HOW CONTEXTUAL CUES IMPACT RESPONSE AND CONVERSION RATES OF ONLINE SURVEYS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how three contextual cues—researcher identity, sponsor identity, and incentive type—affect response and conversion rates of online conversion surveys. Applying an experimental design via an online survey of information inquirers to a tourist destination, the study demonstrates that researcher identity and sponsor identity affect the response rates, and the specific arrangement can increase the response rate substantially. The three contextual cues do not affect conversion rates significantly.

Keywords: online surveys, conversion study, response rates, conversion rates
INTRODUCTION

Marketers frequently use surveys to assess the effectiveness of marketing campaigns including those in the tourism industry (Burke and Gitelson 1990; Pratt et al. 2010; Woodside 1990; Woodside and Dubelaar 2003). Using appropriate methodology, researchers can gauge the cost-per-visitor and return-on-investment of marketing campaigns (Pratt et al. 2010). With the wide adoption of the internet among consumers, especially in the developed countries, marketing and tourism researchers are conducting surveys online. In comparison to the paper-and-pencil surveys, online surveys are faster, easier, more flexible, and more cost-effective (Dillman 2007; Tierney 2000). However, many problems plague online surveys, including low response rates, poor representativeness, and biased results (Hwang and Fesenmaier 2004; Pan 2010). Thus, researchers need to investigate the validity of online survey results and the ways to increase response rates and to rectify the possible biases.

Some methods work well for improving survey response rates, such as pre-contacts, reminder messages, post-contacts, personalized solicitation messages, and university letterheads (Sheehan and McMillan 1999). However, response bias remains a problem with all surveys due to coverage errors and the self-selection of respondents (Best et al. 2001; Ross et al. 2003; Woodside & Dubelaar 2003). Biased results can also confound with response rates: low response rates due to self-selection when a survey identifies one specific brand may bloat the conversion rates (Woodside and Dubelaar 2003). In a meta-study on the interaction between response rates and conversion rates for tourist conversion surveys, Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) hypothesize and confirm that identifying one destination-brand as the sponsor of the survey decreases the response rate while inaccurately increasing the conversion rate. Such findings show that the methods to increase response rates may jeopardize the validity of the survey results. Thus,
Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) advocate experimental studies on the manipulation of contextual cues in order to test the effectiveness of conversion studies.

This study responds to Woodside and Dubelaar’s (2003) recommendation to test the effects of contextual cues on response and conversion rates of online studies. The study here applies an elaborate experimental design. Specifically, the study manipulates three contextual cues – researcher identity, sponsor identity, and incentive type – and tests their effects on response and conversion rates of online conversion studies.

**Online Surveys**

Online surveys are increasingly popular for data collection for marketing and conversion studies and may take many forms: surveys embedded in email messages, online survey websites (e.g., surveymonkey.com, zoomerang.com, and qualtrics.com), and a mixed method of combining traditional mailings with a web link of an online survey (Pan 2010). A number of studies compare online and mail surveys and conclude that the advantages of online surveys include saving the cost of printing, folding, envelope stuffing, postage, and data entry, and allowing more interactive survey content and a richer format (Dillman 2007; Schaefer and Dillman 1998). Online surveys also usually have short turnaround time (Dillman 2007; Hwang and Fesenmaier 2004; Cobanoglu, Warde, and Moreo 2001; Sheehan and McMillan 1999; Truell, Bartlett, and Alexander 2002), and more responses to open-ended questions and sensitive inquiries (Schaefer and Dillman 1998; Link and Mokdad 2005; Wang et al. 2005). However, a few problems plague online surveys including low response rates, representativeness issues, and technological uncertainty (Pan 2010). However, the representativeness challenge may not be unique to online surveys; the paper-and-pencil version also possibly bias the population, but in
different ways (Dolnicar, Laesser, and Matus 2009). The following section reviews one major flaw: low response rates.

