United States Department of Agriculture

National Agricultural Statistics Service

Research and Development Division
Washington DC 20250

RDD Research Report
Number RDD-10-01

May 2010

Does Using a Personalized Pre-Survey Letter Improve the Response Rate for the June Agricultural Survey in Louisiana?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) surveys the United States' and Puerto Rico's agriculture. The data collected are then compiled to estimate crops and livestock, assess production practices, and identify economic trends. The June Agricultural Survey (JAS) is conducted by NASS to provide the first clear indication of the potential crop production and supply of major commodities for the year. The data collected are also used as the basis for several additional follow-on surveys throughout the year.

Louisiana is one of 49 states (Alaska excluded) which conducts the June Agricultural Survey. The Louisiana Field Office utilizes personalized pre-survey letters in an effort to improve response rates by conveying a more personalized touch to potential respondents. In this context, personalized means that the name and address appears in the address area of the letter, the name of the operator of the agricultural operation appears in the salutation, and a digitized blue ink signature of the state director appears in the signature area. The overall preparation and mailing processes used are quite labor intensive compared to sending out a generic pre-survey letter. The Louisiana Field Office wanted to assess whether the additional effort had a return benefit in terms of increased response rate versus using a generic pre-survey letter.

To research the efficacy of personalized questionnaires in increasing the response rate, NASS' Research and Development Division worked with the Louisiana Field Office on a split sample test on the 2008 June Agricultural Survey.

After analyzing the data, there was no statistical evidence that personalizing the pre-survey letters improved the response rate for the June Agricultural Survey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Louisiana Field Office should discontinue the practice of using personalized pre-survey letters if response rate improvements are the sole objective, since no positive return was found to offset the resources required for personalization of pre-survey letters.

2. Research should be expanded to additional states to determine if using personalized pre-survey letters has any effect on the response rate at a national level.

Does Using a Personalized Pre-Survey Letter Improve the Response Rate for the June Agricultural Survey in Louisiana?

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Abstract

The United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) surveys farmers and ranchers across the United States and Puerto Rico in order to estimate crops and livestock, assess production practices, and identify economic trends. One of the surveys NASS conducts is the Agricultural Survey, conducted four times a year, (March, June, September and December). June is the base quarter of the survey, and it is the focus of this study.

In recent years, NASS' Louisiana Field Office has used personalized pre-survey letters in an effort to increase the response rate. However, this process is very labor intensive compared to mailing a generic pre-survey letter. Given increasing workloads, the Louisiana Field Office sought to determine whether the practice provided positive return for the time expenditure.

This study examines whether personalized pre-survey letters result in a higher survey response rate compared to using generic pre-survey letters.

Key Words: Agriculture, (Personalized / Generic) Pre-survey Letter, Data Collection, Response Rate

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1. INTRODUCTION

The National Agricultural Statistics Service's (NASS) primary purpose is to provide timely, accurate and useful statistics on the United States' and Puerto Rico's agriculture. NASS conducts hundreds of surveys annually for the purpose of making estimates on crops and livestock, exploring production practices, and identifying economic trends.

The Agricultural Survey occurs four times a year, in March, June, September and December. June is the base quarter and collects information on U.S. crops, livestock, grain storage capacity, and type and size of farms. June is also the focus of this study.

The 2008 June Agricultural Survey (JAS) sample was comprised of 87,151 agricultural operations across the United States. Louisiana had 1,290 agricultural operations sampled.

1.1 Problem: Creation and Mailing of Personalized Pre-Survey Letters is Labor Intensive

The Louisiana Field Office has employed a number of different methods for improving their survey response rate. Survey nonresponse negatively affects data estimates, increases survey costs and data collection time, and significantly complicates the data editing and summarization processes. Nonresponse also increases the potential for introducing a bias into the estimates which cannot be easily assessed.

One of the methods used to attempt to increase the response rate is personalizing each sampled agricultural operation's pre-survey letter. In Louisiana this is done by printing 1) the name and address in the address area of the letter, 2) the name of the operator of the agricultural operation in the salutation, and 3) a digitized blue ink signature of the state director in the signature area.

