

NSS Seminar Series

Response Enhancing Techniques

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Overview

- Why non-response is a problem
- Techniques for improving response rates
 - ▶ minimising respondent burden
 - well-designed form
 - choice of mode
 - ▶ multiple contacts
 - pre-approach, covering and reminder letters
 - ▶ incentives
 - ▶ follow-up / reminder phone calls
- Focus is mainly self-administered mail forms, mainly business surveys
 - ▶ But principles can be applied to other types of surveys

Why is non-response problematic?

- Low response rates can lead to inaccurate estimates and large standard errors
- Possibility of incorrect conclusions being drawn about the population of interest
- What constitutes a good response rate is not clear-cut - but the higher, the better

Business surveys - challenges

- Accuracy of records
- Getting the right person at each stage of the survey process
- Responses may be required from numerous people in the organisation
- Company policy to "not do questionnaires"

Technique 1:

Minimise respondent burden

- Importance of a well-designed form
- Poorly designed forms
 - ▶ serve as a disincentive
 - ▶ can result in respondent errors
- ABS form design standards available on NSS website
 - ▶ www.nss.gov.au => Statistical References => Survey Design Materials: Manuals, Handbooks and Guides => ABS Forms Design Standards Manual
- Relevant for paper & electronic forms, and interviewer scripts, e.g. for Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) interfaces

Principles of good questionnaire design

- Common content
 - ▶ Survey title and organisation name
 - ▶ Purpose of the survey
 - ▶ Confidentiality statement
 - ▶ Contact number for help


Structure and navigation

- Questions should follow a logical sequence
- Use sections / parts for longer forms
- Sequential numbering of questions and sub-questions
- Page numbers
- Start with general and easy questions - not complex or sensitive questions
- Progress indicator for web forms

Filter questions

- Exclude respondents from questions that do not apply to them
- Can be helpful - but use carefully
- Respondents may make errors

2 Did this business make any donations to organisations or individuals during the period covered by this form?

No  Go to Question 6

Yes

3 What types of donations did this business make?

Questions

- Use clear, simple, familiar language
- Define terms
- Minimise memory recall (e.g. specify reference period)
- Allow enough answer space

Questions *(continued)*

- Avoid the following:
 - ▶ too many, or not enough response categories
 - ▶ jargon or technical language
 - ▶ questions that are:
 - double-barrelled ("Have you searched for employment opportunities in newspapers and on the internet?")
 - leading ("Do you agree with the majority of people that the health service is failing?")
 - ambiguous ("What is your income?")
 - unbalanced ("How would you rate the services provided by Company X?" => Satisfactory, Good, Excellent)

Length of form

- Use as many pages as you need to achieve a clear layout
- A longer form with a good layout will obtain equivalent or better response rates compared with a shorter, cramped form (e.g. Champion & Sear, 1969).

Typeface

- *Avoid fancy typefaces as they are difficult to read*
- Simple serif font (e.g. Times New Roman) for large blocks of text
- Simple sans serif font (e.g. Verdana) for short lines of text
- Be consistent
- Larger headings
- Notes, definitions, instructions in a different style or size

THIS PARAGRAPH IS WRITTEN IN UPPER CASE. BECAUSE WORDS LOSE THEIR DISTINCTIVE SHAPES THEY TAKE LONGER TO RECOGNISE, AND SO READING IS MADE MORE DIFFICULT. THIS ADDS TO RESPONDENT FATIGUE AND IS LIKELY TO CREATE RESPONSE PROBLEMS. UPPER CASE IS VISUALLY VERY INTRUSIVE, AND SO DISTRACTS FROM THE NORMAL FLOW OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE AND OTHER MORE SUBTLE RESPONSE PROCESSING AND PERCEPTION METHODS; **UPPER CASE, UNDERLINED** **IS EVEN WORSE.**

Graphics and colour

- Minimal use of graphics and colour
- High contrast between text and background
 - ▶ Recommend black text on light (white or lightly shaded) background
- Electronic & online forms
 - ▶ Simple colour scheme
 - ▶ Minimal use of radio buttons, icons, drop-down menus

White answer spaces

Part F – Comments and time taken

15 Please provide comments

- on any reporting problems or information unrelated to specific data you have supplied on this form

(Please use BLOCK letters)