**Response Rates of Online Surveys**

Online surveys’ response rates have a large range spanning from 6 to 75 percent (Sheehan and McMillan 1999); online surveys usually generate lower or similar response rates to mail surveys (Best et al. 2001; Leece et al. 2004; Sheehan and McMillan 1999; Fricker and Schonlau 2002; Cole 2005); Truell, Bartlett, and Alexander 2002). One exception is a multi-stage population survey on leisure travel behavior in Switzerland, in which respondents who chose the online format were less likely to dropout than those opting for the paper survey (Dolnicar, Laesser, and Matus 2009). The multi-phase nature of the survey may have made the online version more appealing due to the greater savings in effort to participate. With the fast growth of internet population and the amount of emails people receive on a daily basis, the response rates of online surveys continue to decline over the decades (Sheehan 2001).

Many factors may influence the response rates of online surveys. Fan and Zheng (2010) report various factors influencing response rates in different phrases of a survey: in the survey development phase, the content and presentation of questions influence response rates; whereas in online survey delivery phase, five major issues may influence response rates: sampling methods (who are surveyed), contact delivery modes (through which the respondents are informed), invitation designs (how respondents are invited), the use of pre-notification and reminders (how various notification and reminders are used), and the use of incentives (the effectiveness of different incentives varies).

Sheehan and McMillan (1999) and Cook, Heath, and Thompson (2000) identify specific ways to increase response rate, such as increasing the instances of contacts, creating a
personalized contact, pre-contacting respondents, and generating email solicitations that are
distinguished from spam emails. James and Bolstein (1992) show that monetary incentives, the
use of stamps on return envelopes, and granting of anonymity are useful in boosting response
rates. Jobber and O'Reilly (1998) demonstrate telephone pre-notification, express mail, using
university letterhead rather than commercial letterhead, and telephone reminders before the mail
reminder all significantly raise response rates.

Additional factors can also influence response rates including some contextual cues, such
as the sender's name, introductory length, incentive type, the format and the timing of the
surveys. Chawla and Natarajan (1994) report that senders' American-Christian names could
generate a significantly higher response rates than non-American names. However, when the title
of professorship is added to the manipulation, the significance disappears. Thus, the title of the
sender may levitate the negativity association of foreign or unusual names (Chawla and
Natarajan 1994). Wright and Schwager (2008) report approximately equivalent findings where
an invitation from a well-known person produced higher-levels of response quality and fewer
item omissions compared to a more generic invitation. Similarly, a personalized salutation and
high-power status of the sender can also influence people's decision to join or leave an online
survey panel and increase response rates (Joinson and Reips 2007). The attributes of email
solicitations, such as email address, job title, office of sender, statements of deadlines, and
statements of selectivity also have impact on response rates (Porter and Whitcomb 2003).

Deutskens et al. (2004) apply an experimental design to examine the effect of the
incentives (voucher, lottery, or donation), length of the survey (short or long), presentation of the
questionnaire (textual or visual), and timing of follow-up (early or late) on the response rate and
response quality. The results reveal that short questionnaires have a higher response rate;
vouchers seem to be the most effective incentive in long questionnaires; and lotteries are more efficient in short surveys. Deutskens et al. (2004) also conclude that lotteries with small prizes and a high chance of winning are more effective than the reverse in increasing the response rate. However, Dennis's (2003) study with small business owners find different results. Incorporating six different methods, including Dillman's survey design recommendations—three color surveys, personalized address, stamped postage, pre-notification, and different mailing dates—are ineffective in increasing response rates.

Pan (2010) examines the exponential growth model of the pattern of survey return numbers, and reports that most respondents tend to respond as soon as they receive the email solicitations. The best time to send out the surveys would be early morning hours or early night in the respondents’ local time in order to catch their peak-time of checking emails.

Due to the usual low response of online surveys, researchers may intend to increase the response rates using many of the aforementioned strategies conjunctively. The issues of responses rates and survey representativeness often intertwine. Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) provide a meta-analysis of 32 tourism mail surveys to assess advertising-response and purchase (visit) conversion rates. The results show that those studies identifying brand sponsorship decrease the response rates and simultaneously increase conversion rates in comparison to studies that do not identify any specific one as a sponsor. The former surveys remind the respondents that they had requested tourist information from a specific brand (State of South Carolina’s Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism), and thus the converted respondents were more likely to respond. Withholding the sponsor's identity may actually capture the lower—but closer to the actual values—conversion rates, but closer to the actual values. As a
result, Woodside and Dubelaar (2003) advocate context manipulations of survey design in conversion surveys in order to test their influence on response and conversion rates.

