

# MAKING RESPONSE RATES JOB #1

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Despite the very challenging response rate environment of the last several years, Scarborough has achieved significant response/return rate *increases* in each stage of our three-instrument, telephone-followed-by-mail survey approach.

Gains in the mail are largely due to conventional respondent-oriented treatments and added resources. For the telephone, however, the most important factor has been an internally-directed overhaul and re-engineering of the entire telephone interviewing process. The financial management measures that were once important elements in evaluating interviewers and calling center managers have been abandoned, replaced by the concept of “best use of sample.” This has become a central organizing principal, akin to a total quality management approach in a traditional manufacturing environment, and has affected virtually every aspect of the interviewing process. Of particular note, it has led to greater communication and interaction between field and management, to significant changes in interviewer hiring, training, and supervising practices, and to new metrics for evaluation and compensation. And, as has often happened in quality management settings, quality has greatly improved (measured against any type of quality metric) with relatively modest cost increases.

Though some of this story is unique to Scarborough – a combination of where we started and the opportunities and tools available to us – many of the lessons should be applicable to others as well.

## Background

Scarborough provides local market measurement of major media and selected products and services in each of 75 top U.S. Markets, which collectively include approximately 80% of the U.S. population 18 years of age and older. Survey results are released every six months, on a rolling year basis.

A two-phase methodology is used. Phase I is a telephone interview, covering newspaper readership, radio listening, and demographics. Phase II includes two self-administered instruments – a Consumer Booklet, covering lifestyle characteristics, products, services, and some additional media, and a 7-Day TV Diary – which are mailed to respondents after the telephone interview. Respondents who do not return a booklet and/or diary are ascribed the missing instrument. Approximately 210,000 interviews are completed each year.

The burden on Scarborough respondents is substantial. The telephone interview averages approximately 15 minutes. The Consumer Booklet is 36 to 48 pages, depending on the market. And the TV Diary, though not very time consuming in the conventional sense, requires consistent respondent effort over seven days. This combination of instruments and tasks obviously provides respondents many opportunities to balk or drop out of the process, but at the same time provides us with opportunities for new treatments and contact approaches.

Table 1 shows average return and response rates by instrument, for 2001, 2003 and 2005 (all as of Release 1).

Table 1: 75 Market Average Response and Return Rates, Release 1 2001, 2003, 2005

	<u>2001</u>	<u>2003</u>	<u>2005</u>
Telephone Response Rate	31%	37%	45%
<u>Booklet Return Rate</u>	<u>50%</u>	<u>51%</u>	<u>55%</u>
Net Booklet Response Rate	16%	19%	25%
<u>Diary Return Rate</u>	<u>35%</u>	<u>37%</u>	<u>38%</u>
Net Diary Response Rate	11%	14%	17%

Prior to 2001, telephone response rates had been declining for several years, with 2001 representing the low water mark. Though returns rates for the booklet and TV diary during this period had been holding steady or increasing slightly, net booklet and diary response rates were declining, too, dragged down by the eroding telephone response rates.

In 2001 Scarborough management, working with the Media Ratings Council and client groups, made improving response rates the number one operational priority. The gain in telephone response rates we have achieved since then – from 31% to 45%, or almost a 50% relative increase – is extraordinary. Combined with increasing return rates, the net response rate gains for the Phase II mail instruments are even larger.

Response rates for Scarborough's Phase I-based currency newspaper ratings are now higher than response rates for telephone-based U.S. television and radio audience measurement services.

Scarborough does not compare as well on response rates against the major U.S. magazine audience service, MRI, which has about a 65% response rate in their Phase I personal interview and a return rate of about 60% for their Phase II self-completion product booklet. In fairness, the local market focus of Scarborough requires 8 times as many interviews per year, and relies on phone and mail components, as opposed to personal interviewing and in-person placement and retrieval of materials.

### Focus on Phase I

It was obvious that achieving the kind of response rates we wanted would require a complete overhaul or re-engineering, from top to bottom. Given the complexity of Scarborough operational processes and the all-consuming management attention re-engineering requires, it was also clear we could not tackle everything at once.

We decided to focus on telephone response rates first, in part because our currency newspaper audience estimates are based on the telephone interview, and in part because failure to increase telephone response rates would minimize the response rate benefit of any effort we might make to increase booklet and diary return rates.

At the same time, we were not prepared to risk a decline in booklet and diary return rates, which seemed likely if existing booklet and diary procedures were left alone while telephone response rates increased. We decided, therefore, to use additional mailings and increased incentives to shore up booklet and diary return rates while the Phase I re-engineering was underway.

Significant resources were added to Phase II. In 2001 there was a single mailing with a market/demo-dependent cash incentive averaging about \$4. By 2005, cash incentives in the initial mailing had been increased about 50%, and second and third mailings to non-returned had been added, with promised incentives of up to \$35. Net-net, total Phase II incentives more than doubled between 2001 and 2005. Two reminder calls were also added.

Though we have tried to use the additional Phase II resources reasonably efficiently, the added treatments have so far been applied pretty much across the board. With Phase I now under control, we are about to begin full-scale re-engineering of Phase II, with the expectation of finding more effective, respondent-specific ways of using the same total resources.

### Telephone Re-Engineering

Changes made in the telephone interviewing process fall into three areas.

#### 1. Call Scheduling and Respondent-Oriented Treatments:

- Expanded Calling Days/Hours. In 2001 we made calls Tuesday-Friday evenings and Saturday daytimes. Though most attempts are still made during these periods, some attempts are now scheduled during the day on Tuesday-Fridays and on Sundays.
- Additional Dialing Attempts. Total attempts were increased from 12 to 14. The maximum of two refusals was increased to four.
- Sample Pause. After the 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> attempts, sample numbers are given a 6-day pause or rest before dialing resumes.
- Cash Incentives. In 2001 first-time refusals (where address could be obtained by match against telephone directory or other sources) were mailed a postcard explaining the study purpose and asking participation on the next call. Refusals in about 2/3 of markets are now mailed a letter with a cash incentive of \$1 or \$2.

