

Engaging Establishment Survey Respondents Using Electronic Communication Methods

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Disclaimer: The findings and conclusions in this presentation are those of the author and should not be construed to represent any official USDA or U.S. Government determination or policy.



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Background

Goal

- Expand communications with operators by incorporating electronic options to provide survey reminders with links to access surveys online.

Benefits

- Easier navigation to web survey instruments and perhaps encourages more online reporting.
- Using electronic survey reminders costs less than mailed reminders.
- Research has shown that using electronic reminder methods works to promote earlier responses but does not necessarily increase overall response rates. (McGeeney and Yan, 2016)
- Earlier responses will help save agency resources by reducing the need for more expensive follow-up methods.



NASS Enterprise Messaging Outreach (NEMO) System

- Custom-built system to standardize and automate use of text and email communications in NASS data collections.
- Utilizes email address validation tools.
- Integrated with NASS Survey Management System.
- Tracks Text Opt-in / Opt-out & Email Unsubscribe.
- Produces reports to track and manage campaigns (e.g., unsubscribe, validated emails, sent emails, text opt-out, bounce).



Email Policy and Considerations

CAN-SPAM Act

- Sets rules for commercial email, establishes requirements for message content, gives recipients the right to opt-out, and conveys penalties for violations.
 - Not sending commercial messages, the anti-SPAM regulations don't apply.
 - Public-sector organizations don't have to worry about breaking the law, but should follow the law if they care about emails reaching the inbox.



Census of Agriculture Web Test

- Test of Census of Agriculture web data collection.
- Mailed sample: 14,940 operations (approx. 66% w/ emails)
- Divided full sample into email and no email groups.
 - Eligible if had not responded and have valid email.
- Sent two mailed reminders and one email reminder after the initial mailing.
- Conducted an email feedback questionnaire at the conclusion of the Agricultural Census questions.



Census of Agriculture Web Test

Research Questions

- What is the impact of the email on response?
- Did respondents receive our email?
- What do respondents think about our emails?
- Did respondents open the email?
- Did respondents click on the link in the email?