Past studies reveal lower response rates of online surveys; these studies discuss the methods researchers can adopt to boost response rates. However, conflicting conclusions exist on the effectiveness and validity of those methods. The following section reviews theoretical background for the purpose of understanding possible behavioral antecedent of response rates and the survey results.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS OF SURVEY RESPONSES

Researchers propose a few major theoretical frameworks to explain nonresponses and their effects on survey results. Groves, Cialdini, and Couper (1992) suggest that societal factors, interviewer attributes, and respondent-interviewer interaction directly affect survey response rates. The psychological factors of the respondents may influence those factors, including compliance with requests, helping tendencies, and opinion change. Groves, Singer, and Corning (2000) propose the leverage-saliency theory to explain people's decision in responding to a survey. Many attributes influence their decisions to respond, including incentive, the survey senders, the sponsors, and the topic. Survey receivers implicitly assign different direction (positive or negative) and weights to each attribute. The summed value of the multiplication of the weight and direction of each attribute affect whether or not a survey receiver responds. Groves et al. (2006) apply response propensity to define the likelihood and probabilities of being a respondent. Nonresponse bias occurs when a non-zero covariance exists between a survey variable and the respondent propensity. Nonresponse bias can vary across different statistics obtained from a survey. They use randomized experiments to test if respondents who are
interested in the survey topic are likely to respond. The results partially confirm a positive bias in
that many surveys may result in exaggerated population estimates and prevalence of interests or
activities (Groves et al. 2006).

Stalans (2012, p. 75) explains the effects of context on survey responses and response
rates using the psychological concept of “frame.” A frame includes “the essence of the story, the
central guiding theme, or a salient strategy that suggests how a decision should be made.”
Survey introductions, certain phrases in a survey question, or survey sender identity, could
become frames through which the survey respondents interpret the meaning and intent of
specific questions and the whole survey. Respondents may assign greater importance to the
highlighted message in the question and form their opinion about the issue accordingly. These
frames, including survey sponsorship or survey introduction, are part of contextual effects which
create meanings and may encourage or deter certain respondents to respond. Thus, the framing
effect can create the co-variance between response propensity and certain variables in the survey
results. Groves et al. (2006) experimentally test and partially validate the framing effect of topic
of interests and how framing influences response rates and affects survey results.

However, no experiment to date examines more subtle contextual cues such as
sponsorship, survey sender identity, or incentive's effects on the interaction between response
rates and survey bias (Woodside and Dubelaar 2003). Studies frequently incorporate these
contextual cues with the hope of boosting response rates. First, studies show that survey senders
in high power, either the researcher or the sponsoring body, generate more responses than low
power and less authoritative requestors (Joinson and Reips 2007; Porter and Whitcomb 2003;
Wright and Schwager 2008). When a specific business or organization sponsors advertising
conversion studies conducted on their existing customer database, they would like to reveal their
identity in the hope of increasing response rates. Second, university units as survey senders can also solicit more responses (Jobber and O'Reilly 1998; Sheehan and McMillan 1999). Those businesses or organizations often hire educational institutions to conduct the survey since the latter are more authoritative and hopefully generate a higher response rate. Third, providing free product samples or sweepstakes from the business as survey-response incentives is convenient and frequently used in some studies (e.g., Wilcox and Woodside, 2012). However, revealing these contextual cues (the research body, sponsorship, or incentive) about the survey may simultaneously affect the conversion rates (Woodside and Dubelaar 2003).

Surveyors have a natural but unjustified tendency to maximize response rates as much as possible (Groves 2006). However, the increase in response rates may be unjustifiable if the increase jeopardizes the validity of survey results (Groves 2006). Inconsistency in past studies may be attributable to specific circumstances or scenarios under which each study was conducted (Groves, Singer, and Corning 2000). In addition, few studies use an experimental design to target the same population with the same method and to test the intertwining effects of online response rates and biased results from contextual cues. Therefore, in particular this study aims to test the effects of contextual cues on response rates and conversion rates of online conversion studies.

