Author's response to reviews

Title: A Comparison of Small Monetary Incentives to Convert Survey Non-Respondents: A Randomized Control Trial.

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Author's response to reviews: see over
April 26, 2011

Editors
BMC Medical Research Methodology

Dear Editors,
Please find for a revision of our manuscript entitled “A Comparison of Small Monetary Incentives to Convert Survey Non-Respondents: Response Rates and Costs.” We greatly appreciate the helpful comments from the reviewers and believe that their insights have improved the paper.

As we previously noted, a large body of evidence shows the effectiveness of using monetary incentives in survey research to improve response rates, but one area that has received far less attention is if these incentives are equally effective in populations that are averse to research, which may include demographic groups that are typically underrepresented in survey research. Our findings provide helpful information for survey researchers who are interested in the effect of incentives and reducing the potential for non-response bias. We show that if only one mailing is possible, a larger incentive may be most effective at achieving a high response rate in a difficult to reach population. However, if researchers have enough time and money for an additional mailing, a smaller incentive will yield very similar response rates. Regardless of incentives and number of mailings, some demographic groups may not respond and researchers need to develop more innovative strategies to assure adequate representation of these groups.

Our manuscript currently has 3099 words. The content of the manuscript has not been previously published and the manuscript itself is not under review with any other publication. All of the paper’s authors have each contributed intellectually during all stages of the research and writing process.

Thank you for your consideration of our manuscript. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

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<th><strong>Referee 1</strong></th>
<th><strong>Response</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Introduction/First Paragraph: Would include explanation why higher response rates are important to accurate/unbiased survey results (e.g., respondents being systematically different from nonrespondents).</td>
<td>We have added a sentence in the first paragraph to this effect.</td>
<td>Page 4, Para 1; sentence 2</td>
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<td>2. Methods: Provide additional information on the methods (recruitment/incentive) for parent study.</td>
<td>We have added additional information about the parent study</td>
<td>Page 5, last sentence; page 6, sentence 2</td>
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<td>3. Discussion/First Paragraph: Would recommend that the authors cite literature on factors related to survey response. See, for example, work by Sudman, etc.</td>
<td>We have referenced literature that pertains to survey response.</td>
<td>Page 11, Sentences 1&amp;2</td>
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<td>4. Discussion/Second Paragraph: The authors should address literature on the number of contacts/response rates. For example, see work by Parsons et al. It is not just time, but also number of contacts that may be important.</td>
<td>We have noted that both incentives and number of contacts have been shown to increase response rates and added the appropriate references supporting this statement.</td>
<td>Page 12, 1st sentence of 1st para.</td>
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<td>Discretionary Revisions: 1. Introduction: I would recommend that the authors note work on the ethics of providing incentives as a means of improving survey response. For example, see work by Singer and Couper (2008); Singer and Bossarte (2006) or Wertheimer et al. (2008).</td>
<td>Thank you. We have added a sentence regarding ethics of incentives and citations that introduce the issue and evidence.</td>
<td>Page 4, para. 1, sentence 5.</td>
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<td>2. Discussion/Last Paragraph: Would recommend that the authors consider rewording sentence beginning with “Our data suggest that, with the exception…” to make a more cautionary statement. Study actually suggests that multiple mailings and incentives may not entice participation of the populations in question.</td>
<td>We have revised this sentence to be more cautionary.</td>
<td>Page 14, second to last sentence of 1st para.</td>
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<td>3. Discussion/Last Paragraph: I would recommend a sentence or two at conclusion of this paragraph addressing the potential use of design-based approaches (both independent from or in conjunction with monetary incentives) to improve participation of hard-to-reach groups.</td>
<td>We have added a sentence on the need for studies designed to assess strategies to improve participation in hard-to-reach populations.</td>
<td>Page 14, last sentence of first para.</td>
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<td>4. Conclusion: Consider whether it is a “faster” response or a “higher initial” response.</td>
<td>We agree that “higher initial response” is a more appropriate conclusion to our</td>
<td>Page 15</td>
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**Referee 2**

1. **Methods:** As per CONSORT guidelines the authors should describe their methods of randomisation, and explain how allocation was concealed from the researchers conducting the study. For example, was the university affiliated survey centre independent of the authors of this research?  
   We have clarified the methods for randomization.  
   Page 7, under “Ancillary Study Administration,” Sentences 1, 4-5.

2. **Minor essential revisions**  
   Table 1. I am not clear to what tests the p-values shown relate to. In the methods, I understood that the chi-squared test was used to assess whether the demographic and health characteristics of participants randomised to the two incentive conditions were balanced. The column percentages in the table sum to 100%. I was therefore expecting a single p-value for each characteristic overall, but there are p-values shown for each level of each category. Perhaps the authors tested proportions responding within each category by incentive condition (e.g. the proportion of woman who received the $5 incentive that responded compared to the proportion of women who received the $2 incentive that responded)? If so, the table should show the percentage of each category responding, not the percentage responding overall.  
   Thanks for this helpful observation. We had originally included column percentages to provide a more traditional “Table 1” with descriptive information. We appreciate, however, that our other intent for this table, to whether randomization was successful using pairwise comparisons, gets lost. Therefore, we have revised this table so that we now have row percentages instead of column percentages and have added a footnote to note we used pairwise comparisons.  
   Table 1

3. **Table 4 repeats much of the data contained in Table 2**  
   Table 2 presents differences in response rates by condition whereas Table 4 for is looking at differences in representativeness. With the exception of urban/rural status, the two incentive conditions provide equally representative samples. But the $5 incentive condition produced a respondent population more heavily weighted toward rural than the population sampled. We have revised the text to clarify this finding.  
   Page 11, 1st para
<table>
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<th>Editorial comments:</th>
<th>We have added this statement.</th>
<th>Page 6. End of first paragraph, top of page.</th>
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<td>1. Ethics - Experimental research that is reported in the manuscript must have been performed with the approval of an appropriate ethics committee. Research carried out on humans must be in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration (<a href="http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/index.html">http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/b3/index.html</a>), and any experimental research on animals must follow internationally recognized guidelines. A statement to this effect must appear in the Methods section of the manuscript, including the name of the body which gave approval, with a reference number where appropriate.</td>
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<td>2. Competing interests - Please include a 'Competing interests' section between the Conclusions and Authors' contributions. If there are none to declare, please write 'The authors declare that they have no competing interests'.</td>
<td>We have verified from all authors that they do not have any competing interests and have added a statement to this effect.</td>
<td>Page 16</td>
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<td>3. Authors' contributions - Please include an Authors' contributions section before the Acknowledgements and Reference list.</td>
<td>We have added the authors’ contributions.</td>
<td>Page 16</td>
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<td>4. Please provide some context information in the background section of your abstract. For more information on how to write your abstract, please see <a href="http://www.biomedcentral.com/bmcmedresmethodol/ifora/#abstract">http://www.biomedcentral.com/bmcmedresmethodol /ifora/#abstract</a></td>
<td>We have revised the abstract to include more background information.</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
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