#### 2. Interviewer skills and productivity:

- Productivity-based Hiring. Testing showed that interviewer performance was correlated with results of a standard written skills assessment test. Scarborough-specific scoring standards are now part of new interviewer hiring process.
- Revamped Training. New interviewers receive two weeks of training – a week of “classroom” instruction, plus a week of live practice interviewing – before doing interviews that count. Training once followed the standard school paradigm. Trainers mostly lectured, and the instructional focus was on technical points concerning interviewing scripts, using the CATI system, and so on. A completely new training program is now in place. Based on Adult Education theory, it includes substantial student participation, and there is much more focus on interviewing skills (e.g., listening, addressing objections) and how and when to use them. Trainers themselves participate in regular training conferences jointly supported by Scarborough and a few other large telephone interviewing companies.

- Skill Development Workshops. During the first three months of interviewing interviewers attend two-hour workshops each week covering such topics as voice control, interviewing style, and being assertive without being aggressive. On an ongoing basis thereafter, regular workshops for all interviewers focus on refusal prevention and refusal conversion.
- Interviewer Input and Flexibility. Interviewers are now allowed, within limits, to adapt introduction and objection response scripts to their personal style/taste. In addition, responses used by better performing interviewers have been compiled into “Cue-tips,” available in interviewer manuals and live in the CATI system.
- Better Pay and Benefits. Interviewer pay has been increased slightly, to make interviewing more attractive than competing local job opportunities, and interviewers are now eligible for vacation and other benefits.
- Coaches instead of Supervisors. The role of “supervisor” has been changed to “coach,” in substance as well as name. Coaches listen in on each interviewer each dialing session. Post call debriefings occur immediately after calls, and are scheduled on a frequent, random basis. Interviewer/coach conversations therefore do not signal that the interviewer is being called to task, and coach-interviewer discussions cover the positive as well as the negative.

### 3. “Best Use of Sample”:

- Response Rates as a Critical Company Goal. Response rates are a central, daily element in all communications with calling center management, staff and interviewers. As one example, throughout fieldwork (24 weeks per market per release) there are regular reports comparing response rates to date against the prior six month field period at the same stage.
- Response Rate Incentives. Center management incentives are based on center-wide response rates. Daily, weekly, and release level interviewer incentives are based on interviewer-specific response rate performance.
- Data-Mining/Analysis. Our database of literally tens of millions of dialing efforts has been examined in considerable detail. We know how the likelihood of obtaining a completed interview on any given calling attempt varies by type of sample number (e.g., market, listed/unlisted status), prior result history (e.g., number of attempts, current disposition), and the circumstances of this call (e.g., day, time). This information has been used to improve call scheduling and prioritization, and to build a model that is used to evaluate interviewers, by comparing each interviewer’s actual results against model-predicted results for the specific set of calling attempts assigned to that interviewer. This takes into account varying difficulty (e.g., mostly first attempts vs. mostly refusal conversions) and provides a direct measure of the number of interviews that interviewer gained or lost compared to an average interviewer assigned the same set of attempts. In addition to serving as an interviewer incentive measure, model-based performance measures have been revealing about the effectiveness of different interviewer styles. When model-based interviewer scores were first produced, scores for most interviewers were consistent with center management expectations. Some, however, were not. Interviewers with lower than expected scores tended to make lots of attempts. They completed interviews but were quick to give up on reluctant respondents and used a lot of sample in the process. Better than expected performers were just the opposite, making fewer attempts and spending time with reluctant respondents. Though these interviewers may have been only average in terms of completed interviews per hour, they managed to achieve these completes with relatively few attempts.

Except for the skills assessment test used to screen new hires, all the changes outlined above have been home-grown. Scarborough is active in AAPOR, CMOR, MRA and other industry associations. We regularly present at industry meetings, and, in turn, got to hear many ideas that proved very useful to us.

### What We’ve Learned

It is hard to overstate how different the Scarborough telephone center environment is today than it was just five years ago. We’ve introduced a large number of changes over a short timeframe, most of which were not or could not be tested before implementation. It is impossible, therefore, to divide our overall response rate gain into the portions attributable to specific components. That said, we can make some general statements that should have broad application.

First, investment in interviewers and center managers has much greater payback than investment in respondents. Net-net, we believe investments in field staff have produced at least three times the impact per dollar as respondent incentives.

Second, the total effect of these changes in combination is much greater than the sum of the parts, because all the components work together and support a single objective. Scarborough tells field staff response rate is an important company goal, we reward them based on response rate performance, and we provide flexibility, skill development, and field support to help them achieve high response rates. No one in the company doubts our commitment to response rates.

This kind of synergy appears in other ways as well. For example, Scarborough interviewing centers have become a more satisfying and rewarding place to work, which has led to lower turnover of coaches, trainers, and interviewers. We now have less than 15% annual interviewer turnover, which is about half the reported industry average and lower than any other survey calling center we know of. Low turnover was not an objective when we started the re-engineering process, but has certainly contributed to increased productivity.

### **Next Steps**

We believe we have established a framework for achieving high response rates in the Phase I telephone portion of our survey process, and will continue to put similar energy against all phases of our interviewing process with even more focus on the return rates in the Phase II mail portion. That said, we recognize that maximizing response rates is a continuous process and we will continue to search for more improvement in all areas, including the telephone.