Extension program or contacted the Extension office? Times

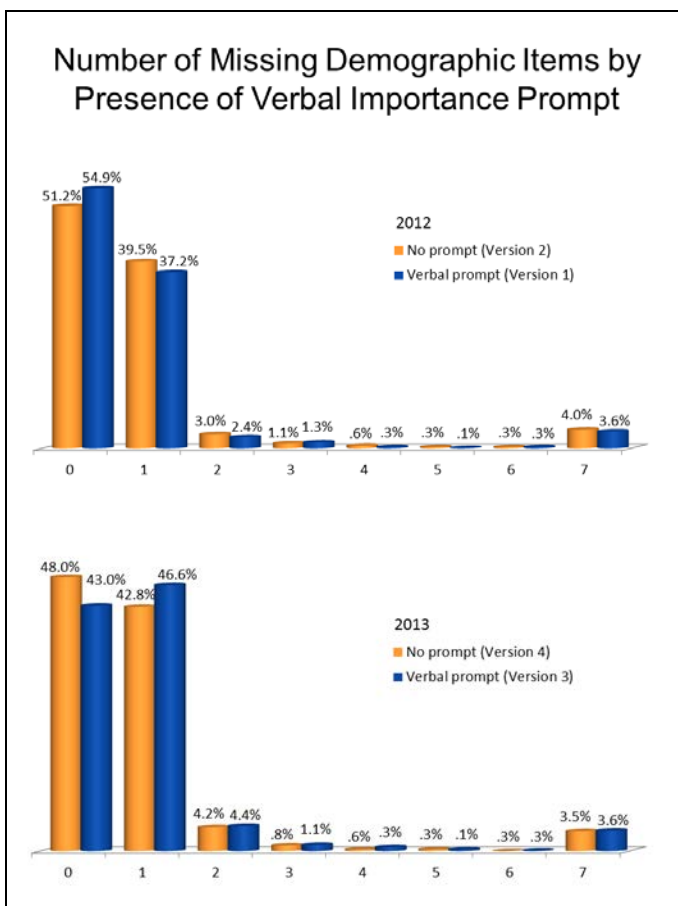
Version 4. With visual design and without importance prompt.

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

How many times during the past 12 months have you attended an Extension program or contacted the Extension office? Times

percent of respondents who provided answers to all of the demographic items for Version 1 vs. 2, this was not significant (Chisq = 2.815, df = 7, Exact Chisq p-value = .909).

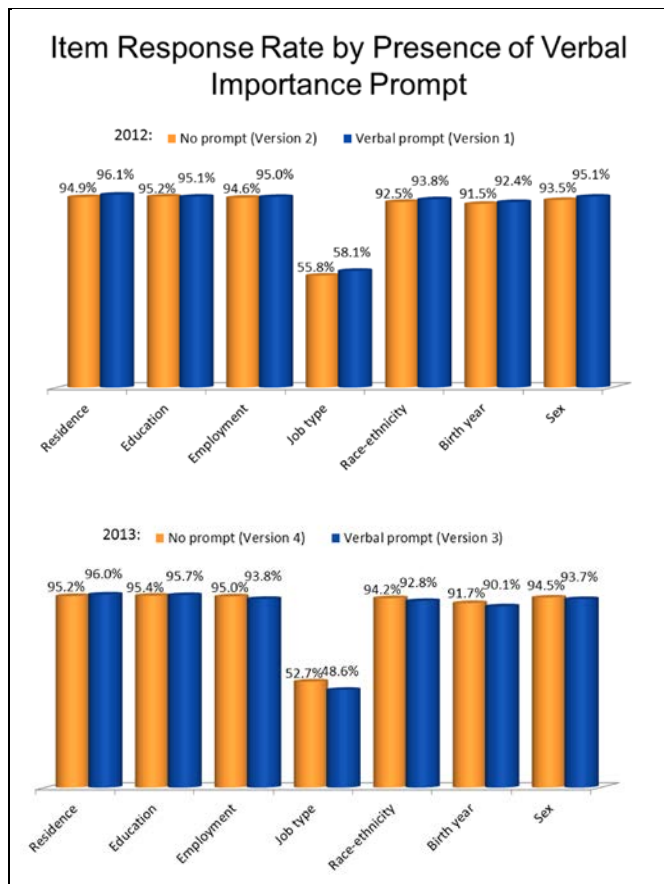
- Moreover, Version 3 performed slightly worse than version 4 (also non-significant, with Chisq = 5.571, df = 7, Exact Chisq p-value = .613).



- 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 in 2012 and a lower rate in 2013, neither difference was 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. In addition, the visual design change to bring attention to the prompt also failed to improve item response. From the findings in this study I 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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