**Research Hypotheses**

This research uses an experimental design in an online conversion study. A conversion study is a study conducted on information inquirers from a specified period for the purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of advertising campaigns (Perdue and Botkin 1988). The effectiveness could be measured through gross conversion rates or net conversion rates (Johnson and Messmer 1997; Pratt et al. 2010). Gross conversion rates represent the total percentage of visitors to the destination during a certain time period compared to the total number of
information inquirers regardless of advertising's influence; the net conversion rates measure the rate of converted visitors to total information inquirers due to the advertising's influence (Johnson and Messmer 1997). For convenience purpose, the conversion rates refer to gross conversion rate in the study.

According to response propensity theory (Groves et al. 2006), every respondent has a likelihood to respond; when certain contextual cues encourage some respondents with certain characteristics to respond, nonresponse bias occurs. Specifying certain highly involved brands may persuade the respondents who are more familiar with the brands or who have prior usage experience to respond; power status of the research body or sponsor may influence response rates. Power status of the survey sender or sponsor is defined as the honor or prestige associated with one's position or rank in societal hierarchy (Lenski 1954). The study here manipulates three contextual cues: researcher identity, sponsor identity, and incentive type. More specifically, the manipulated factors include survey senders' power status and brand association (in researcher identity), and sponsor identity, and brand association for incentive type. The study aims to test the overall proposition that any contextual cues revealing or implicating the specific destination, which the consumers are potentially familiar with, increases the conversion rates; the sponsor or researcher who is high versus low power status generates a higher response rates.

Specifically, this study intends to examine the following three hypotheses. H1: A survey sender lower in power status and associated with a specific destination results in lower response rates (H1a) and higher conversion rates (H1b) compared to one higher in power status and unassociated with the destination. H2: A familiar sponsor associated with the destination and in lower power status generates lower response rates (H2a) and higher conversion rates (H2b), as compared to a national but unrelated sponsor. H3: An incentive associated with the destination
generates lower response rates (H3a) and higher conversion rates (H3b) compared to a general incentive.

METHOD

To investigate the contextual cues’ influence on response rates and conversion rates, the study includes a between-subjects, fixed-effect factorial design with three factors (Campbell, Stanley, and Gage 1969). The experimental design applies to an online conversion study for the website visitors who opted to receive email alerts from City A's Convention and Visitors Bureau (CVB) website. City A is a tourist city in the southeast United States. The survey’s intent is to gauge the conversion rates and other demographic and behavioral characteristics of the information inquirers. The demographic variables include age, gender, home location, household size, education, employment status, and income; behavioral variables include travel history to each of the eight cities in Southeast United States, and information regarding their most recent trip, including travel party, transportation, length of stay, accommodation type, trip purpose, decision criteria, information source use, satisfaction, and re-visit intention.

The experiment study manipulates the following three contextual cues. Two different survey senders include researcher A with a foreign name from a regional university in City A, and researcher B with an American-Christian name from a national university in a distant city. Two different sponsors include City A’s CVB, and an international academy of tourism and hospitality. Two incentives for lottery drawing include one unnamed hotel stay in City A, and an unnamed hotel stay from one of the eight Southeast cities in the United States. The eight cities include City A and its seven competing cities: Asheville, NC; Atlanta, GA; Charleston, SC; Hilton Head, SC; Myrtle Beach, SC; Savannah, GA; St. Augustine, FL; and Wilmington, NC.
All first conditions of the three factors include the name of the specified city, City A. This results in a 2x2x2 full factorial design with eight different cells (Table 1 and Table 3).

Adopting the recommendations by Woodside and Dubelaar (2003), the researchers did not remind the respondents that they had joined the email alert from the CVB website. Instead, the respondents were asked to report on whether or not they have visited any of the eight cities during three time frames. The first question asked the respondent to select the cities they had ever visited among the eight cities listed; the second question requested the respondents to identify the cities they visited in the past six months; the third question asked about the city of their most recent trip, regardless whether or not the city is one of the eight. The three questions can be calculated as different versions of conversion rates to City A.

