


# Increasing Survey Response Rate

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RML Rendezvous  
National Network of Libraries of Medicine  
Pacific Northwest Region  
June 15, 2011  
1:00pm-2:00pm PT

# Today's Topics

- Brief review: questionnaire design
- Response rate overview
- Experts' tips for maximizing response rate
- Low response rate: what to do?

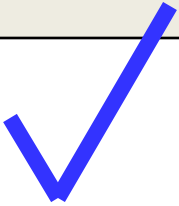
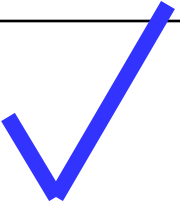
# Questionnaire Design, March 16, 2011

- Recording is here:  
<https://webmeeting.nih.gov/p90742547/>
- Slides are here:  
[http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Questionnaire\\_design.pdf](http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Questionnaire_design.pdf)
- “Writing Good Questions” handout is here:  
[http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Writing\\_good\\_questions.pdf](http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Writing_good_questions.pdf)
- Past RML Rendezvous info is here:  
<http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/RMLrendezvous.html>

# Review: why would you want to use a questionnaire?

- Learn about characteristics of a group
- Evaluate quality of programs and services
- Document results of programs and services

# Review: three goals when using questionnaires

|   |  |
|---|--|
|  | <b>Collect just the right amount of data</b>                             |
|  | <b>Write questions that get the information you want</b>                 |
|   | <b>Get a high rate of participation from respondents (response rate)</b> |

## GOAL 3: GET A HIGH RATE OF PARTICIPATION FROM RESPONDENTS (RESPONSE RATE)

### Why?

“A low cooperation or response rate does more damage in rendering a survey's results questionable than a small sample, because there may be no valid way scientifically of inferring the characteristics of the population represented by non-respondents.”

*American Association of Public Opinion Research, 2002, Standards and Best Practices*

# Response Rate Defined

## *Equation*

# of completed and partially completed  
questionnaires

---

# of eligible participants in your sample

# Why care about response rate?

## A few reasons:

- Late responders respond differently from early responders.
- Responders are more interested in the survey topic.
- More non-response is found among white, middle-income, middle-age to older, urban dwellers.
- Responders tend to be more educated
- Lower response rates are found among white males



# What is a "good" response rate?

A rule of thumb from a standard textbook:

- 50% is adequate
- 60% is good
- 75% is very good

*The Practice of Social Research.* Earl R. Babbie. Belmont, Calif :  
Wadsworth Cengage, 2007.

# Response rates have been declining

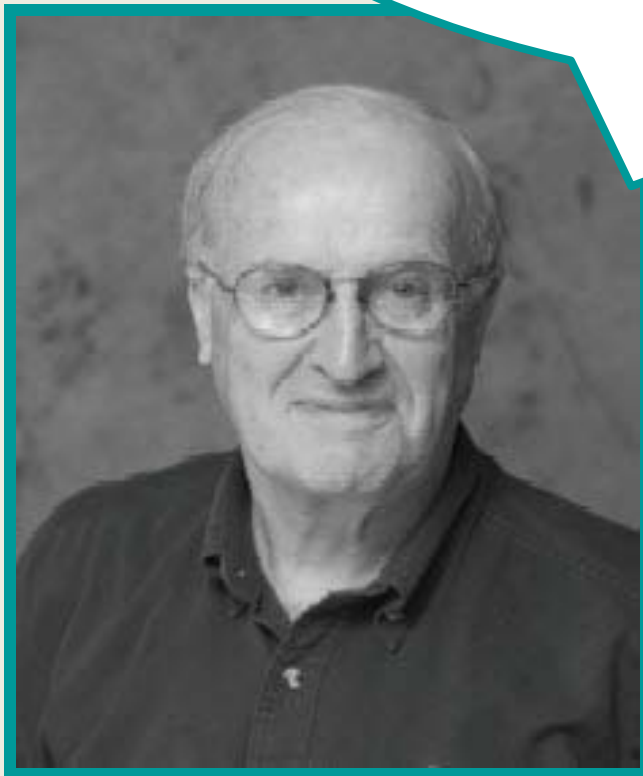
## Pew Research Center Experiment\*

| <u>Standard</u>   | <u>Rigorous</u>   |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 5-day</li></ul>     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 21 weeks</li></ul>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1997: 36%</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 1997: 61%</li></ul> |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2003: 25%</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 2003: 50%</li></ul> |

\*Telephone Survey

Polls are the worst way of measuring public opinion and public behavior, or of predicting elections -- except for all of the others."

