FROM CRICKETS TO CLICKS: MAXIMIZING SURVEY RETURNS

Jennifer Wells, DVM

Program Director

Professor of Veterinary Technology

University of Cincinnati, Blue Ash College

HAVE YOU EVER HAD TO SUBMIT GRADUATE SURVEY DATA WITH JUST...
ONE RESPONSE?

WHAT YOU'LL LEARN TODAY

- Identify 3 proven strategies to increase survey participation

- Design communications that boost engagement and response rates

- Identify tools to streamline and track outreach

WHY DO SURVEY RESPONSE RATES MATTER?

AVMA accreditation compliance

Data-driven decision-making

Protecting integrity of program evaluation

WHAT'S AT STAKE

- Incomplete program outcome assessments

- Missed trends in graduate preparedness

- Loss of credibility with stakeholders

WHAT IS A GOOD RESPONSE RATE?

Target: 60%

Typical? Often <20%

Banta, Jones & Black (2009): "Designing Effective Assessment: Principles and Profiles of Good Practice"
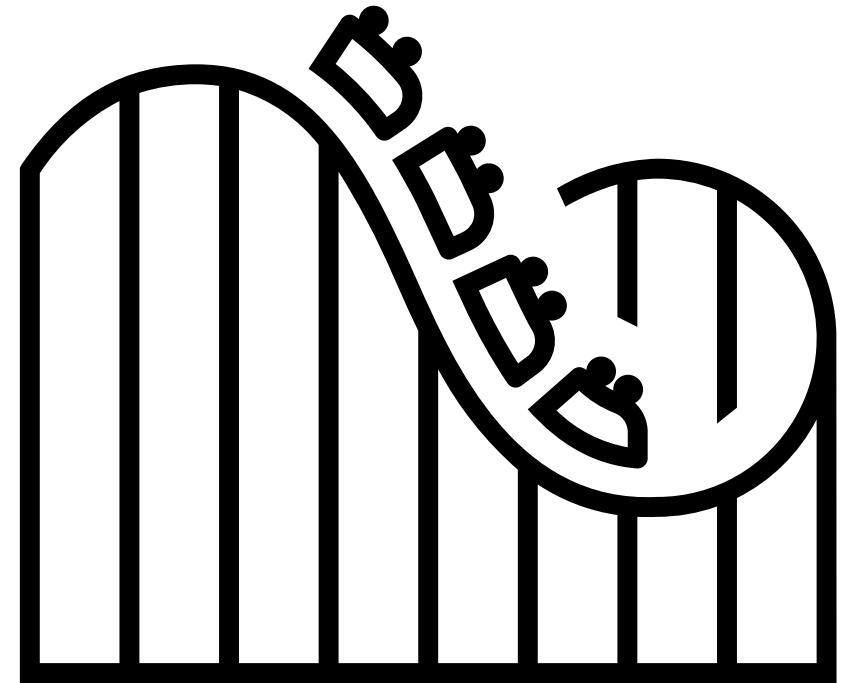
MY EXPERIENCE WITH 10 YEARS OF GRADUATE SURVEYS

- 2016 = 22% return rate (<u>Staff</u> mailed <u>and</u> sent to <u>college</u> email)

- 2017 = 37% return rate

- 2018 = 57% return rate (<u>Staff</u> emailed to <u>personal</u> email addresses; limited follow-up)

- 2019 = 34% return rate

- 2020 = 71% return rate (<u>PD</u> emailed to <u>personal</u> emails with <u>follow-up</u> email(s))

- 2021 = 70% return rate

- 2022 = 80% return rate

- 2023 = 71% return rate

- 2024 = 63% return rate

- 2025 = 65% return rate

MY EXPERIENCE WITH EMPLOYER SURVEYS

- 2004 = 70% return rate (sent to graduates' employers)

- 2006 = 75% return rate

- 2007 = 53% return rate

- 2015 = 15% (mailed to over 200 vet clinics in the city)

- 2021 = 23% (emailed and mailed to 185 clinics)