A total of 17,415, or one in five, active email addresses were randomly selected from all the visitors who opted to receive weekly email alerts from City A’s CVB website. The researchers designed eight different survey forms on SurveyMonkey.com and eight different corresponding email solicitation messages. The 17,415 email addresses were equally and randomly assigned to the eight cells. Seven of eight cells have 2,177 solicitation emails sent out, except one with 2,176. Most of the content of the solicitation emails was the same other than the statement of the three variable factors: researcher, sponsor, and incentive (see Figure 1 for the manipulation).

An opening paragraph in the actual surveys reiterated the content in the solicitation emails with these three different factors. A custom script sent out the email messages and
corresponding links to the email respondents (Figure 1). The first wave of email solicitations were distributed on September 7, 2010 with a customized computer script. In order to increase the response rates, two days after the first wave of solicitation emails, the script sent one follow-up wave of solicitations to those email addresses who had not responded.

The first and second wave of responses generated a total response rate of 7.2%. Thus, one may question the validity of the survey results since the response rate is low, and the respondents may represent a different sub-population. The “continuum-of-resistance” model argues that the respondents who require multiple solicitations before responding more closely resemble those non-respondents, since those people would be non-respondents if the final wave of solicitation had not been sent out (Filion 1976). Therefore, the researchers conducted the third wave of email solicitation following two months after the first and second waves. A total number of 1,600 email addresses were randomly selected from the non-respondents for the first two waves, with 200 emails in each cell. The results can be compared to those collected from the first two waves in order to assess the validity of the conversion rates of the first two.

RESULTS

One month after the first and second waves of solicitations, less than 100 emails were returned as "undeliverable" or bounced back as an "out of office" message. There is no reason to suspect that the bounce-back emails are nonrandom among the eight cells. In addition, the total number of undelivered messages was relatively insignificant compared to the total sample. Thus, the researchers calculated the gross response rate, which does not consider non-deliverable surveys among eight cells when calculating response rates (Deutskens et al. 2004). Since the first
and second waves of email solicitations were sent within a short period of time of each other, they were analyzed as one dataset.

One month after the third wave of solicitation, a total of 71 surveys were returned for all the eight cells. The response rates and conversion rates were aggregated and compared to those collected from the first and second waves in order to assess the validity of the conversion rates.

**The Validity of First Two Rounds of Responses**

The third wave solicitation generated 71 responses and represents 4.4% of emails sent out, which is significantly lower than the combined response rate (7.2%) for the first and second waves. The researchers compared the conversion rate for the third wave of responses with those from the first and the second using Chi-square test (Table 2). Even though the conversion rates from the third wave responses were in general lower than the first and second waves for the questions on "ever visited" and "visited in the past six months", the two conversion rates were not statistically significant (Table 2). The “most recent trip” question had a significant result at the 0.01 level, indicating that respondents of the third wave are less likely to report to have City A as their most recent trip. This is possibly due to the two months' lag between the first/second and the third waves of email solicitations, where the visitors may have taken another trip.

Considering these results, the conversion rates are considered valid statistics in the first and second waves, since the differences between the respondents and likely-non-respondents were insignificant.

Table 2 here.

**Response Rates**
The data from the first two waves were analyzed to test the conditions which may influence the response rates in the eight cells (Table 3). The response rates varied from 5.9% to 9.0%. Multiple Chi-square tests were used to assess the significance of the three factors on response rates: Researcher, Sponsor, and Incentive Type (Table 4). The results show that researcher and sponsor both significantly impacted the response rate \((p < 0.01)\), but not the incentive type. Thus, different researcher identity and sponsor identity would significantly influence potential respondents’ decision to reply.

Table 3 shows that researcher A in low-power generated a lower response rate compared to researcher B in high-power; thus, H1a receives support. However, contrary to H2a, a regional and familiar brand sponsor (the respondents all requested information from the CVB website) actually increased the response rate over a national brand sponsor. Thus, the findings do not support H2a and suggest a direction opposite to the hypothesis. In this study, City A’s CVB as the sponsor is a familiar organization to respondents, since all respondents had requested information from its website, whereas the national academy sponsor may be unfamiliar and thus implies less credibility to respondents. Nowadays, a consumer receives increasing amount of spamming and surveys. Thus, the judgment of the credibility of online surveys may be of paramount importance, based on the power status of the survey sender and the familiarity of the sponsoring body. In addition, a regional incentive on a specific city did not increase response rates significantly more than a general incentive in a wider geographical area. Thus, the findings fail to support H3a.