– Humphrey Taylor,  
chairman of *The Harris Poll*:



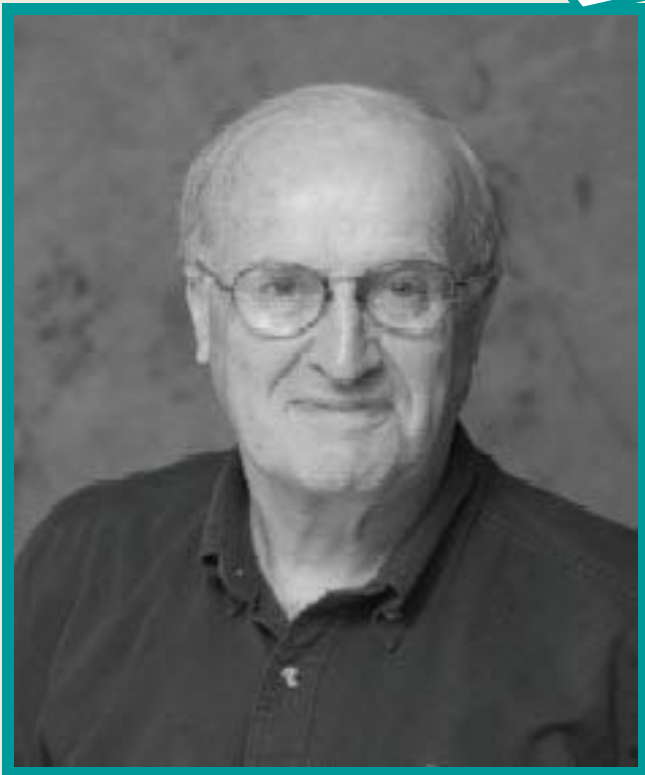
From: *The Polling Report*, <http://pollingreport.com/sampling.htm>

Taylor said that Response rate “...is one of the least of our measurement problems.”

- Selection?
- Availability?
- Refusal?
- Wording of questions?
- Order of questions?
- False reporting?
- Differential turnout?
- “Late-swing” ?

"Well designed, well conducted surveys work. Their record overall is pretty good."

–Humphrey Taylor,  
chairman of *The Harris Poll*:



# Dillman has found the following principles increase response rates



Dillman, et al., *Internet, Mail, and Mixed-Mode Surveys: The Tailored Design Method, Third Edition*. Hoboken: Wiley, 2009.

Dillman's Tailored Design Method is popular because it yields respectable response rates

**Handout One**  
*How to Administer Questionnaires*



[http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Handout1-How\\_to\\_Administer\\_Questionnaires.pdf](http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Handout1-How_to_Administer_Questionnaires.pdf)

# Mail Procedure

| Timing (approx) | Activity   |
|-----------------|--|
| Day 1           | Pre-notification   |
| Day 5           | USPS questionnaire w/stamped return envelope + \$2                               |
| Day 18          | USPS replacement to nonrespondents<br>(thank-you postcard to respondents)        |
| Day 32          | FedEx final replacement to nonrespondents<br>(thank-you postcard to respondents) |

This procedure is on [Handout One](#).

Adapted from:  
Don A. Dillman,  
Washington State University  
January, 2010



# Email Procedure 1

| Timing (approx) | Activity  |
|-----------------|---|
| Day 1           | Pre-notification  |
| Day 3           | Email with link to questionnaire                            |
| Day 9           | Email reminder to non-respondents with URL link             |
| Day 13          | Email <i>and USPS mail</i> questionnaire to non-respondents |
| Day 17          | Email reminder to non-respondents                           |

This procedure is on [Handout One](#).

