

# Can an Importance Prompt Reduce Item Non-response for Demographic Items Across Web and Mail Modes?<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

Conventional practice usually places demographic items at the end of a questionnaire. A recent study by Teclaw, Price and Osatuke (2012) turn this logic on its head and found that item response for demographic items at the beginning of a questionnaire was higher than for the same set of items at the end of the survey. This raises the question of whether there are other approaches to stimulating high item response rates for demographic questions. This study extends previous research by exploring how a statement about the importance of answering the demographic items at the end of a survey might mediate the relationship between mode and item response rate. The aggregate item response rate was significantly higher for the set of nine demographic items for the importance prompt treatment. The results suggest that an importance prompt is a viable strategy for reducing item non-response of demographic items.

## Introduction

- Demographic items are often included in questionnaires to allow researchers to conduct in-depth analysis of subgroups.
- Nonresponse to demographic items can be a problem, more so for people responding by mail than those by the Web (Israel & Lamm, 2012).
- 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.
- Teclaw, Prince, and Osatuke (2012) found, however, that item response for demographic questions was higher when positioned at the beginning of the survey than at the end.
- Is there another equally effective approach to eliciting a high item response rate for demographic questions and, if so, does it work equally well across mail and Web modes?

## 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 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 & 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, & McBride 2009).

## Methods

- Data were collected for the annual survey of Florida Cooperative Extension Service's (FCES) clients in 2012 and 2014.
- A sample of 4,982 participants were 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 55.7% (RR2), with 2,775 partial and complete responses.
- Participants were randomly assigned one of two experimental treatments. One included a verbal

### 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

prompt 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

- The verbal prompt slightly improved the percent of respondents who provided answers to all of the demographic items (Wald Chisq = 7.481, df = 1, p-value = .006). The odds ratio is 1.279.
- In addition, item response rates differed by mode, with the odds ratio for Web respondents being 3.033 relative to mail respondents.
- In addition, the verbal prompt to complete the demographic items significantly improved the response rate for two of the individual items (birth year and sex).
- The prompt did not improve response rates for the items most proximate to the prompt (i.e., number of contacts with Extension and years using Extension services).

### Conclusions

- Overall, the item response rate was slightly higher for the questionnaire with the verbal prompt than for the one without it.
- I conclude that a verbal prompt about the importance of answering the demographic questions is a weak but viable strategy for reducing item nonresponse for both mail and Web modes.

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