A Strategic Framework for Messaging in the American Community Survey Mail Materials

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The views expressed are those of the author and not those of the U.S. Census Bureau.
American Community Survey
Data collection process

Online

Mail

Personal Visit

Self-Response Phase
Six Weeks

Nonresponse Follow-Up Phase
Four Weeks
2022 ACS Self-Response Contact Strategy

Mail contact materials

All Mailable Sample Addresses

First Mailing

Initial Package
- Letter
- Instruction Card
- Multilingual Brochure

Second Mailing

Reminder Letter
- Pressure Seal Mailer

Third Mailing

Questionnaire Package
- Paper Questionnaire
- Letter
- Return Envelope

Fourth Mailing

Reminder Postcard
- Pressure Seal Mailer

Fifth Mailing

Remaining Nonrespondents

Nonrespondents

~ 18 days

7 days

14 days

4 days

14 days
Strategic Framework Project
Long-term plan to improve the mail materials holistically

2017

Phase 1
Develop a strategic framework for ACS messaging
Strategic Framework Report

Phase 2
Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging
Assessment of Current Messaging Report

Phase 3
Develop new mail materials
Four sets of mailing materials

Phase 4
Conduct cognitive testing (3 Rounds)
Cognitive Testing Recommendations

Phase 5
Conduct field testing
Field Testing and Research Report

2021
Phase 1
Develop a strategic framework for ACS messaging

- What do we know about the ACS audience?
- What are the best practices in survey messaging?
- What do survey methodologists suggest for ACS messaging?
Phase 1
What do we know about the ACS audience?

Decennial census audience studies
• Segmentation and Mindset Study (2007)
• Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Surveys I (2008)
• Census Barriers, Attitudes, and Motivators Surveys II (2010)

ACS audience studies
• Collaborative research with Reingold, Inc. (2013-2014)
• Collaborative research with Gallup (2014)
Phase 1
What do we know about the ACS audience?

• There is a lack of awareness of the ACS among the general public.
• The ACS audience is composed of people who:
  • trust the government
  • distrust the government
  • are generally unaware of the role of government
• Messages about the confidentiality of the ACS data do not have high believability among the distrustful segment of the population.
• Messages that convey community-level benefits of ACS participation are viewed favorably.
Phase 1
What do survey methodologists suggest for ACS messaging?

Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST, 2015) suggested a focus on these themes:

- Social norms
- Procedural justice
- Benefits of the survey
- Personalization
- Preventing confusion
- Social norms
- Personalization
- Preventing confusion
- Benefits of the survey

National Academy of Sciences Committee on National Statistics (CNSTAT, 2016) recommendations:

- Attach the ACS to the Census brand
- Communicate the benefits of the ACS to the recipient’s community
- Avoid repetitive, unfocused messaging
Phase 1
What are the best practices in survey messaging?

• Establish legitimacy and trust early.
• Communicate in plain language.
• Reduce the number of messages per mailing.
• Communicate in a manner that conveys a continuous conversation over multiple mailings.
• Communicate different reasons to participate in the survey in each mailing.
• Convey the benefits of survey participation.
Phase 1
Recommend strategic framework for ACS messaging

First Mailing
legitimacy/trust
All mailable addresses in sample

Second Mailing
benefits

Third Mailing
reduce burden

Fourth Mailing
restate previous messages
nonrespondent addresses
remaining nonrespondent addresses

Fifth Mailing
?
Phase 2
Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging

• Developed a codebook to classify all messages, text, and logos, in the 2018 materials.
  • The codebook consisted of four main messaging categories: trust, benefits, burden reduction, and other.
  • These four categories have subcategories (e.g., under trust, “establish credibility,” “confidentiality”).

• Coded all messages, text, and logos.

• Computed a variety of statistics pertaining to the coded data.

• Assessed the readability of the 2018 ACS mail contact materials.

• Made recommendations for developing a new set of ACS mail materials from the ground up.
Phase 2
Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging — Recommendations —

1. Reduce the number of messages per mailing.
2. Reduce repetitious messaging.
3. Use new appeals.
4. Use messages that are justified by research.
5. Improve the readability of the materials.
Phase 2

Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging
— Example of volume of messaging in mailing 1—

129 messages across these five mail pieces
Phase 2

Analyze the current (2018) ACS messaging
— Example of analysis: Letter in mailing 1—

Four sponsors shown. The most important sponsor is presented third in the list.

Most Americans are not familiar with the Department of Commerce. They are however familiar with the U.S. Census Bureau. Where’s the Census logo?

Impersonal salutation

The 10-digit ID required to access the survey is listed on the instruction card, a separate mail piece

1. Text dense
2. Lacks organization
3. Fairly difficult to read (10-12th grade level, Flesch Reading Ease score)
4. Too many messages:
   a) conserving resources
   b) saving taxpayers’ money
   c) benefits of survey participation
   d) selected randomly for the survey
   e) required by law to participate
   f) confidentiality statements
   g) cybersecurity act
   h) brochures enclosed
   i) contact information for more help

Need a direct link to the ACS (i.e., census.gov/acs)
Phases 3 and 4
Develop new ACS mail materials
Conduct cognitive testing

• Four new sets of ACS mail contact materials were developed from the ground up (4 treatments).
  • Icon
  • Column and header
  • Sidebar
  • Minimalist

• The overarching strategy was to establish credibility, earn trust, reduce text, use strategic messaging, and use consistent design.

• The materials were written using plain language principles.

• The developed materials underwent three rounds of cognitive testing.
Phases 3 and 4
— Column and header introduction letter (back)—

The back of the letter is where we placed required information that would normally go on the front and obscure the most salient messages.

Consistent column and header format to ease navigation and enhance readability.
Phases 3 and 4
— Newly developed fifth mailing—

Consistent header information.

Due date to create a sense of urgency.

A formal salutation to suggest importance.

The check box is a form of a commitment device.

Consistent signature block.

Messaging to reach the Spanish-speaking segment of the population.

A stern, time sensitive messaging to motivate a self-response before the start of CAPI.

Three choices as to how to respond to the survey. The phone option is a new explicit way to respond.

Consistent placement of sponsor information.
Phase 5
Conduct field testing

• In 2021, we conducted a field test of four new sets of ACS mail contact materials (4 treatments):
  • Icon
  • Column and Header
  • Sidebar
  • Minimalist

• The objective was to determine if the new sets of ACS mail materials would increase self-response over the production materials.

• The results of this controlled experiment will be presented next.
Questions?

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