

# Best Practices:

## *Improving Respondent Cooperation for Telephone Surveys*

**By:**

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**For:**

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## FOREWORD

Public Works and Government Services Canada gratefully acknowledges the work of Steve Kiar and Alethea Woods of Phoenix Strategic Perspectives, Inc. in reviewing a wide range of practices throughout the discipline and industry of telephone survey research, in conducting an analysis of the best practices described herein and in writing the report. Public Works and Government Services Canada would also like to acknowledge the role of Suzanne Marshall of the same in bringing this project to fruition.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This document, Best Practices: Improving Respondent Cooperation for Telephone Surveys, is intended to provide clients in the Government of Canada and other organizations with an interest in data quality with a practical guide to achieving and maintaining high response rates from telephone surveys. This report was conceived, in part, in response to concerns expressed throughout the research industry, from both supplier and client sides, to the ongoing need for high quality information and, in part, to the concerns about an international phenomenon of declining participation in telephone surveys, which ultimately may lead to compromised survey quality and samples that are not representative of the populations that they are intended to represent.

While the theme of this report is increasing response rates to telephone surveys, the report is not intended to be solely a guide to increasing response rates to meet an arbitrary objective. The focus is rather on strategies to help ensure that telephone surveys conducted for the Government of Canada achieve the highest possible response rates *within the parameters of each study*. These best practices incorporate guidelines and procedures to be used in the different phases of survey research.

This report is thus based on two basic concepts: response rates and non-response. The response rate refers to the proportion of people that participated in a survey compared to the actual number of people sampled from the population that the survey is intended to represent. Non-response is the result of a unit of the sample not participating in the survey. Error resulting from non-response occurs when there are differences between survey responders and non-responders that bias the survey sample. For instance, a sample whose characteristics are essentially different from the population that it is intended to represent (attitudinally or demographically) can have a high degree of non-response bias. For this reason, survey researchers have considered higher response rates as a possible solution to non-response bias. In fact, however, a number of studies reviewed for this report have found that higher response rates do not necessarily result in more accurate data and, what is more, surveys with low response rates can provide useful and valid data. Notwithstanding the lack of a definitive link between non-response and high quality data, the survey research community considers higher response rates to be beneficial. Finally, however, it should be remembered that non-response is only one source of survey error: other major sources of survey error include measurement error, processing error, coverage error and sampling error.

This report is based on a combination of reviews of academic studies and interviews with, and written feedback from, knowledgeable persons in government, the market research industry and academia. In sum, this report presents 50 best practices that can help to improve response rates for telephone surveys. Among this fuller set of best practices, the following are considered by the authors, based on their primary and secondary research, to have the most positive impact:

- Select the best survey method; for public opinion surveys conducted for the Government of Canada on public policy issues where a national sample of the

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adult population is required, telephone samples are at the time of writing generally more representative than the internet; however, many specialized populations are more effectively sampled now via the internet.

- Alternative data collection methods may be more appropriate for hard-to-reach respondents (also referred to as low-incidence populations); mixed-mode surveys have been found to yield higher response rates.
- The length of the data collection period can have a direct impact on response rates. Studies quoted in this report have found that longer interviewing periods can significantly and positively impact response rates. The length of time allotted for data collection should be sensitive to incidence level, target audience and research objectives.
- Longer interviews, especially those over 20 minutes, are widely thought to have a negative impact on response rates. In practical terms, surveys of 10 minutes or less are considered not overly burdensome. Controlling survey length necessarily involves consideration of the relative priority of questionnaires.
- Studies have found that the majority of refusals occur during the first minute of the call. Therefore, effective introductions are useful in increasing the likelihood that a potential respondent will become a participating respondent. The report recommends the use of personalization, identification of the sponsor, description of the survey objectives and confirmation that confidentiality and privacy will be respected.
- There is a general consensus among researchers that incentives (monetary and non-monetary) are an effective way to increase response rates. For special-audience research, the distribution of a summary of the highlights is a valuable and relatively common type of non-monetary incentive. Where possible, the incentive needs to be offered when the respondent is first contacted in the interview.
- Revealing the sponsor of the survey can be positively related to survey response. Research suggests that government-sponsored or conducted surveys achieve higher response rates than surveys sponsored by most other organizations.
- Varying the call scheduling can reduce the number of call attempts required to reach the respondent and increase the likelihood of reaching a household or business. Maximizing response rates requires calling at times that are most suitable for the survey sample while still ensuring that interviewing takes place across different time periods (e.g. hours of the day, days of the week) in order to ensure that the sample is representative of the targeted population.
- An adequate number of callbacks can also have a positive effect on the response rate. Increasing the number of callbacks up to a certain point will result in higher

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response. Increasing the number of callbacks should also be combined with varying the call scheduling (see above).