Overall, preparing and mailing a personalized pre-survey letter is more labor intensive than a generic mailing. Combining a generic pre-survey letter with a copy of the labeled questionnaire can be mechanized using mailing machines. In comparison, each personalized pre-survey letter has to be manually combined with the appropriate, labeled questionnaire to ensure that they are mailed together in the correct envelope. This process requires an additional 12 hours of manual intervention, which takes time away from employees' other work.

1.2 Purpose of the Research

The goal of the pilot study, which focused on Louisiana's 2008 June Agricultural Survey, was to determine whether using a personalized pre-survey letter would result in a better response rate than using a generic pre-survey letter.

1.3 Definitions

There are three types of survey nonresponse: 1) refusals, 2) inaccessibles, and 3) incompletes.

1.) **Refusals** are operators who were not willing to respond or participate in the survey.

2.) **Inaccessibles** occur when field enumerators are unable to contact or reach the agricultural operators for data collection.

3.) **Incompletes** are questionnaires for which at least one of the questions is not answered.

2. METHOD

The 2008 JAS sample for Louisiana was comprised of 1,290 agricultural operations, which were randomly divided into four treatment groups. Treatment groups A and B received the personalized pre-survey letter and treatment groups C and D received the generic letter.

The treatment groups used are defined as follows:

Treatment Group A: Operations received a personalized pre-survey letter and were visited by a field enumerator to complete the interview. See Appendix A.

Treatment Group B: Operations received a personalized pre-survey letter and were asked to complete either the enclosed paper questionnaire by mail or the survey electronically via the Internet. If this initial contact did not result in a completed questionnaire, an office enumerator would call the operation to obtain the information. If a response could still not be obtained in this way, a field enumerator would visit the agricultural operation to complete the questionnaire. See Appendix B.

Treatment Group C: Operations received a generic pre-survey letter and were field enumerated only. See Appendix C.

Treatment Group D: Operations received a generic pre-survey letter and were asked to complete either the enclosed paper questionnaire by mail or the survey electronically via the Internet. If this initial contact did not result in a completed questionnaire, an office enumerator would call the operation to obtain the information. If a response could still not be obtained in this way, a field enumerator would visit the agricultural operation to complete the questionnaire. See Appendix D.

There were two constraints applied to the randomization process. First, sampled agricultural operations tied to multiple operations were restricted to treatment groups A and D. Second, those agricultural operations identified as long term refusals were not assigned a treatment group.

Table 1 displays the data collection mode, the pre-survey letter version and the characteristics and the number of agricultural operations in each treatment group. Treatment groups A and C had fewer operations than treatment groups B and D, since these operations (in groups A and C) were typically ones that requested field enumeration in the past or were Louisiana's larger operations for which the field office felt that a personal field visit would be best.

Table 1: 2008 June Agricultural Survey in Louisiana: Treatment Groups Defined and Number of Agricultural Operations in Each.

Treatment Group Name	Data Collection Mode	Pre-Survey Letter Type	Number of Operations
A	Field	Personalized	77
B	Mail, Web, Telephone, Field	Personalized	538
C	Field	Generic	95
D	Mail, Web, Telephone Field	Generic	531

2.1 Analysis Method

The Chi-square test was used to determine if there exists a significant difference between personalized and generic pre-survey letter frequencies. The 95 percent confident level was used with an alpha level of 0.05.

The hypotheses are as follows:

Null hypothesis: No significant difference between treatment groups exists.

Alternative hypothesis: There is a significant difference between the treatment groups.

2.2 Project Costs

Developing the pre-survey letters and organizing and recording which sampled agricultural operations received a particular pre-survey letter consumed a majority of the time -- totaling 24 staff hours.

3. FINDINGS

Tables 2 through 4 show the compiled results. Table 2 displays the number and percentage of questionnaires that were recorded as complete, inaccessible or refusal by treatment group.

Table 2: 2008 June Agricultural Survey in Louisiana: Number of Completes, Inaccessibles and Refusals by Treatment Group.