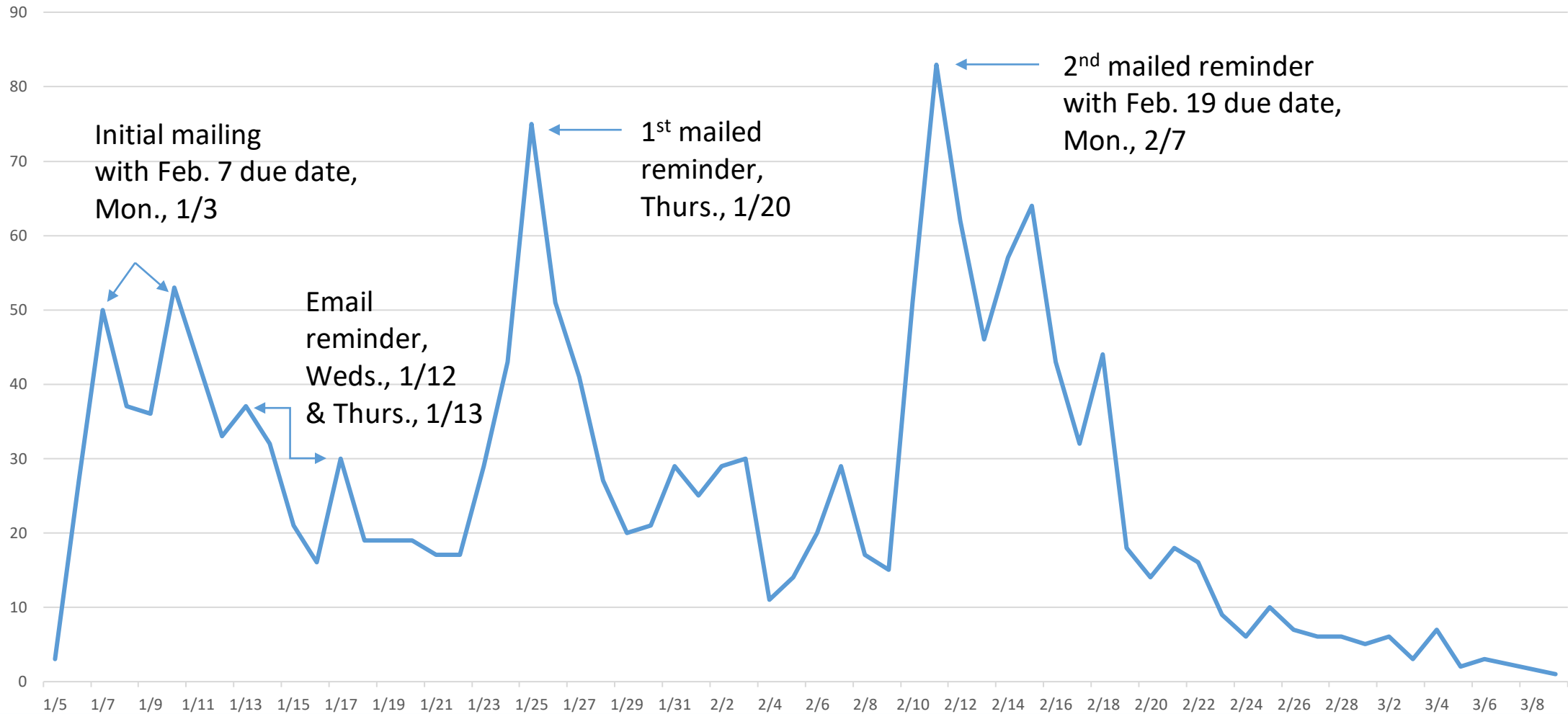


Results

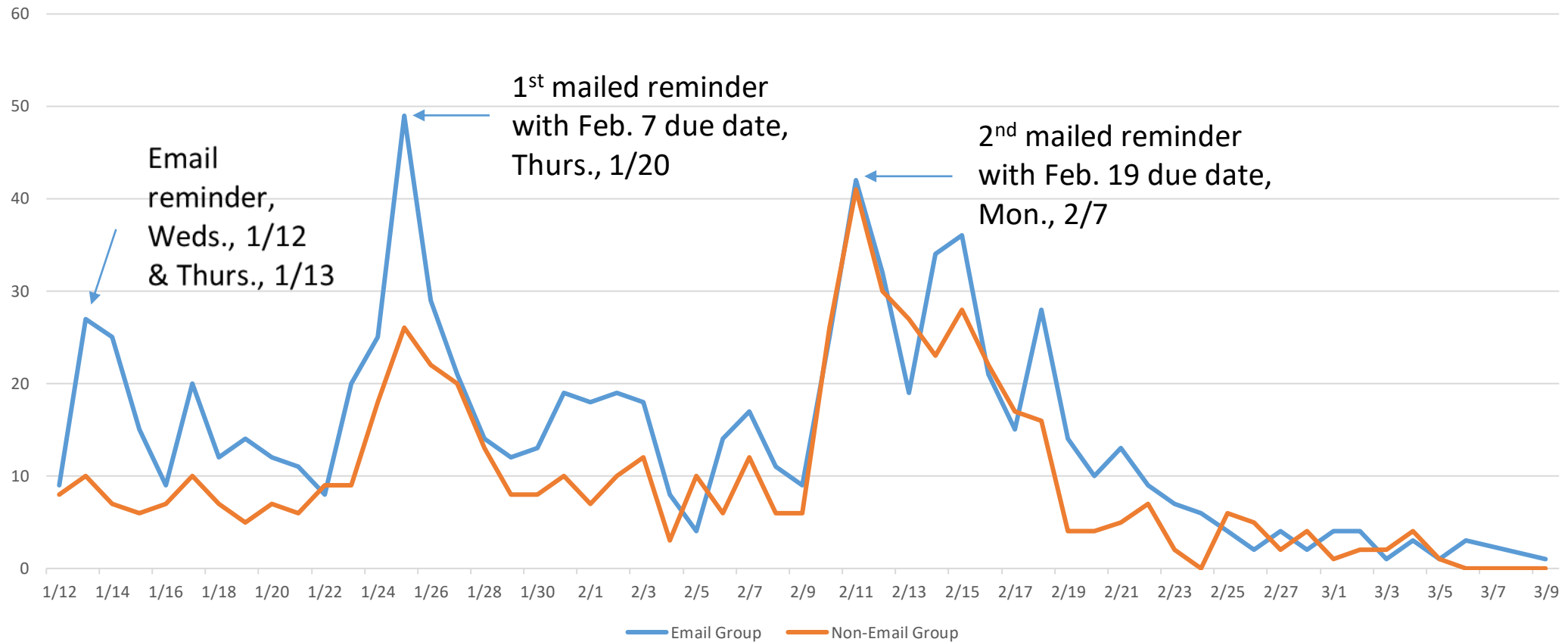
- Total number of web surveys completed: 1654 (11.1%)
- Total number of completed feedback questionnaires: 1635 (98.9%)
- Number of emails messages sent: 6,577 (44.0%)
- Number of unsubscribe responses received: 31 (0.47%)
- Number who opened email: 2,052 (31.2%)