In order to understand the interaction of the factors, a logistic regression was further used to regress whether or not one responds to the survey on the three contextual cues. The results find no significant interaction effects between these three factors. Researcher B garnered 21.3%
more responses than Researcher A. Furthermore, City A’s CVB as the sponsor generated a 14.9% increase in response rate compared to the national academy sponsor. Combining the two factors of researcher and sponsor, the response rate could increase up to 39.2% (Figure 2).

Table 3 and 4, and Figure 2 here.

In general, the results show that the response rates of this particular online survey were extremely low, an average of 7.2 percent, confirming the concerns of low response rates of online surveys. The contextual cues given away by the researcher's identity and sponsoring body influenced the response rates, and the combination of researcher identity and sponsor identity could increase the response rate up to 39%. In conclusion, H1a receives support: the researcher in a high-power position generates more responses than one in low-power. H2a and H3a fail to receive support: a low-power but familiar sponsor generates more responses than a high-power but unfamiliar sponsor (H2a in the opposite direction). The type of incentive does not affect response rates significantly (H3a).

**Conversion Rates**

The three types of conversion rates to City A from the first two waves of respondents by three factors were tabulated (Table 5). No clear patterns were observed and a logistic regression on the prediction of being one of converted visitors by the three factors did not yield significant results (Table 6). Thus, the conversion rates, in all three different measurements, were unaffected by the three contextual cues in the survey. Therefore, contrary to proposed hypotheses, researcher identity, sponsor identity, or different incentives, did not influence conversion rates significantly. Thus, the findings do not support H1b, H2b, and H3b.
Contrary to the hypotheses, the contextual cues explicitly or implicitly associated with the product did not attract more converted consumers to reply. The researchers suspect that most recipients did not bother to respond to the surveys due to reasons other than topic interests, such as busy schedule and increasing amount of emails and surveys. The added familiarity to the destination under certain contextual cues did not create enough weight to change the direction of the formula of responding, according to the leverage-saliency theory (Groves, Singer, and Corning 2000).

Table 5 and 6 here.

DISCUSSION

This study indicates low response rates of online conversion studies. Some hypotheses regarding response rates were rejected while others receive support. A high-power researcher and a familiar sponsor generated higher response rates, while a familiar incentive did not. The three contextual cues did not affect three types of conversion rates.

The study shows that a researcher in a high power position could generate more responses than one in lower power position. In this study, the researcher affiliated with the regional university is from an ethnic minority and has a typical non-American name, while the researcher from the national university is a Caucasian with a typical American-Christian name. Prior research reports that the name of the survey sender influences the response rate, as senders with American-Christian names generate a higher response rate than those with foreign non-Christian names (Chawla and Nataraajan 1994).

Therefore, as important components in the researcher identity, both the researchers’ names and their university affiliation may affect the response rate. Whether or not only one
factor leads to the different response rate or the combination of the two influences the response rates is impossible to conclude. However, both researchers' names were associated with the title of "Ph.D.". As Chawla and Nataraajan (1994) discuss, with added titles, the differences in bias in names may disappear. Thus, the researchers estimate that the national university affiliation of the second researcher may have contributed more to the higher response rates.

The two sponsors of this study include one local CVB and one national academic organization. The respondents in this study are all information seekers who opted to receive email alerts from this particular local CVB; therefore, they are more familiar with this sponsor than the national academic organization. The embedded three features of the sponsorship in this study – a familiar versus unfamiliar organization, a local versus national one, and an industrial versus academic one – may individually or collectively influence the response rates. Past studies show that academic institutions could garner more responses than industrial ones (Sheehan and McMillan 1999); also the organization with a higher power status (national versus regional) would result in a higher response rate. This study shows the opposite: the local CVB sponsor generated a higher response rate than the national academic organization. This finding confirms the value of familiar sponsors, since the CVB sponsor even surpassed the disadvantages of being an industrial and regional organization.