Treatment Name	Data Collection Mode	Pre-Survey Letter Type	Questionnaires							
			Complete		Inaccessible		Refusal		Total	
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
A	Field	Personalized	63	81.8	7	9.1	7	9.1	77	100.0
C		Generic	76	80.0	10	10.5	9	9.5	95	100.0
B	Mail, Web, Telephone Field	Personalized	384	71.4	116	21.6	38	7.1	538	100.1[1/]
D		Generic	375	70.6	102	19.2	54	10.2	531	100.0

1/ Due to rounding, total does not equal 100 percent.

Table 3 displays the results of the Chi-square analyses conducted in comparing treatment groups. Comparing treatment groups A and C shows that there is virtually no difference in response rate due to the type of pre-survey letter used. The Chi-square test with 2 degrees of freedom was calculated to be 0.96, which is larger than the alpha level, 0.05. This means the two treatment groups are not statistically different in response rate.

Comparing treatment group B with D, shows that the type of pre-survey letter used had no effect on the response rate. The Chi-square test with 2 degrees of freedom was calculated to be 0.15, which is larger than the alpha level. This indicates that there is no evidence to conclude that these two treatment groups are statistically different in response rate.

Table 3: 2008 June Agricultural Survey in Louisiana: Chi-Square Analysis on Treatment Groups

Treatment Name	Data Collection Mode	Pre-Survey Letter Type	Chi –Square Value[1/]
A	Field	Personalized	0.96
C		Generic	
B	Mail, Web, Telephone, Field	Personalized	0.15
D		Generic	

1/ Two degrees of freedom.

Table 4 displays the number and percentage of completes, inaccessibles and refusals by pre-survey letter type (collapsing across treatment group). The Chi-square test with two degrees of freedom was conducted on pre-survey letter type versus response type. The test showed that there was no statistical difference in response rate between using a personalized pre-survey letter versus a generic one since the resulted Chi-square value of 0.18 is larger than the alpha level.

Table 4: 2008 June Agricultural Survey in Louisiana: Response Type by Pre-Survey Letter

Pre-Survey Letter Type	Questionnaires								Chi – Square Value
	Complete		Inaccessible		Refusal		Total		
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Personalized	447	72.8	123	20.0	45	7.3	614	100.1[1/]	0.18
Generic	451	72.0	112	17.9	63	10.1	626	100.0	

1/ Due to rounding, total does not equal 100 percent.

4. PAST STUDIES

Other research into using a personalized letter over a generic pre-survey letter has been conducted over the years. Several studies occurred in the 1970's when personalization of pre-survey letters was fairly new and innovative. However, only a few studies have been done in recent years.

In August 2005, "*Effect On Survey Response Rate Of Hand Written Versus Printed Signature On A Pre-surveying Letter: Randomized Controlled Trial."* was published from the University of Oxford, United Kingdom. The authors Kristie McKenzie-McHarg, Lucy Tully, Simon Gates, Sarah Ayers and Peter Brocklehurst tested whether hand signing the pre-survey letter improved the response rate compared to a computer-generated signature. The results showed no detectable difference between the groups in the time taken to respond.

In the 2005 International Journal of Market Research Vol. 47 Issue 4, "*The Effect Of Pre-surveying Letter Personalization In Mail Surveys"* by Phillip Gendall of Massey University looked at personalization of mail surveys to the general public. The study found little or no effect of personalization on response rates, response speed, item non-response, or social desirability bias. Gendall suggests that personalization may no longer be effective in mail surveys. Nevertheless, he stated that as survey-processing technology has advanced over the years, that it is often more difficult not to personalize survey correspondence than to personalize it. Gendall went on to say that, unless there is a good reason to avoid personalization, survey researchers should use it. At worst, it will have no effect, but it might have a positive effect.

In 2007, Don Dillman authored *"Mail And Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method. 2nd Edition."* Dillman states that "Recent tests of personalized mailings on general public samples, each of which used four contacts, resulted in response rate increases of 5% to 11%." However, he went on to say that "The large scale of certain government surveys also makes it difficult to use certain techniques that are acceptable to OMB and that help to assure a high response rate. For example, sending out tens of thousands of questionnaires makes it difficult to employ personalization techniques. This difficulty stems less, perhaps, from objections to inserting names and address into letters, than it does from the risks inherent in requiring that two identified pieces of mail be matched and inserted into the same envelope." Dillman also mentions the possibility of personalization having a negative effect due to the perceived costs of loss of privacy. Overall, he continues to support the use of personalization when appropriate and possible. He believes that, on average, personalization of mail surveys has a significant positive effect.

