



# **IMPROVING SURVEY RESPONSE BY DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE CONTACT AND COOPERATION STRATEGY**

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## 1. ABSTRACT

Collection of high-quality survey data requires effective *contact* strategies with people to communicate why they have been selected in a survey, and to gain their *cooperation* to participate. With statistical organisations around the world facing cost pressures and declining response rates, having effective contact and cooperation strategies in data collection has never been more important to maintain statistical quality and trust.

A strategic priority for the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) is the production of high quality statistics. This paper explores the effectiveness of three approaches designed to support and advance the ABS's contact and cooperation strategy for household and person surveys.

1. Developing a **tailored approach strategy** to engage key demographic groups. These include those with a high non-response propensity, or groups that are critical to have represented in the data based on the survey topic (e.g. those with low or high socio-economic status for income and expenditure surveys).
2. Offering financial or non-financial **incentives** for completing a government survey.
3. Collecting contact details through a **household survey induction model**, whereby the respondent is initially introduced to the survey program, rather than to a specific survey.

We designed the three approaches to work either independently, or in combination, depending on the collection requirements.

For each approach, we carried out extensive literature reviews and employed human centred design consultation methods. This was followed by prototype development and cognitive testing with members of the public.

The opportunities and limitations of the approaches are outlined. We also suggest how and when they should be deployed to a statistical agency's contact and cooperation strategy, to improve survey response.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

Household statistics produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) play a critical role in informing the nation's most important decisions. To produce these statistics, the ABS is reliant on collecting survey data from households across the country. Collecting both high quality and timely survey data requires both making effective *contact* with those who live at the selected dwellings and obtaining their *cooperation* to start and complete an ABS survey.

For the ABS, making effective *contact* with respondents is challenging for various reasons. Household survey samples are selected from an address-based register, with no additional contact information (e.g. name or phone number) available (ABS, 2020). This means that the ABS is reliant on postal mail and field interviewers to approach selected households and engage them in the

survey process. Without the ability to address the approach letters to the name of the resident/s, often respondents will throw the letters out assuming them to be junk mail. Australia is a vast country, making rural or remote areas, which are disproportionately represented by key demographic groups, difficult and costly to survey in person.

Once contact has been made, seeking willing *cooperation* to complete an ABS survey is also challenging. While most ABS surveys are compulsory, there is limited public awareness of the ABS' collection of household data outside of the Census. This limited awareness, coupled with the rise in exposure to scams (ABS, 2023), means that our survey requests are increasingly being dismissed as fraudulent. Furthermore, many of our household surveys are time-consuming to complete (e.g. over 1 hour), cognitively burdensome (e.g. questions requiring detailed recall of spending), and/or sensitive in nature (e.g. include questions about mental health). These surveys also tend to cover a specific topic (e.g., mental health, labour force, income), so households will often self-deselect from the survey as they assume their data is not relevant to the statistics produced (e.g., retirees often self-deselect from the labour force survey).

Considering these challenges, having an effective contact and cooperation strategy is paramount to the ABS producing quality and timely statistics. The aim of this paper and accompanying presentation is to explore the effectiveness of three approaches designed to support and advance the ABS's contact and cooperation strategy. These approaches are:

1. Developing a **tailored approach strategy** to engage key demographic groups. These include those with a high non-response propensity, or groups that are critical to have represented in the data based on the survey topic (e.g. those with low or high socio-economic status for income and expenditure surveys).
2. Offering **incentives** for completing a government survey
3. Collecting contact details through a **household survey induction model**, whereby the respondent is initially introduced to the survey program, rather than to a specific survey.

These approaches were designed to work either independently, or in combination with one another, depending on the collection requirements.

### 3. METHOD

The project consisted of two distinct phases – the 'discovery phase', which included deep-dives through literature reviews and extensive consultation with experts across the ABS, and the 'prototype and test phase', which included prototype development and cognitive testing with members of the public.

For cognitive testing, 16 members of the Australian public were recruited through Askable recruitment service (Askable Pty Ltd, n.d). To capture a variety of demographics, filtering questions were added in the Askable advertisement, followed by purposeful selection from those who replied.

Of the 16 participants, 12 were involved in the testing of ‘tailored approaches’ (see Section 4) and the remaining 4 were involved in the testing of the ‘household survey induction model’ (see Section 6 below). All 16 participants were asked questions about incentives (Section 5).

#### 4. TAILORED APPROACH TO ENGAGE KEY DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS

There are two ways in which a contact and cooperation strategy can be tailored to engage key demographic groups. You can create a *single* contact and cooperation strategy that is optimised to engage multiple demographic groups using contemporary, best practice human-centred design methods. Alternatively, you can create *multiple* contact and cooperation strategies that are tailored to meet the specific needs of each key demographic group. Whether a single strategy or multiple strategies should be adopted is largely dependent on the commonalities and differences between the demographic groups in terms of barriers to survey response, and best practice engagement techniques. Consideration also needs to be given to the cost and operational complexity associated with managing and maintaining the strategy/ies.

To this end, a review of internal and external research was conducted to understand barriers, as well as best practice engagement strategies, for key demographic groups. For this particular project, demographic groups that are known to have a high non-response propensity, and/or are critical for the production of accurate income and expenditure statistics were explored (see Figure 1).

The review found that while there were many differences amongst the groups, there were also many commonalities, both in terms of barriers and strategies that can address them (see Figure 1). Given these commonalities, the project team decided to pursue a single strategy because of the potential benefit it would efficiently deliver to a broad range of demographic groups. Updated approach letters were prototyped based on this decision, and on the review of the commonalities between groups. The approach letters were positively received during cognitive testing, and now form the basis for the standard suite of approach letters for ABS household surveys. Future research will seek to further optimise this single approach strategy.