Adapted from:  
Don A. Dillman,  
Washington State University  
January, 2010

# Email Procedure 2

| Timing (approx) | Activity                                       |
|-----------------|--|
| Day 1           | Surface mail w/URL, access code, \$2 incentive |
| Day 5           | Email follow-up with link                      |
| Day 7           | Thank-you postcard to respondents              |
| Day 13          | FedEx to non-respondents w/URL                 |
| Day 17          | Email follow-up with link                      |

This procedure is on [Handout One](#).

Adapted from:  
Don A. Dillman,  
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# Comparisons

| Contact Type  | Response Rate |
|---|---------------|
| <b>Mail</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Letter + paper questionnaire w/stamped return envelope and \$2; thank-you postcard;</li><li>• Non-respondents received replacement questionnaire</li></ul>              | 51.5%         |
| <b>Web</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Letter w/URL + access code and \$2; thank-you postcard;</li><li>• Non-respondents received follow-up letter w/URL</li></ul>  | 42.8%         |
| <b>Web + Email</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Letter w/URL + access code and \$2; follow-up email; thank-you postcard;</li><li>• Non-respondents received follow-up letter w/URL and follow-up email</li></ul> | 60%           |

Adapted from:  
Don A. Dillman,  
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January, 2010

# One researcher reported a 79% response rate using email procedure 1

| Activity                                   | Response Rate |
|--|---------------|
| One week prior: Pre-notification letter    | --            |
| Day 1: Email questionnaire                 | 25%           |
| Day 7: Email reminder                      | 46%           |
| Day 11: [Emailed and Mailed questionnaire] | 68%           |
| Day 15: Email reminder                     | --            |
| Day 25: 71% response rate                  | 71%           |
| Day 32: 79% response rate                  | 79%           |

Source: Brashears, T. Low expense, high return: A bimodal methodology for Internet Survey implementation. Web document:

<http://www.depts.ttu.edu/aged/research/brashearsurveyabstract.pdf>

# Here's how to decrease cost

## Print questionnaires:

- Make questionnaires as short as possible (1-2 pages)

## Online questionnaires

- Make first questions easy to complete
- Describe computer actions at point of usage
- Use scrolling rather than screen-to-screen format
- Show progress bars
- Don't require responses to items

# Do not require a response

## Survey on [www.savingwater.org](http://www.savingwater.org)

Questions marked with an asterisk (\*) are mandatory.

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1 \* Do you use the Internet to find information on (check all that apply):

- Water conservation
- Gardening

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2 \* Have you ever visited [www.savingwater.org](http://www.savingwater.org)?

YES  NO

**SUBMIT** 

# Here's how to increase perceived reward

## All questionnaires

- Use motivational cover letter
- Make question topics interesting to respondents

## Online questionnaires

- Use motivational welcome screen (instead of cover letter)

# Here's how to increase trust

## All questionnaires

- Use a credible sponsor
- Have sponsor send out preliminary mailing of endorsement
- Use a “special” follow-up
- Use first-class postage

## Online questionnaires

- Use motivational welcome screen (instead of cover letter)



# Don't forget the cover letter

## Handout Two

### *Letters for Questionnaires*



[http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Handout2-Letters\\_for\\_Questionnaires.pdf](http://nnlm.gov/pnr/training/Handout2-Letters_for_Questionnaires.pdf)

# Tips for pre-notification letters

## Pre-notification letter/email:

- Signature that respondents know and trust. Also, for electronic questionnaires, use that person's email address in the "FROM" field if possible.
- Briefly describe the project and why it is important that they respond. (Emphasize how it is important to them as well as how their responses are important to you and your organization.)
- Explain when and how they can expect the questionnaire and who will send it to them.
- Thank them in advance for their help.

See [Handout Two](#) for these items as a checklist.