**IMPLICATIONS**

This study touches upon two priorities in tourism research: the appropriate measurement of destination marketing strategies and the methodological validation of marketing programs. Since today's online surveys suffer severely from low response rates, marketing researchers need to carefully design survey content and delivery methods to maximize survey response rates;
however, this effort should not at the same time compromise the quality of survey results and create more survey biases.

The results of this study suggest or validate the following guidelines. First, researchers need to make every effort to construct an authoritative, trustworthy, and consistent solicitation message. One should adopt a researcher higher in power, higher in organizational position or educational achievement, or serving in a national-level educational institution, as the main contact person. Whenever possible, it is the best to list the formal title and degree of the researcher to validate the authority.

Second, if applicable, the research team should use a researcher who has a name in similar cultural background as the respondents’ to be the main contact person. For example, use a Chinese researcher's name as the contact person when surveying a Chinese immigrant group. Third, researchers should use and disclose a sponsor's information which the respondents are familiar with.

Despite all suggestions to increase response rates, it seems unlikely that these recommendations for online-marketing effectiveness studies will increase response rates dramatically. Even though this study did not reveal significant bias in conversion rates, and low response rate might not necessarily lead to low quality results (Groves 2006). Not every conversion study can afford the time and effort to conduct extensive analysis on survey bias on the specific survey. Thus, whether nor not a conversion study is accurate may remain unknown.

Consider applying the following broad guidelines in conducting conversion studies. First, offer free and useful material as long as the prospect is willing to provide her/his telephone number for future two-minute interviews when conducting the random interviews, and also make a few attempts to reach the respondents by telephone. Even though the response number is likely
to be low due to the high cost, the obtained conversion rates are likely to be more meaningful and accurate.

Second, a mixed-mode survey method serves to maximize response rates. Millar and Dillman (2011) report that some specific techniques are useful for improving online response rates. For example, researchers can consider email solicitation first and a mail follow-up option in the final contact, or combine both postal and email contacts, and deliver a token cash incentive in advance. Further studies are necessary to explore and validate different means of online and mixed-mode data collection to combine multiple response-inducing strategies.

Third, in reality, many other factors rather than its scientific values may influence a conversion study for a destination. One of the authors of this study conducted a conversion study where consumption data were collected without identifying any brand. The sponsor was dissatisfied with the findings, which included a 25 percent increase in the survey response rate and a 25 percent decrease in the conversion rates in comparison to similar studies by competing brands (Arch Woodside, Personal communication, June 2011). In this instance, the sponsoring brand’s manager received these findings with displeasure. The brand manager preferred being able to report conversion rates equal to the conversion rates in the reports made by competing brands.

One may argue that if every destination conducts conversion studies by identifying the sponsors, the inaccurate conversion rates are actually comparable on the same methodology across all competing destinations. However, the identified sponsor may affect the conversion rates in different ways and magnitude, and without rigorous testing, one may never know all these effects to justify that approach. As a result, researchers should adopt a conservative approach with suggested recommendations here. The scientific value of a rigorous approach,
rather than a politically motivated one, will be more beneficial to the fields of tourism research and tourism marketing in the long run.
REFERENCES


Table 1

Three Factors: Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>First Condition</th>
<th>Abbreviations</th>
<th>Second Condition</th>
<th>Abbreviations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>Researcher A in a City A University</td>
<td>Researcher A</td>
<td>Researcher B in a national university</td>
<td>Researcher B</td>
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</table>
Table 2

Tests of Conversion Rates between the First/Second Wave versus the Third Wave

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>First and Second Wave</th>
<th>Third Wave</th>
<th>Chi-Square</th>
<th>Significance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Returned Responses</td>
<td>1,257</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>--</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversion rate to City A for Ever Visited</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>69.0%</td>
<td>1.487</td>
<td>0.2226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion rate to City A for Past Six Months</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>0.849</td>
<td>0.3568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversion rate to City A for the Most Current Trip</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>7.926</td>
<td>0.0049</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

