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Respondents' Reactions to Proposed Text Messaging

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Heather Ridolfo¹

Abstract

In 2018, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducted a test to examine the feasibility of sending text messages to respondents with known cell phone numbers, notifying them that the September Agricultural Survey was on its way. As a follow up to this test, personal interviews were conducted to gather respondents' reactions to these types of text alerts. In general, respondents had a positive reaction to text alerts. Respondents indicated that receiving a pre-notification via text was helpful; however, some respondents indicated that they would rather receive survey reminders via text. Although, the idea of text alerts was well-received, some of the message content was off-putting. In addition, respondents felt an opt-out feature was needed.

Key Words: Text messaging, pre-notification, communication

1. INTRODUCTION

In August 2018, the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) conducted a test to examine the feasibility of sending text message blasts to respondents with known cell phone numbers, notifying them that the September Agricultural Survey was on its way. The text message read: "USDA Alert: Your NASS Sept Ag Survey is on the way. Please plan 25 minutes to complete online or return by mail. Questions? 888-424-7828, nass@nass.usda.gov."

As a follow up to this test, nine personal interviews were conducted to gather respondents' reactions to text alerts. During these interviews, respondents were asked to share their reactions to this text, as well as their experiences with similar text notifications, and whether they thought texts from NASS should have an opt-out feature. In addition, respondents were also asked about their preferences for being contacted by NASS. The following report will present findings from this research.

2. METHODOLOGY

Nine respondents participated in this research, which was conducted in conjunction with testing for the 2018 Agricultural Labor Survey. At the end of the evaluation of the Agricultural Labor Survey, respondents were presented with the text message sent in August 2018, and the interviewer explained the purpose of the text. Respondents were then asked to provide their reaction to this text. They were also asked to discuss experiences with similar text notification, and whether an opt-out feature should be provided in these types of messages. Respondents were then asked about their preferences for receiving communications from NASS regarding their surveys.

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All interviews were conducted via WebEx. Respondents represented different sectors of agriculture, including nurseries, fruits, vegetables, cattle and calves, and equine, and were located in several different states (Washington, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Virginia, West Virginia, New York, and New Jersey).

3. RESULTS

The majority of respondents had a positive reaction to the text message. One respondent indicated that he was indifferent and another respondent had a negative reaction.

Respondents who had a positive reaction to the text message said they liked the idea of being notified that the survey was coming. Some respondents said it would help them keep an eye out for the survey: “It wouldn’t have phased me at all... I would also be paying attention for it to come.” Others said it would give them time to get their records together and set aside time to complete the survey: “I guess I’d like to know when the survey was coming. To know I have to spend Wednesday morning to do it, and know it takes more time than they’re saying.” Similarly, another respondent said that he may have time in the next 10 days to work on gathering information but by the time the survey comes, he may not. He said the pre-notification “gives you more of a window to get something prepared.” Others noted that it was just another way NASS could communicate with them. A few respondents indicated that they receive similar texts from other organizations and they appreciate them. For example, one respondent indicated that the Farm Service Agency sends text notifications indicating when deadlines are approaching to apply for farm programs. One respondent indicated that he liked the idea of a text because it would save costs by eliminating the need for a separate mailing.

The respondent who was indifferent to this text message indicated that he did not have a strong opinion about it. He said if he received this type of text, it would “be somewhat in my memory for a couple days.” However, he also indicated he would prefer to receive an email rather than a text.

The respondent who had a negative reaction to receiving this type of text said, “[text messages] don’t really do much for me. I get random texts all the time. I kind of overlook them.” He said receiving a text notifying him that a survey is coming would not be helpful to him. Instead he would rather receive a text reminding him to complete a survey and the due date. He also would not mind receiving a short survey via text. He said, “If you’re looking for some sort of information, I’d probably do more with it.” He said the survey would need to be short, like one question.

A few respondents, who did have a positive reaction to the text message, indicated that aspects of the message were alarming at first. For example, two respondents did not like the use of the word “alert” in the text. They associated the word “alert” with an emergency. One respondent said his first reaction would be “Oh [expletive deleted]!” But, once he read the text he would understand NASS was just contacting him about a survey. Another respondent said, “Everything is good except for the word alert.” He said “alert” would make him question whether or not this was spam and if someone was trying to trick him into doing something. He then added that the word alert “sounds pretty ominous.” A third respondent had an issue with the sentence “Please plan 25

minutes to complete online or return by mail.” She said she would have the following reaction if she received this text message and it said the survey would take 25 minutes: “I would probably scream for a minute because we stay so busy and it’s hard to break out or know when we can break out 25 minutes. Although, it would be a nice alert to know that it’s coming. I’d rather have it than not.”

A few respondents indicated that they would rather the texts be used for purposes other than pre-notification. One respondent indicated that he completes NASS surveys online and instead of receiving a pre-notification, he would rather receive an invitation to complete the survey via text. Other respondents indicated they would rather receive a text reminding them to complete the survey with the due date.

Respondents had other comments regarding these types of messages. One respondent said the message should say “thank you” at the end. Another respondent said NASS would need to be cognizant of the time zones their respondents reside in when sending these messages. A third respondent indicated that NASS should be cautious about overusing this avenue of communication.

When asked if a text message like this should have an opt-out feature, many respondents indicated that it should. Even if they did not think they would opt out of these messages, they felt it would be nice to provide it as a courtesy. For example, one respondent said, “I wouldn’t personally opt out but someone would appreciate the option.” Another respondent questioned whether NASS was required by law to have an opt-out feature. He said even if they are not, “being nice goes a long way.” One respondent said while it would be nice to provide this feature, people should know that if they provide their cell phone number to NASS, NASS will use it to contact them.

Finally, some respondents mentioned that they would prefer to receive an email rather than a text. One respondent indicated that a text from NASS would be sent to her personal phone whereas an email would go to her work email. She said, “I’d rather deal with work at work.” Another respondent commented that he is more likely to pay attention to an email than a text. He then cautioned that NASS would need to be careful about how they worded the subject line and the frequency with which they send emails. He said he gets about 100 emails a day and spends about half a second looking at subject lines to determine if he should open each email. He said the subject should say something like “for your attention” or “for your review.” He said something other than “NASS Ag survey” would get his attention. He also added that he receives a lot of “junk” from the Food and Drug Administration. He was receiving an email almost every day from them and now he sends them all straight to junk mail. If he received an email once every two weeks, he would be more apt to read it.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, text messaging may be an effective tool for NASS to communicate to its stakeholders, including survey respondents. Respondents were generally open to receiving information via text from NASS. NASS should continue to explore using text messaging as

another way to communicate with its survey respondents. In addition to pre-notification, NASS should explore using text messaging as a survey reminder.

Although the text messaging was generally well-received, respondents found some of the content to be off-putting. Additionally, respondents indicated that an opt-out feature should be provided in all texts. Finally, some respondents indicated they would prefer to receive emails from NASS rather than text messages. NASS should also explore the use of email as another avenue for communicating information regarding surveys.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to explore the use of text messaging for pre-notification and/or survey reminders
2. Avoid the use of terminology that could be viewed as ominous or off-putting
3. Provide an opt-out feature on all text messages
4. Explore the use of email for survey invitations and reminders