

# **SWAT 49: Effects of the use of different tone in reminder emails to non-respondents for an online survey**

## **Objective of this SWAT**

To examine the effects of using different tone in reminder emails for an online survey.

Study area: Recruitment

Sample type: Participants

Estimated funding level needed: Very Low

## **Background**

Questionnaires are frequently used in online research, but recruiting participants and getting them to answer all the questions can be challenging [1]. Poor recruitment and completion can result in underpowered research that may not be representative of the sample population. This can also increase costs and delay the findings if the recruitment period has to be extended until sample size is reached. Inadequate recruitment and completion rates can lead to research waste if the study has to be terminated and the answer to the research question remains unknown. To mitigate these challenges, reminder emails are sent to people invited to complete online questionnaires but there is uncertainty about the effectiveness of different tones used in email reminders to boost response rates [2].

Written communication in email reminders has no verbal or sensory cues and it would be helpful to know what kind of tone the researcher might adopt to increase the proportion of response and completion rates. In an email, the tone could be perceived as the perception of the researcher's attitude toward the reader and the subject of the message. The overall tone of the reminder message may affect the reader, just as one's tone of voice affects the listener in a verbal exchange. This might, in turn, influence response and completion rates. However, the intended written tone can be interpreted differently by different individuals [3].

Authors have suggested two approaches: appealing to a team victory with a sense of duty and benefit for others by participating or by building a sense of encouragement for participation [4]. In addition, this SWAT will test whether introducing duty or encouragement in the second reminder (after a generic first reminder) makes a difference, and whether someone who was exposed to duty or encouragement in the first reminder benefits from reinforcement of the "nudge" of a generic reminder [5].

This SWAT (ResponseQT) is being implemented in an online survey about the dissemination of the findings of clinical trials to participants and other patients, which will be sent to the first authors of reports of clinical trials. All participants will receive the same questionnaire invitation email, and will be randomised to receive either a standard, duty-laden or encouragement-laden as their first (at 14 days) and their second reminder (at 28 days) if they do not respond.

## **Interventions and comparators**

Intervention 1: Reminder letter tone = Duty, Duty

Intervention 2: Reminder letter tone = Encouragement, Encouragement

Intervention 3: Reminder letter tone = Encouragement, Duty

Intervention 4: Reminder letter tone = Duty, Encouragement

Intervention 5: Reminder letter tone = Standard, Standard

Intervention 6: Reminder letter tone = Standard, Duty

Intervention 7: Reminder letter tone = Standard, Encouragement

Intervention 8: Reminder letter tone = Duty, Standard

Intervention 9: Reminder letter tone = Encouragement, Standard

Index Type: Method of Recruitment, Reminder letter tone

## **Method for allocating to intervention or comparator**

Randomisation

## **Outcome measures**

Primary: Proportion of responses received (partial plus complete) following the first and the second reminder.

Secondary: Proportion of responses received (partial plus complete) before any reminder.

### **Analysis plans**

Recruitment will be compared at three stages: initial response (when there could have been no impact from a reminder), following the first reminder and following the second reminder.

### **Possible problems in implementing this SWAT**

There may be too little difference between the conditions to have a detectable impact. Nine intervention groups may make for a challenging analysis and a simpler design would be to have three conditions only, such that non-respondents would receive the same type of reminder email as their first and second reminder. There might be insufficient information on the characteristics of the invitees and the respondents to detect an effect of the different tones across cultures.

### **References**

- 1) Edwards PJ, Roberts I, Clarke MJ, DiGiuseppi C, Wentz R, Kwan I, Cooper R, Felix LM, Pratap S. Methods to increase response to postal and electronic questionnaires. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2009; (3): MR000008.
- 2) Felix LM, Burchett HE, Edwards PJ. Factorial trial found mixed evidence of effects of pre-notification and pleading on response to Web-based survey. *Journal of Clinical Epidemiology* 2011; 64: 531-6.
- 3) Cook DA, Wittich CM, Daniels WL, West CP, Harris AM, Beebe TJ. Incentive and Reminder Strategies to Improve Response Rate for Internet-Based Physician Surveys: A Randomized Experiment. *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 2016; 18: e244.
- 4) Fan W, Yan Z. Factors affecting response rates of the web survey: A systematic review. *Computers in Human Behavior* 2010; 26: 132-9.
- 5) Baruch Y, Holtom BC. Survey response rate levels and trends in organizational research. *Human Relations* 2008; 61: 1139-60.

### **Publications or presentations of this SWAT design**

### **Examples of the implementation of this SWAT**

People to show as the source of this idea: Amy Price, Sara Schroter, Mike Clarke

Contact email address: dr.amyprice@gmail.com

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Revisions made by:

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