Response Rates by Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type in Eight Cells

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Total Sample</th>
<th>Total Respondents</th>
<th>Response Rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cell 1</td>
<td>Researcher A, CVB Sponsor, City A Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 2</td>
<td>Researcher A, CVB Sponsor, SE Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 3</td>
<td>Researcher A, Academy Sponsor, City A Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>128</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 4</td>
<td>Researcher A, Academy Sponsor, SE Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 5</td>
<td>Researcher B, CVB Sponsor, City A Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 6</td>
<td>Researcher B, CVB Sponsor, SE Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>172</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 7</td>
<td>Researcher B, Academy Sponsor, City A Incentive</td>
<td>2176</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell 8</td>
<td>Researcher B, Academy Sponsor, SE Incentive</td>
<td>2177</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4
Tests of the Impact of Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type on Response Rates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Chi Square Value</th>
<th>Significance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor</td>
<td>9.965</td>
<td>0.002**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>7.602</td>
<td>0.006**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive</td>
<td>0.653</td>
<td>0.419</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Significant at 0.01 level.
### Table 5

**Three Types of Conversion Rates Under Three Factors:**

**Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type**

#### 5A. Have Ever Visited City A

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Incentive</th>
<th>City A</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Sponsor Academy</td>
<td>75.8%</td>
<td>78.1%</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CVB</td>
<td>74.1%</td>
<td>80.7%</td>
<td>76.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
<td>79.4%</td>
<td>77.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Sponsor Academy</td>
<td>72.0%</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>77.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CVB</td>
<td>75.6%</td>
<td>77.3%</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>74.0%</td>
<td>76.7%</td>
<td>75.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 5B. Visited City A within Six Months

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>Incentive</th>
<th>City A</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Sponsor Academy</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CVB</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>37.8%</td>
<td>40.4%</td>
<td>39.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Sponsor Academy</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>31.4%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CVB</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>37.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
5C. Visited City A in the most Recent Trip

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Researcher</th>
<th>City A</th>
<th>Southeast</th>
<th>Average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Sponsor Academy</td>
<td>46.1%</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>33.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVB</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
<td>37.9%</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>40.6%</td>
<td>39.0%</td>
<td>39.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B Sponsor Academy</td>
<td>34.8%</td>
<td>32.1%</td>
<td>43.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CVB</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
<td>29.7%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>30.8%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6

Testing the Impact of Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type on Conversion Rates with Logistic Regression

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have Ever Visited City A</th>
<th>Visited City A in Previous Six Months</th>
<th>Visited City A in the Most Recent Trip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>Value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incentive</td>
<td>2.460</td>
<td>0.227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sponsor</td>
<td>1.049</td>
<td>0.306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Researcher</td>
<td>0.013</td>
<td>0.910</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear [First Name],

I am conducting a survey on visitor behavior and satisfaction to eight cities in the Southeast of the United States (Asheville, NC, Atlanta, GA, Charleston, SC, Hilton Head, SC, Myrtle Beach, SC, Savannah, GA, St. Augustine, FL, and Wilmington, NC). Please participate by completing the survey even if you did not visit any of the eight cities in 2010. If you live in one of the eight cities, please do participate in the study as well.

The study is sponsored by the [Sponsor]. By responding to the survey, you are helping to increase knowledge about traveler behavior and travel-related services. The survey takes at most 7-8 minutes to finish. Complete the survey and you are invited to enter to win a three night hotel stay at one selected tourist destination in [Incentive] (you do not have to enter to win the hotel stay to complete the survey). This survey is voluntary and all responses are anonymous, confidential and with no email address coded with answers.

Please click on the following link to go to the survey directly. If the link does not work, please copy and paste the URL in your browser. Thank you for participating in the study! Please do write to me if you have a question about the study.

http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/????

Thank you very much for your participation.

Sincerely,

[Researcher], Ph.D.
School of [????]
[????] University
Address: [????]
Telephone: [????]
Email: [????]

* Text in brackets indicates different conditions.

**Figure 1. Solicitation Email Messages with three Factors: Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type**
Figure 2

The Impact of Researcher Identity, Sponsor Identity, and Incentive Type on Response Rates