# Pre-notification email template

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

I am writing to request your help with a very important project: \_\_\_\_\_. In a couple of days, you will receive an email with a link to an electronic questionnaire from \_\_\_\_\_ (email address). This questionnaire will ask about \_\_\_\_\_ and will help \_\_\_\_\_ *[improve service; plan programs; assess the effectiveness]* Your responses will be very important \_\_\_\_\_ *[explain how the evaluation will benefit the respondent, others, and the organization that will use the questionnaire data.]*

Thank you in advance for your participation. I look forward to getting feedback from you and others who use our services. If you have questions, please contact \_\_\_\_\_ at *[phone]* or *[email]* *[Let them know if they can reply to this email message or if they need to use a different email address]*

Sincerely,

*[signature line of contact person]*

See [Handout Two](#) for this template.

# Tips for cover letters

## Cover letter/email:

- Briefly describe your project and why you want respondents to reply to your questionnaire.
- Include a motivational appeal and explain how to complete the questionnaire.
- Describe who will see their individual responses and how you will maintain confidentiality and any risks to the respondent if he or she chooses to respond.
- Describe incentives.

See [Handout Two](#) for these items as a checklist.

# Cover letter email template, part 1

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

A couple of days ago, you received an email message alerting you to look for an email message from \_\_\_\_\_ with a link to a questionnaire about \_\_\_\_\_. This study is being conducted by \_\_\_\_\_ in order to \_\_\_\_\_. You have been chosen to complete this questionnaire because of \_\_\_\_\_ [e.g. *your interest in the questionnaire; your recent use of services*]. Your responses are very important because \_\_\_\_\_ [e.g. *how will it help the respondent, others, and the organization.*]

Please click on the link below and follow the instructions to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire takes approximately \_\_\_\_\_ to complete.  
[questionnaire link]

The questionnaire is being conducted by \_\_\_\_\_. Your responses will be seen only by \_\_\_\_\_. The responses of all participants will be summarized and presented to \_\_\_\_\_.

# Cover letter email template, continued

To our knowledge, there is no risk to your participation in this questionnaire. Your participation is voluntary and you have the right to refuse to answer any or all of the questions.

However, we do hope you will choose complete the questionnaire. When we have completed the questionnaire, we will send you a brief description of our results. The enclosed \_\_\_\_\_*[gift card; money]* is our way of thanking you in advance for your help.

We request that you submit your answers to the questionnaire by \_\_\_\_\_*[date.]*. If you have questions, please contact \_\_\_\_\_ at *[phone]* or *[email]* *[Let them know if they can reply to this email message or if they need to use a different email address]*

Sincerely,

*[signature line of contact person]*

See [Handout Two](#) for this template.

# Tips for reminder letters

## Checklist for reminder letters/emails:

- State that you are sending a reminder for them to complete the questionnaire.
- Thank those who have already responded.
- Request those who have not responded to do so by a given date.
- For electronic questionnaires, include a link to the questionnaire in every follow-up.

See [Handout Two](#) for these items as a checklist.

# Reminder template

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

About a week ago, you received an email from \_\_\_\_\_ requesting your participation in a very important questionnaire about \_\_\_\_\_. If you have submitted your responses already, thank you for your participation. If you have not yet had a chance to complete the questionnaire, please do so by clicking on this link:

[questionnaire link]

We request that you submit your responses by \_\_\_\_\_. If you have questions, please contact \_\_\_\_\_. *[Let them know if they can reply to this email message or if they need to use a different email address]*

*[signature line of contact person]*

See [Handout Two](#) for this template.