Based on these research studies, there are limited and conflicting results on whether personalizing pre-survey letters improves the response rate.

5. CONCLUSION

Analyzing response data from Louisiana's 2008 June Agricultural Survey shows that the use of personalized pre-survey letters compared to generic pre-survey letters made no statistical difference in the response rate. Past studies, conducted outside of NASS, both support and counter the use of personalized pre-survey letters.

Overall, the authors recommend that the Louisiana Field Office should discontinue using personalized pre-survey letters since no positive return was found to offset the resources required for personalization of pre-survey letters. Also, the authors recommend research be expanded to additional states to determine if Louisiana's results are only isolated to that state. Additional research also could include examining if particular content and length of the pre-survey letter has an effect.

In the future, Research and Development Division will continue to investigate with NASS' Louisiana Field Office and NASS' Survey Administration Branch (responsible for managing all of NASS' surveys) new ways to improve response rates and make current survey processes more efficient.

6. REFERENCES

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Appendix A

Treatment Group A - Pre-Survey Letter

United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service
Louisiana Field Office
Cooperating with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry

May 21, 2008

«opername»
«wholename»
«addrdelive»
«placename», «statealpha» «zip5»

Dear «sex» «lastname» :

Last year the acreages in Louisiana's traditional crop mix changed drastically in response to the record-high corn prices. This year, rice, soybean and wheat prices are strong. Can we expect this acreage to shift away from corn or will corn be a new "major crop" for Louisiana? And what about grain storage capacity? That was an issue is some parts of the state in 2007. This year fields near the Mississippi River and the Morganza Spillway have been affected by flooding. Will farmers be able to replant in these fields, and if they can how will that impact Louisian's crop mix in 2008. The June Agricultural Survey, conducted each year by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, will provide the answers to these and other questions, eliminating the guesswork and providing useful information for everyone.

Your operation has been selected to participate in the June Agricultural Survey. Your participation is important, as your operation represents many others like it in Louisiana and around the nation. An enumerator representing this office will contact you either by phone or in person sometime between May 30th and June 11th to complete this survey.

The data that you report to us are kept **strictly confidential and are protected by law** (U.S. Code, Title 7). Your response is used only in combination with responses from other producers to set state and national estimates, ensuring that no single operation's data can be discovered or calculated. Farmers benefit directly from these estimates because they reduce market uncertainty and risk. Our mission at NASS is to provide unbiased, useful and accurate statistics for agriculture. Your help is critical.

If you have questions about the survey, or if we can be of assistance to you in any way, please give us a call. Our toll-free number is 800.256.4485.

Sincerely,

Nathan Crisp
Director
Enclosure

5825 Florida Blvd · Baton Rouge, LA 70806
(225) 922-1362 · (225) 922-0744 FAX · www.nass.usda.gov

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Appendix B

Treatment Group B - Pre-Survey Letter (Page 1 of 2)

United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service
Louisiana Field Office
Cooperating with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry

May 21, 2008

«opername»
«wholename»
«addrdelive»
«placename», «statealpha» «zip5»

Dear «sex» «lastname» :

Last year the acreages in Louisiana's traditional crop mix changed drastically in response to the record-high corn prices. This year, rice, soybean and wheat prices are strong. Can we expect acreage to shift away from corn, or will corn be a new "major crop" for Louisiana? And what about grain storage capacity? That was an issue is some parts of the state in 2007. This year fields near the Mississippi River and the Morganza Spillway have been affected by flooding. Will farmers be able to replant in these fields, and if they can how will that impact Louisiana's crop mix in 2008. The June Agricultural Survey, conducted each year by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, will provide the answers to these and other questions, eliminating the guesswork and providing useful information for everyone.