Responses by Day - Overall



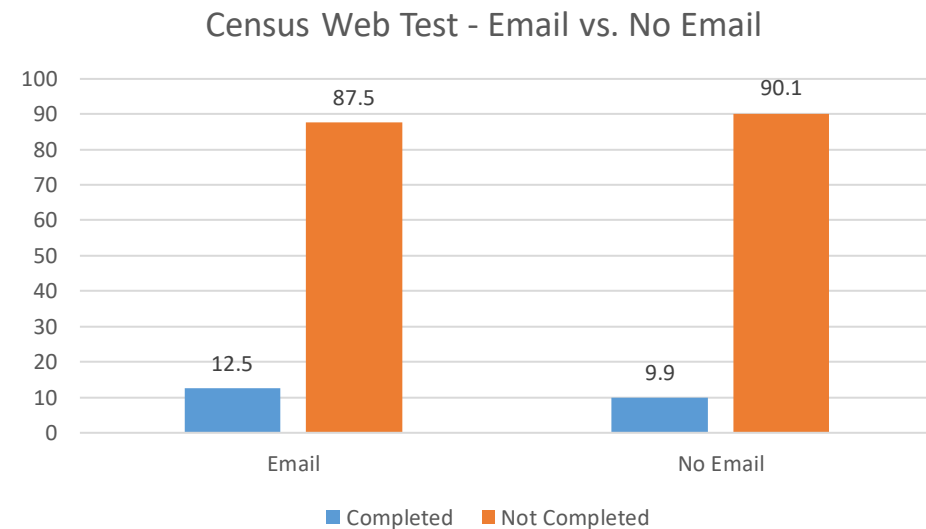
Responses by Day – email vs. non-email group



Does one group generate a higher response?

- There is a significant difference between email and no email group.

$$\chi^2(1) = 25.9; p = .000$$



Census of Agriculture Web Test

Research Questions

- How does the email impact response?
- Did respondents receive our email?
- What do respondents think about our emails?
- Did respondents open the email?
- Did respondents click on the link in the email?





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Your response is important!

The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS) recently mailed you a letter requesting your participation in the Census of Agriculture test of the online questionnaire. Your response is voluntary, but important and will help improve the Census of Agriculture program in your state.

By **February 7**, please complete the online Census test at www.agcounts.usda.gov/portal using your survey code in the letter you received. Your responses will be kept confidential and will not be disclosed in identifiable form, in accordance with federal law.

Thank you for your participation and your support of our programs and U.S. agriculture. If you have questions or would like assistance completing this online Census test, please call toll-free 1-888-424-7828.

NASS is the federal statistical agency responsible for producing official data about U.S. agriculture and is committed to providing timely, accurate and useful statistics in service to U.S. agriculture.