# Improving Response Rates

- Short surveys (1-2 pages)
- Special third contact (e.g., certified mail, telephone call)
- Content meaningful to respondents
- Government sponsorship (as opposed to corporate or marketing firm)
- Survey population (employee, school, military)
- Pre-paid incentives (cash works best)

# Incentives work better when sent before or with the questionnaire



Cost of  
Obligation



Cost of  
Motivation

*Obligation is cheaper than motivation*

# Incentives: cash is best

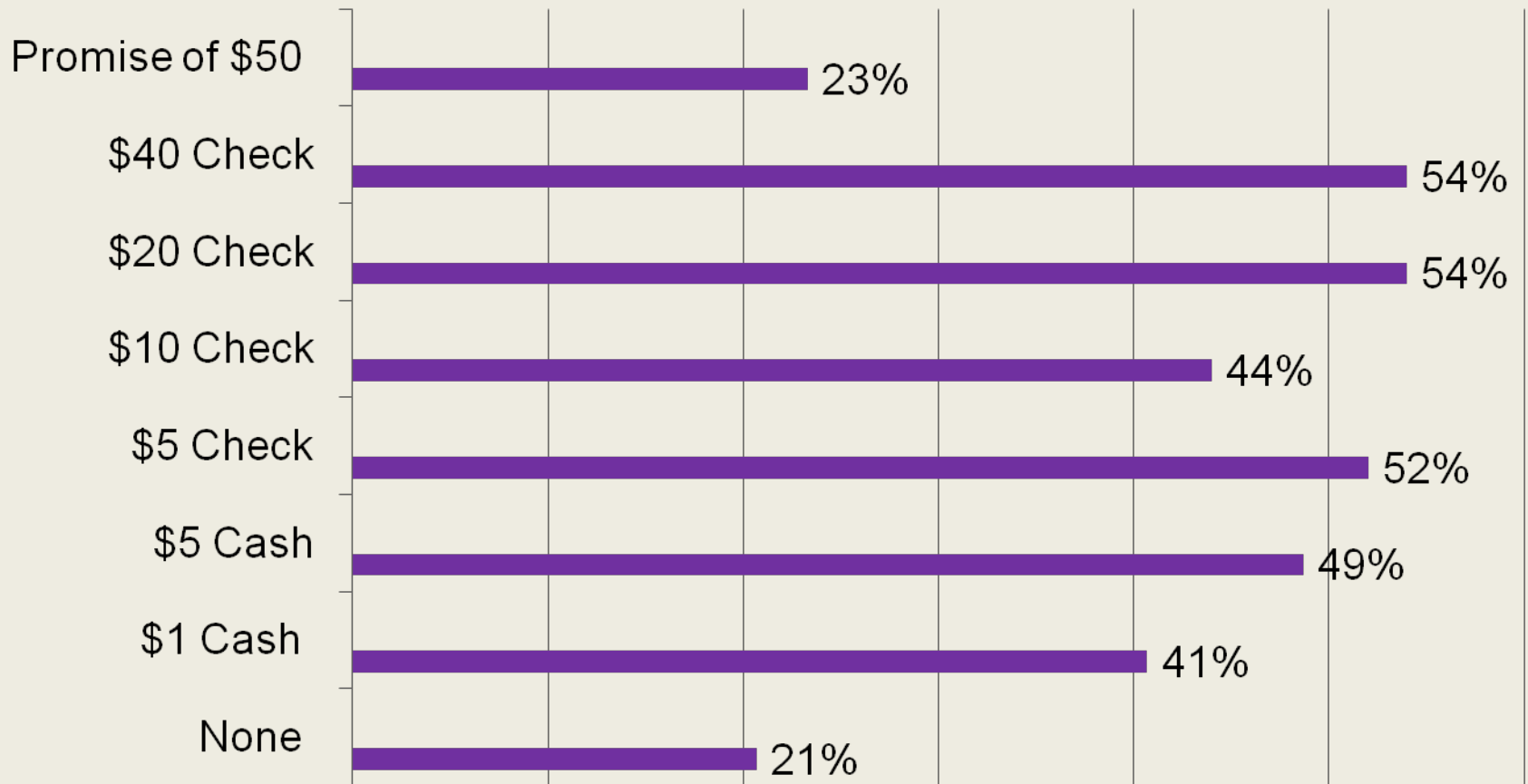
- Prepaid cash had strongest effect
- Contributions to charity had little effect
- Lotteries had no effect