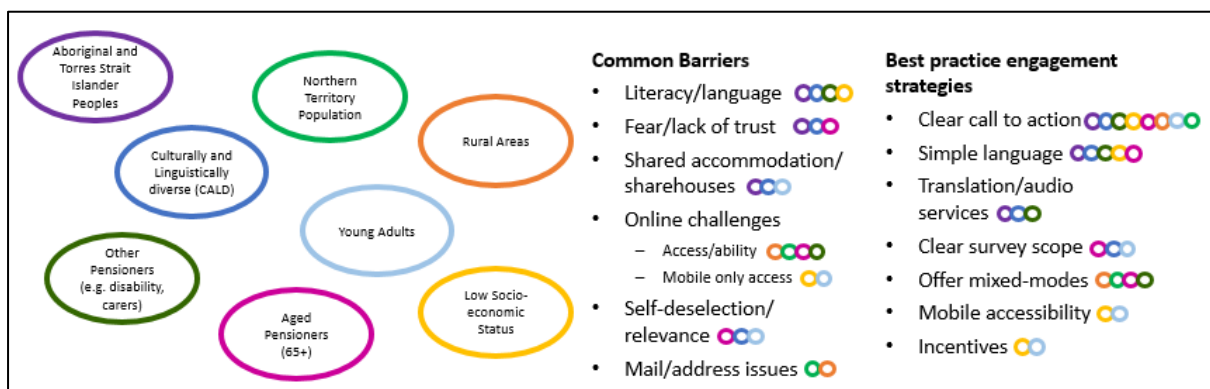


Figure 1. Barriers and best practice engagement strategies for key demographic groups for income and expenditure statistics.



## 5. INCENTIVES FOR COMPLETING A SURVEY

Research has shown that incentives are an effective tool to motivate survey response (Church, 1993; Edwards et al., 2005; Mercer et al., 2015; Ryu Wong, 2022). As a result, statistical organisations around the world are increasingly turning to incentives to boost declining response rates, and mitigate the risk of non-response bias (Crossley & Winter, 2015). To date, most studies looking at the effectiveness of incentives have been conducted outside of Australia, with surveys that are voluntary. It is possible that the effectiveness of incentives may be received differently in Australia, and for non-voluntary surveys (most ABS surveys are compulsory).

The project team conducted cognitive testing with 16 members of the Australian public to explore possible uses for incentives in ABS surveys. The interview questions focused on financial incentives (e.g. a gift card) as the literature suggests this to be the most effective incentive type (compared to non-financial incentives, such as tote bags or coffee mugs).

One key finding from cognitive testing was that participants did not expect to receive an incentive for completing a compulsory ABS survey. They viewed completing the survey as something they “just have to do” as part of their civic duties, with some expressing that financial incentives are unnecessary or even wasteful. That said, participants also expected that a compulsory survey would take between 5 to 30 minutes. Once informed that it may take 1 to 1.5 hours to complete the survey, the majority of participants either expected or would appreciate compensation for what they saw as an ‘unreasonable’ time commitment. This finding hints at a possible interaction between compulsion (or at least civic obligation) and survey length on the perceived appropriateness of financial incentives for government surveys. While incentives may be considered inappropriate for shorter surveys, they could be an important tool for communicating value and reciprocity for surveys that require a greater time commitment.

## 6. HOUSEHOLD SURVEY INDUCTION MODEL

The ABS’ current approach strategy involves sending letters to selected households explaining their role in a specific survey. These letters include what they can expect at each stage of their participation, including mode options, the sorts of questions they’ll be asked, and any additional activities required to fulfil their obligation (e.g. completing an expenditure diary). This information is provided upfront to help set respondents’ expectations on the survey process.

There are two challenges with the ABS’ current approach strategy: 1. there is some evidence that providing too much information upfront can reduce response due to the perceived burden of the task (Data Collection Design Centre, 2021), and 2. there is a growing organisational need for flexibility in updating survey topics as new and/or urgent data needs arise. To address these two challenges, we explored the concept of a ‘household survey induction model’, whereby generic approach materials are provided to respondents at initial contact, with survey-specific information provided at the time that they require it (e.g. upon starting the survey).

Cognitive testing found that participants were generally comfortable with not receiving survey specific information at the first contact, and made assumptions that the survey would ask about a range of topics relevant to their own lives. However, when participants were informed upon starting the survey that it would take approximately 1.5 hours to complete, they expressed frustration with not having been told this information upfront so they could plan when to do it. Participants said knowing the length of the survey would not deter them from completing it, and would help them to decide the most appropriate time for them to sit down to complete it.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Designing an effective contact and cooperation strategy is critical to the collection of high quality survey data. In this paper we explored three approaches that have potential to advance the ABS' contact and cooperation strategy. We found that small design updates to our materials, taking into account commonalities amongst key demographic groups, can increase overall engagement with the survey process. Furthermore, we found that a different approach may be warranted depending on the time commitment and effort required to complete a survey. For surveys that are in line with what is considered a reasonable time commitment for a compulsory survey (5 to 30 minutes), approaching households through a household survey induction model may be appropriate. However, for surveys beyond what the public deems a reasonable time commitment, ensuring optimal engagement from respondents may require being upfront about the survey requirements (particularly around time commitment), and/or providing incentives to motivate response.

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