- 2023 = 15% (emailed only to 85 clinics)

- 2025 = 9% (emailed to 109 clinics)

COMMON PITFALLS

- Poor timing (e.g., holidays, last minute)

- Impersonal or "spammy" subject lines

- No personalization

- No incentives
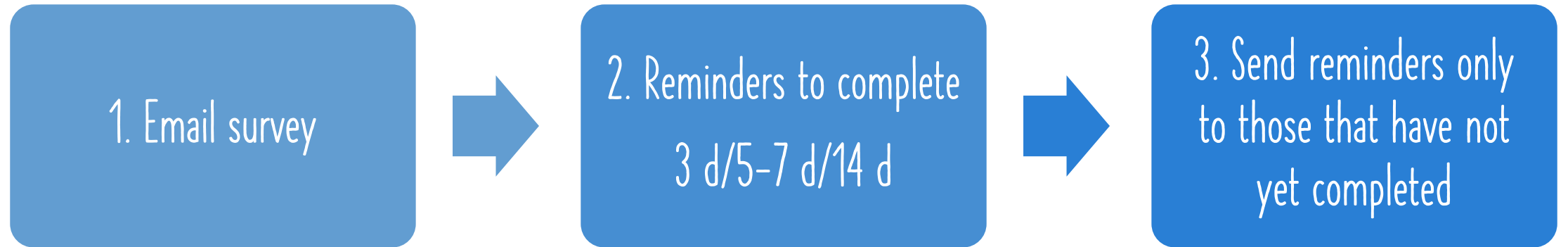
- No follow-up

STRATEGY #1: STRATEGIC TIMING

Pre-survey message + 3 waves of contact

81% of Boise State responses came after just 2 reminders

Perkins (2011): "Using Research-Based Practices to Increase Response Rates of Web-Based Surveys"

FOLLOW-UP SYSTEM

1. Email survey → 2. Reminders to complete 3 d/5-7 d/14 d → 3. Send reminders only to those that have not yet completed

STRATEGY #2: PERSONALIZATION

Use names, departments, and personalized messages

Reference relationship (advisor, program)

SURVEY MESSAGE TRUST

- Email from known domain & person

- Include quick link to survey in email

- Signed by real name & title

- Include official website link for validation

COMMUNICATION EXAMPLES

- Generic vs. Personalized email

- Best subject lines

- Add human tone + action verbs

- Highlight/bold important info

- Due date for return

BONUS STRATEGY: SURVEY DESIGN

KEEP IT UNDER 10 MINUTES

ELIMINATE UNNECESSARY QUESTIONS

USE BRANCHING LOGIC

MOBILE-FRIENDLY FORMATTING

AVMA SURVEY TEMPLATES

- Coming soon!

- Templates of Graduate and Employer Surveys that you can use to collect specific data from your graduates and their employers

STRATEGY #3: USE INCENTIVES

- Non-monetary: early access, shout-outs, certificates, data access

- Prepaid incentives greatly boost participation

- Helping program outcomes

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLE

A Program increased from 15% to 45.6% completion rate

Personalized emails + $5 credit + 3 reminders

Perkins (2011): "Using Research-Based Practices to Increase Response Rates of Web-Based Surveys"

EMPLOYER SURVEY TIPS: 2 ENGAGEMENT METHODS

1. Track through graduates

- Track student employment
  - At graduation
  - On graduate surveys
- Intentionally survey employers of new graduates
- These surveys will follow graduate surveys yearly
- These are NOT preceptorship/internship surveys!

2. Survey ALL area employers

- Send employer surveys to all area veterinary hospitals
- Collect data on all graduates from your program
  - Recent graduates versus 5-10 years, etc.
- Can be helpful for collecting geographic data
- Survey response % may be lower
- Could do every 3-5 years?

TOOLS TO SUPPORT YOU

- Survey platforms: Qualtrics, Google Forms, Microsoft Forms, SurveyMonkey

- Email tools: Mailchimp, CRM
  - Know how to mail merge for personalization!