- on any questions which caused problems, or suggested improvements to this form

(Please use BLOCK letters)

16 Please provide an estimate of the time taken to complete this form

Including

- The time actually spent reading the instructions, working on the questions and obtaining the information
- The time spent by all employees in collecting and providing this information

hrs

mins

Pre-testing the form

- E.g. focus groups, observational studies, cognitive testing, usability testing, expert review
- Benefits:
 - ▶ ensures questions are clear & concepts consistently understood
 - ▶ assess respondent burden, availability of data
 - ▶ determine whether the questions are applicable to respondents
 - ▶ improved data quality, reduced editing costs

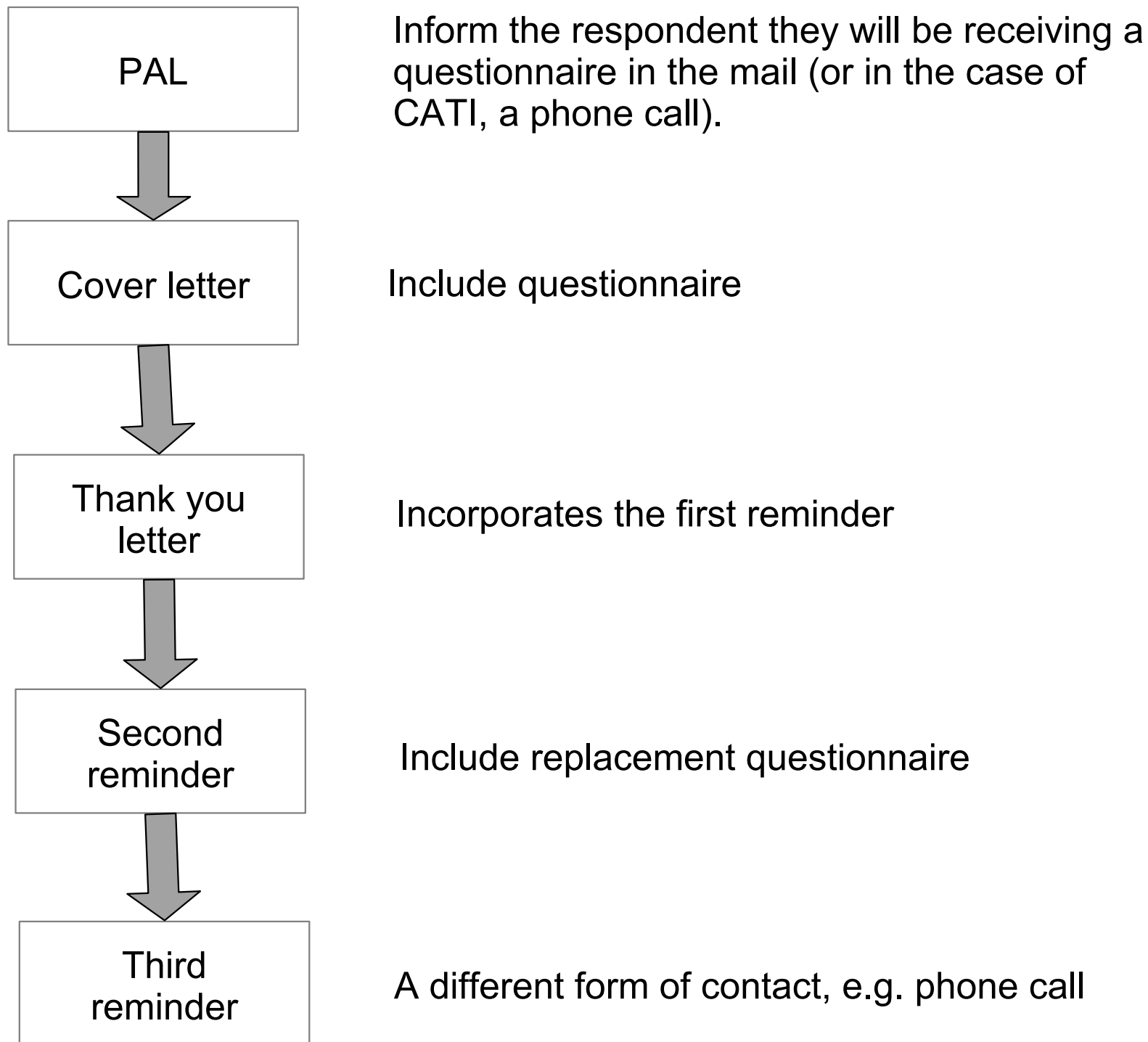
Providing choice of mode

- E.g. paper, online, phone
- Can improve response rates
- However, potential mode effects
 - ▶ electronic forms should generally look as similar as possible to paper version
 - ▶ phone surveys - script for interviewers to ensure consistency