Warriner K, Goyder J, Gjertsen PH, McSpurren, K.  
Charities, no; lotteries, no; cash, yes:  
Main effects and interactions in a Canadian incentives  
survey. Public Opinion Quarterly, 1996, 60(4), 452-563 3

# Bigger incentives are not necessarily better

Response rates associated with each type/amount of incentive



Adapted from:  
Don A. Dillman, Washington State University, January, 2010

# Incentives' Effect on Electronic Survey Response Rate

## Study 1 ([Social Science Computer Review, 2004](#))

- Incentives better than no incentives
- Cash better than online gift certificates
- No difference between online and paper gift certificates

[http://www-personal.umich.edu/~danhorn/reprints/Horn\\_2004\\_Web\\_Survey\\_Incentives\\_SSCORE.pdf](http://www-personal.umich.edu/~danhorn/reprints/Horn_2004_Web_Survey_Incentives_SSCORE.pdf)

## Study 2 ([AAPOR conference paper, 2002](#))

- No difference between \$2 pre-paid, \$2 post-paid, or no incentives
- Lotteries for two \$50 and four \$25 awards had positive effect (8%-10% increase over other conditions)

[http://www.psyconsult.de/bosnjak/publications/AAPOR2002\\_Bosnjak\\_Tuten.pdf](http://www.psyconsult.de/bosnjak/publications/AAPOR2002_Bosnjak_Tuten.pdf)

# Use some key tools to assess response rates

|            |   |
|------------|---|
| Strategy 1 | Compare sample profile to population  |
| Strategy 2 | Compare early and late responses  |
| Strategy 3 | Contact a small percentage of non-respondents with key questions for comparison |

# Use some key tools to assess response rates

- Purposeful sampling: quota sampling
- Triangulate (corroborate) - collect information from multiple sources and look for consistency

# Use some key tools to assess response rates

- Use time-tested methods to boost response rates
- Check for bias regardless of response rates
- Use more than one source of information to assess the accuracy of your findings



# Internet Access, Early 2010

- Internet in approx. 65% of households
- Where modem access, download time is an issue
- Different people respond to paper surveys than to Web surveys
- When people are given a choice between paper and Web, approx 75% choose paper

# Web Surveys

Lower cost than mail **but:**

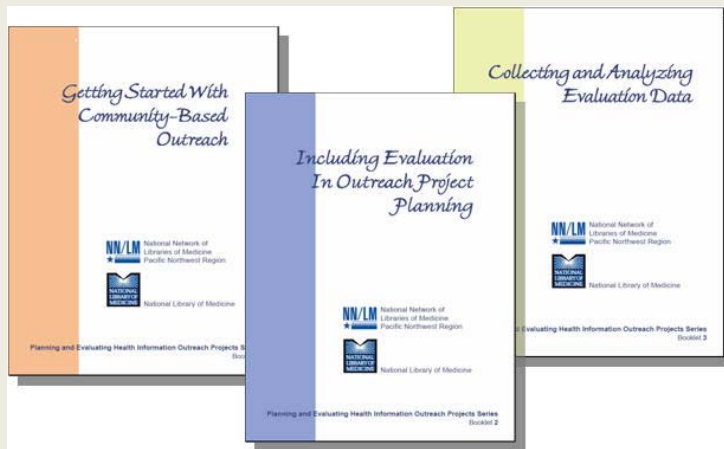
- Poor coverage for some populations
- No way to sample general public
- Issues with firewalls, spam filters, etc.
- Lower response rates

# Looking Forward

- Long-run future of survey research is Web
- 2007 survey of a community of approx. 50,000 surface mail had higher response rate
- Role of smart phones/personal devices?
- Phone behavior—control has evolved from caller to recipient

# For More Information:

## *Planning and Evaluating Health Information Outreach* – Series of 3 booklets:



1. Getting Started with Community-Based Outreach
2. Including Evaluation in Outreach Project Planning
3. Collecting and Analyzing Evaluation Data

– <http://nnlm.gov/evaluation/booklets>