Your operation has been selected to participate in the June Agricultural Survey. Your participation is important, as your operation represents many others like it in Louisiana and around the nation. We offer three convenient ways for reporting your information. The survey is available to you via our secure USDA Internet web site, www.agcounts.usda.gov . For internet reporting you will need to enter your personal survey code which is highlighted on the label of the enclosed questionaire. A page of web reporting instructions is enclosed. If you would like to use Internet reporting, please report early. If you prefer to respond via mail please complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it no later than June 2, 2008. This survey operates on a tight timeline, and representatives of this office will begin contacting producers on ***Friday, May 30th*** to ensure we have all reports in on time.

The data that you report to us are kept **strictly confidential and are protected by law** (U.S. Code, Title 7). Your response is used only in combination with responses from other producers to set state and national estimates, ensuring that no single operation's data can be discovered or calculated. Farmers benefit directly from these estimates because they reduce market uncertainty and risk. Our mission at NASS is to provide unbiased, useful and accurate statistics for agriculture. Your help is critical.

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Sincerely,

Nathan Crisp
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You may now complete this survey on the Internet!

The survey will be available on-line until June 13, 2008.

Instructions for completing this survey on the Internet:

1. Using your Web browser (e.g., Internet Explorer or Netscape), go to: www.agcounts.usda.gov When the page loads, a security warning message will appear. After you have read the message, click on **Continue**.

2. Enter your **SURVEY CODE** from the label on your questionnaire. Your secure survey code is highlighted in **yellow.**

3. When filling out your survey(s), use the mouse or the Tab key to navigate.
   Note: Using the Enter key may prematurely submit incomplete information.

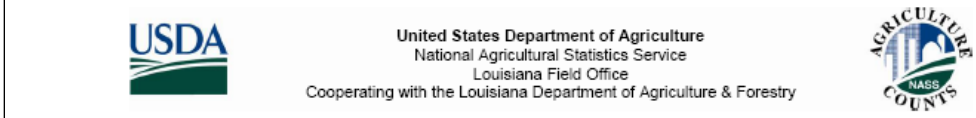
If you need assistance completing your Internet questionnaire, please contact Ronnie Mitchell or Chris Hawthorn at 800.256.4485.

No matter which way you choose to report, your data will continue to be secure, remain confidential and will only be used in combination with other reports.

Thank you in advance for completing the survey.

Appendix C

Treatment Group C - Pre-Survey Letter



May 21, 2008

«opername»
«wholename»
«addrdelive»
«placename», «statealpha» «zip5»

Dear «sex» «lastname» :

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Appendix D

Treatment Group D - Pre-Survey Letter (Page 1 of 2)

United States Department of Agriculture
National Agricultural Statistics Service
Louisiana Field Office
Cooperating with the Louisiana Department of Agriculture & Forestry

May 21, 2008

Dear Louisian Farmer:

Last year the acreages in Louisiana's traditional crop mix changed drastically in response to the record-high corn prices. This year, rice, soybean and wheat prices are strong. Can we expect acreage to shift away from corn, or will corn be a new "major crop" for Louisiana? And what about grain storage capacity? That was an issue is some parts of the state in 2007. This year fields near the Mississippi River and the Morganza Spillway have been affected by flooding. Will farmers be able to replant in these fields, and if they can how will that impact Louisiana's crop mix in 2008. The June Agricultural Survey, conducted each year by USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, will provide the answers to these and other questions, eliminating the guesswork and providing useful information for everyone.

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Sincerely,

Nathan Crisp
Director
Enclosure

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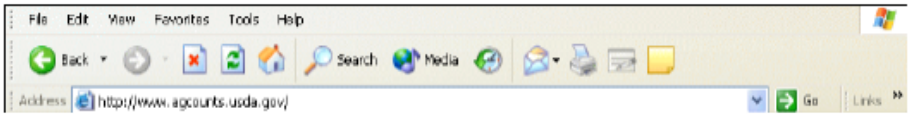

2. Enter your **SURVEY CODE** from the label on your questionnaire. Your secure survey code is highlighted in **yellow.**

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Thank you in advance for completing the survey.