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National Operations Division, 9700 Page Avenue, Suite 400, St. Louis, MO 63132-1547

[NASS Confidentiality Pledge](#)

USDA is an equal opportunity provider, employer, and lender.

[Unsubscribe](#) to email reminders from USDA NASS

Findings – Email Feedback Questionnaire

Description	Yes	%	No	%	DK	%
Did you receive an email reminder from NASS to complete the questionnaire?	285	18.0%	856	53.9%	445	28.1%
The email helped to remind me to complete the questionnaire by the due date.	183	64.2%				
I clicked the link in the email to complete the online questionnaire.	112	39.3%				
I called the phone number in the email for assistance.	8	2.8%				
The email provided me with information about the confidentiality of my data.	42	14.7%				
I prefer email reminders rather than mailed paper reminders.	48	16.8%				
I did not find the information in the email useful.	11	3.9%				
I unsubscribed from email reminder communications.	2	0.7%				
I did not open the email.	11	3.9%				
I have other feedback about the email – please specify	4	1.4%				



Email Feedback Questionnaire

- Of the 1,301 who responded did not receive (856) or did not know if received an email (445), 44.7% were sent an email.
 - Send email, but recipient may not see your email.
 - Buried in email box
 - Haven't checked email
 - Spam box
 - Other deliverability issues (e.g., wrong email)



Agricultural Survey – December 2021

Research Question

- Does the subject line impact open rates?



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Agricultural Survey – December 2021

- Conducted via mail, web, phone via CATI and Field (personal visit restrictions)
- Sample of 77,477 agricultural operations; 53,172 completed
- Collection period from 11/24/21 to 12/17/21
- Conducted initial email campaign test in a few states
 - Emailed reminder on 12/9/21
 - Eligible if had not responded and had valid email – 457 emails sent



Agricultural Survey – December 2021

Does the subject line impact open rates?

- Divided email sample into groups to test whether we see any impact on open rates based on the email subject line.
 - Subject line with “Survey” – “Don’t do surveys”
- vs.
- Personalized Subject Line with a “Call-to-Action”
- Three Test Groups:
 - Control: “Complete Your USDA NASS Agricultural Survey Today!”
 - Treatment 1: “Ensure Agricultural Operations in Your State are Accurately Represented”
 - Treatment 2: “Ensure Agricultural Operations in <State Name> are Accurately Represented”



December Agricultural Survey

Results:

Subject	Emails Sent	Emails Opened	Open Rate
Control	157	47	29.9%
“Your State”	169	58	34.3%
State Name	131	43	32.8%
Total	457	148	32.4%

$\chi^2 (2)=0.73; p =.69$



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Summary

- Majority of respondents reported the email helped remind them to complete the survey.
- Feedback survey helped us understand what operators thought of our emails and level of engagement.
 - 17% prefer email; 39% clicked on link; 4% did not open/did not find information useful
- Saw bump in responses from the email group.
- The email group had higher completion rate, but large number of operators who were emailed responded that they didn't receive or didn't know if they received an email.
- Didn't see any significant difference in email subject open rates, but plan to conduct another study with larger sample.



Lessons Learned

- Sending email communications isn't as easy as we thought.
- Monitor bounce back reports for delivery errors. Error/SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol) codes vary by service provider.
 - Set up reverse DNS proving to mailbox providers that you control the IP you're sending from.
- Monitor reputation score.
 - Affected by bounces, engagement, IP blacklisting, spamming, blocking, unsubscribes.
- Use service provider feedback loops.
 - Provide information on whether recipients spam or block emails.
- Refine the email criteria for who to send reminder emails using operator characteristics.
 - Adversely affects our reputation score to send emails to those who do not want them.



Future Work

- Plan to conduct interviews with select operators who responded to the email feedback questionnaire.
- Understand more about operators who prefer emails and texts.
- Study impact of emails and text reminders on response mode.
- Use electronic communications in a strategic way that benefits both our operators and the agency.
 - Coordinated communication strategy



Thank you

Contact: pam.mcGovern@usda.gov



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