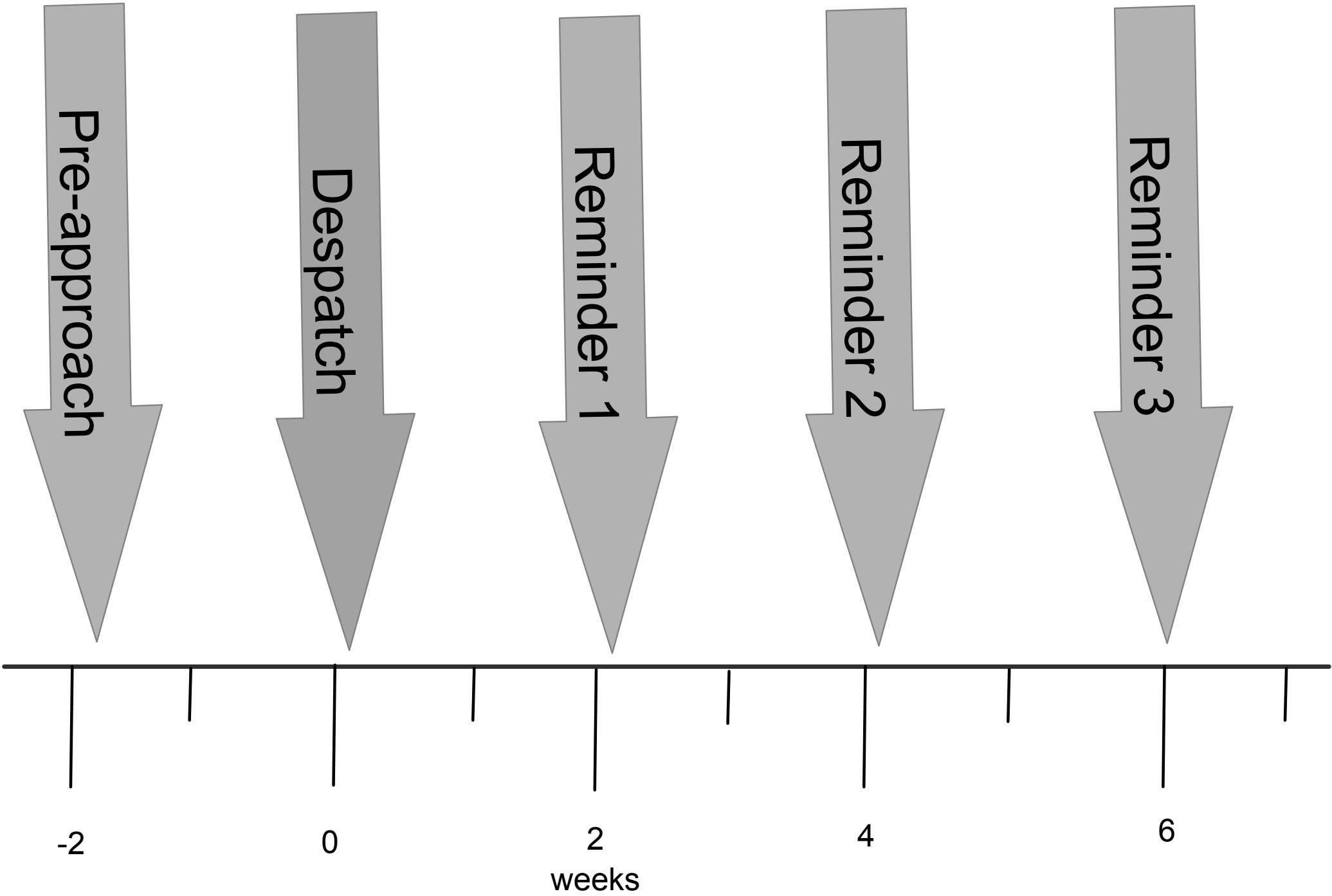
Technique 2:

Multiple contacts with respondents

- Don Dillman (2000)
 - ▶ Multiple contacts with respondents maximise response rates
 - ▶ Focuses on self-administered paper forms - letters
 - ▶ Can be adapted for online surveys - emails



Dillman, 2000



Pre-approach letter (PAL)

- Sent before the survey form to alert respondents of its upcoming arrival
- Invokes a sense of the survey's importance
- Studies have consistently found PALs to increase response rates - by around 8% (Fox, Crask & Kim, 1988)

Contents of PAL

Dillman (2000), Groves & Cialdini (1991)

- Date
- Personalisation - name, address (but not if survey is sensitive)
- What the survey is about, and what will happen
- Why it is important / useful
- Thank you
- Elements which convey authority (signature, name of organisation, logo)
- Keep the letter short (maximum 1 page)

Cover letter

- Includes questionnaire
- Some elements of PAL, but also:
 - ▶ Due date
 - ▶ Confidentiality statement
 - ▶ Explain if voluntary
 - ▶ Details of who to contact with queries
 - ▶ Stamped reply paid envelope
 - ▶ Postscript

Reminders

- Reminders increase response rates
- Dillman (2000) - 3 reminders, increasing in urgency of wording
 1. Thank-you / reminder letter sent to all recipients
 2. Second reminder sent to non-respondents with replacement questionnaire
 - Stronger tone of insistence - *their* questionnaire hasn't been received
 3. Third (final) reminder - different form of contact
 - Email, registered mail, phone call

Technique 3: Incentives

- Respondents are more likely to comply if they perceive that they will get something in return for their compliance (Groves & Cialdini, 1991)
- Rewards can be tangible or intangible

Intangible rewards

- Dillman (2000), Groves & Cialdini (1991)
- Wording of letters
 - ▶ E.g. showing positive regard / respect
 - ▶ Asking for advice
 - ▶ Social validation - similar others have already complied
 - ▶ Scarcity - more likely to comply with requests that are perceived as being a rare opportunity to participate

Tangible rewards

- Create a sense reciprocal obligation - respondent feels they should do something in return
 - ▶ Should be "prepaid" rather than "promised"
- Monetary incentives can lead to higher response rates compared with non-monetary tangible incentives (e.g. Simmons & Wilmot, 2004).
 - ▶ But depends on respondent group (e.g. students vs professionals)
 - ▶ Should be of little monetary value - not "payment of time", but **token of appreciation**, to acknowledge respondent's effort

Tangible rewards *(continued)*

- ABS policy
 - ▶ No monetary incentives
 - ▶ Sometimes non-monetary tangible incentives (e.g. pens, calculators, publications, brochures, magnets with ABS logo)
- Letter postscript
 - ▶ (P.S. The ABS makes available a wide range of useful statistics free-of-charge, thanks to the data provided by people such as you. For details, see the ABS website, www.abs.gov.au.)

Technique 4:

Follow-up / reminder phone calls

- E.g. ABS Provider Contact Unit follow-up non-response for business surveys, and
 - ▶ answer respondent queries / concerns
 - ▶ provide extensions and replacement forms where applicable
 - ▶ establish out-of-scope units
 - ▶ add a personal touch to the interaction
 - ▶ may collect data over the phone
- Follow-up is increasingly intensive

Follow-up / reminder calls *(continued)*

- Standardisation (interviewer scripts, strict adherence to questionnaire) => higher quality data
- Centralisation of call centre
 - ▶ standardised training and interviewing procedures
 - avoids variation in response rates and estimates
 - ▶ recruitment, training and supervision easier
 - ▶ technical support for systems, e.g. CATI

Follow-up / reminder calls *(continued)*

- Resource intensive
- Effectiveness may be decreasing, due to e.g.
 - ▶ increased levels of telemarketing
 - ▶ mobile phones
 - ▶ answering machines
 - ▶ caller ID

Summary

- Good response rate is crucial - but no single method
- Well-designed form
- Choice in the method of response if possible
- Letters (PAL, cover, reminders)
- Incentives (tangible but token)
- Follow-up phone calls

References

- Dillman DA (2000). Mail and internet surveys: The tailored design method. 2nd ed., John Wiley & Sons, Canada
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