- Trackers: Google Sheets, Excel, Airtable

SURVEY PLATFORMS

- Survey Platforms with Analytics (e.g., Qualtrics, SurveyMonkey, Google Forms)

- These platforms allow users to:

- Schedule automated follow-up reminders to non-responders

  - Monitor real-time response rates

  - Filter respondents based on demographics or completion status

  - For example, Qualtrics offers dashboard views to track who has responded and set conditional logic for follow-ups– helping coordinators focus efforts on the right populations.

EMAIL TOOLS

- Customer Relationship Management/Contact Management Tools
  - (Airtable, Excel, Mailchimp)
- By creating a centralized contact database, programs can:
  - Record when and how each graduate or employer was contacted
  - Tag contacts with response status (e.g., "Opened," "Responded," "Needs Follow-up")
  - Segment lists for targeted reminders (e.g., only 2024 graduates who didn't open the first email)

MICROSOFT & GOOGLE TOOL USE EXAMPLES

Microsoft Excel + Outlook Mail Merge

- Use Excel to manage your contact list

- Mail merge through Outlook lets you send personalized bulk emails from your school email address

- You can track who received what and when

- Responses can be logged back into Excel manually or with macros

- Use case: Add a column for "Last Contacted" and filter for who needs a follow-up reminder.

Google Sheets + Google Forms + Gmail Add-ons (Free)

- Google Forms is easy to use for small-to-mid-size surveys

- Google Sheets can track responses and outreach

- Add-ons like "Yet Another Mail Merge" (YAMM) let you send personalized bulk emails via Gmail with open tracking

- Tip: Filter and sort in Sheets by cohort, status, or date contacted.

TRACKING AND FOLLOW-UP

- Improves efficiency and personalization in follow-ups.
  - Systems like Mailchimp, Google Workspace's "mail merge" allow for:
    - Personalized bulk email sends
    - Scheduled reminders
    - Open and click tracking to refine message timing and subject lines
- Dashboards & Metrics
  - Simple tools like Google Sheets or more advanced ones like Power BI can help you:
    - Visualize trends (e.g., "response rates by week" or "by cohort")
    - Make real-time adjustments based on which outreach efforts are working
- Example: In Perkins (2011), the university used a combination of filtered email lists, personalized messages, and carefully timed reminders to track engagement and ultimately reached a 45.6% response (rate-three times higher than their previous average).

BEST PRACTICES CHECKLIST

✔ Short, relevant surveys

✔ Targeted recipients

✔ Personal + trustworthy messages

✔ Well-timed delivery

✔ Multiple follow-ups

✔ Use incentives (if feasible)

IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

- Choose one survey to optimize

- Test 2 follow-up strategies

- Add personalization

- Pilot an incentive

- Measure results

KEY TAKEAWAYS

You *can* improve participation

The solution is multi-factorial

Better data = better decisions = stronger programs!

THANK YOU / RESOURCES

Jennifer Wells, DVM

Email: Jennifer.Wells@UC.Edu

Banta, T. W., Jones, E. A., & Black, K. E. (2009). *Designing effective assessment: Principles and profiles of good practice.*

Koskey, K. L. K., Sondergeld, T. A., & Cobb, R. B. (2015).
A mixed-methods investigation of factors and scenarios influencing college students' decision to complete surveys.
Journal of Educational Research and Practice, 5(1), 1-21.

https://doi.org/10.5590/JERAP.2015.05.1.01

Perkins, R. A. (2011).
Using research-based practices to increase response rates of web-based surveys.
EDUCAUSE Quarterly, 34(2), Article 6.

https://er.educause.edu/articles/2011/5/using-researchbased-practices-to-increase-response-rates-of-webbased-surveys

Ross, A. P. (2011).
Survey design practices that support higher education assessment.
American Journal of Evaluation, 32(2), 166-179.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1098214010386043

QUESTIONS?

What's your biggest takeaway or 'aha' moment?