

Improving Response Rates

Your idea may be the one that will improve response rates. Improving on Arbitron response rates is a major radio industry objective. There needs to be many ideas presented. Think out of the box as the old saying goes. The response rate issue involves many facets of the survey process; therefore, the more suggestions the better. We invite you to participate. Send your ideas to: RBosley@ResearchDirectorInc.com. The idea[s] will be posted here.

Some sample ideas:

- Pay higher premiums to encourage response.
- On placement calls, make sure the Arbitron name shows on the caller ID
- Advertise the name Arbitron on the radio to let people know that Arbitron and radio needs them to participate in the survey.
- In high density Hispanic areas insist on the interviewers being bilingual.

Here are the responses received so far:

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Thanks for the mail piece "The Truth About Response Rates." I believe that the radio industry has to be allowed to be involved in the process of fixing the response rate problem. We encourage people to vote in elections, why are we not allowed to encourage them to participate, if asked, in an Arbitron survey? I'm not sure if the MRC remains totally against this idea, but I don't see the harm of a completely benign message of encouragement to listeners to participate when asked. True, name recognition for Arbitron is only part of the problem, but getting the Arbitron name better known through continuing radio exposure needs to be considered as part of the answer because nothing else is working. The MRC has to be on board to retain credibility for the process, but something has to change now or the MRC will drop accreditation because of low response rates! We know radio works. Radio gets response from listeners for advertisers, why not expect it do the same for Arbitron? Dick Orkin or Roy Williams in Austin could do great creative. That's what I think.

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Ever since I started working at Arbitron about 20 years ago, people have complained about falling response rates. Intuitively, you would conclude that higher response rates are always better. This greatly depends on the meaning of the word "better".

Rhody believes that Arbitron conducted radio non-response studies in 1978 and 1984. His recollection of the key findings are as follows:

1. In general, diary responders exhibited slightly higher radio listening levels than non-responders.
2. Teens, M 18-24 and W 18-24 reversed that pattern and responders tended to listen less.
3. Responders tended to listen more to News/Talk and Soft AC stations, and listen less to CHR, Urban and Country. The exception was with teens, Men and Women 18-24, which showed the opposite.
4. Little variation by daypart was observed between the responders and total sample.
5. The 1984 study found that "non-returners" constituted a disproportionate share of the nonresponse bias. In other words, people who consented to keep a diary and then didn't return it were more likely to have different radio listening behavior than people who just wouldn't consent.

So if we were to look at the issue of higher response rates as a pure business decision, each broadcaster needs to look at it from the standpoint of what would happen to their station's ratings, and how much extra it might cost Arbitron to improve the response rate situation. Since Arbitron is a for-profit company, the radio industry should expect to have to bear the additional costs.

One of the initiatives Arbitron has proposed is to perform another nonresponse study. To us, this is the key element in deciding what the industry should ask Arbitron to do. Unfortunately, the press release says that the study is scheduled for "2004/2005", so it could be more than 2 years before we know the impact of higher response rates on the audience estimates and the Arbitron bill. If we find out that non-responders still listen to less radio overall, is it in the industry's interest to pay more to Arbitron so it can try to entice those nonresponders, which could result in lower ratings?

In the Arbitron Data Users Forum (ADUF) sponsored by Julian Breen, Jaye Albright (Albright & O'Malley Country Consulting/RadioIQ) pointed out that more households will be getting \$5 premiums. While that is true, there are a substantial number of households that are being offered \$10/diary premiums if they consent and return the diary. This is in addition to the diary

and follow-up premiums already in place, and started during the Fall 2002 survey. More details of this can be found in chapter 3 of Arbitron's Description of Methodology.

Also in the ADUF Forum, Joe Kelly (PD/WPUR-FM/Cat Country 107.3/Atlantic City) brought up the idea of using Radio to raise the public's awareness of Arbitron. The issue of Arbitron's name, or brand, recognition is also one that has been looked at in the past. Arbitron worked with the industry to allow them to run radio commercials to improve response rates in both San Diego and Atlanta. Rhody recalls that there was a slight improvement in both cases in response rate (maybe about one point) but listening levels dropped! All the Atlanta stations agreed to run the same announcement with the same dayparts and an agreed to level. One inherent danger in the concept for promoting participation in the survey is the belief among agency researchers that more bias will be introduced into the survey process. Rhody called this another great idea that just didn't work. Charlie recalls some Advisory Council meetings where this study was discussed. Some argued that it was not run for a long enough time. A related issue is that while Nielsen has much better name recognition with the general public than does Arbitron, Nielsen's response rates are just as poor, if not worse than Arbitron's.

One factor affecting consent today that wasn't around 20 years ago is that through caller ID we can tell who is calling before we even pick up the phone. As far as I know, Arbitron's name will not show up on the caller ID, especially outside the state from which the calls are being made. So even if the industry acts to publicize Arbitron, there might be little net benefit since Arbitron's name won't be displayed. Maybe if Arbitron's pre-alert postcard told the potential diarykeeper when Arbitron would call, or told them what would show up on the caller ID, this could help.

We should remain hopeful that Arbitron will find a way to increase response rates, which will result in more stable -- and hopefully higher -- estimates, and it won't cost the industry too much more for this improved information. Good luck to them!

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