- The use of well-trained and professional interviewers will have a positive impact on response rates. Interviewer briefings should be provided for all telephone surveys and should be project-specific.
- The survey organization should attempt refusal conversions. This practice involves an attempt to convert someone who has initially indicated refusal. Refusal conversions are normally done in subsequent telephone calls using more senior, experienced interviewers.

The above best practices represent only those that the authors consider to have the greatest impact on survey response. There are a large number of practices in this report that are thought to have a medium or low impact and are discussed within.

This set of best practices was compiled with the objective of providing users of public opinion research in the Government of Canada with the information necessary to understand issues related to survey response and the factors that affect response rates. For more information on the 50 best practices, we invite the reader to examine the full set of best practices that is contained in the following pages.

For more information on this study, please contact [por-rop@pwgsc.gc.ca](mailto:por-rop@pwgsc.gc.ca).

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the Public Opinion Research Directorate (PORD) of Public Works and Government Services Canada (PWGSC) and other departments of the Government of Canada have raised concerns over survey quality issues. In particular, declining response rates to telephone surveys have been a key concern and discussion item at meetings of the Government of Canada's Community of Practice. Industry associations (especially the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA)) and the Office of the Auditor General of Canada (November 2005) have also expressed similar concerns. This focus on response rates is not unfounded given the general consensus among survey research practitioners that response rates have been declining over the past few decades (de Leeuw and de Heer, 2001; Groves and Couper, 1998). People are becoming harder to reach and less willing to participate in survey research.

The result of this decline has been to cast doubt on the validity of data resulting from surveys with lower response rates and to increase the cost of conducting research to reach target response rates. Improving response rates requires a multi-dimensional response that addresses the issue of nonresponse at different stages of the research process. This set of Best Practices has been developed to assist Government of Canada departments and agencies with designing and conducting public opinion research (POR) that strives to achieve the highest response rates possible.<sup>1</sup>

## PURPOSE & SCOPE

This set of Best Practices was developed to help maximize response rates for telephone surveys. The focus is on strategies to help ensure that each Government of Canada telephone survey achieves the best response rate possible within the parameters of the study. These Best Practices incorporate guidelines and procedures that should be considered throughout the research study, from the design through to the reporting phase of the project. The document is intended for use by departments and agencies for their own review, and for discussions with research suppliers. Since the research process in the federal government context is typically a collaboration between PORD, the departmental POR coordinator, the end-client and the research supplier, readers will find that some of the areas covered by the Best Practices may have indirect application to *their* role in a particular study. Some of these Best Practices are considered by research suppliers as standard quality control practices. Others will involve consideration and reflection on the part of the department or agency commissioning the survey.

## THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING THE BEST PRACTICES

The development of this set of Best Practices involved undertaking a comprehensive review of relevant literature (see bibliography), contacting industry associations and research institutes, and conducting a series of consultative interviews and/or

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<sup>1</sup> The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the United States released a list of standards for statistical surveys in September 2006.

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correspondence with POR buyers within the Government of Canada, top field suppliers to the federal government, and key academics in Canada and the United States with expertise related to survey response rates. In total, 26 stakeholders/organizations were consulted to validate and strengthen the Best Practices (often with multiple individuals within an organization offering feedback). A detailed discussion of the methodology can be found in Appendix A.

### **DEFINING RESPONSE & NONRESPONSE RATES**

The response rate refers to the proportion of people that participated in a survey compared to the actual number of people sampled from the target population. In general terms, this is calculated by dividing the number of people who completed the survey by the number of people selected to participate. Nonresponse occurs when a unit of the sample does not complete a survey. Typically, it comprises two groups: people who refuse to participate in the survey (i.e. refusals) and those who cannot be reached during data collection (i.e. non-contacts).

### **RESPONSE RATES CALCULATIONS**

The Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA) is the leading national association for POR professionals in Canada and its definitions and methods are the most widely applied by private industry in Canada. Outside of Quebec, surveys conducted by private industry for the Government of Canada generally use the MRIA method to calculate response rates. The Association recently adopted a new standard response rate calculation, which has been endorsed by Statistics Canada and L'Association de l'Industrie de la Recherche Marketing et Sociale (AIRMS) in Quebec. It comprises two methods, a primary (Empirical Method) and secondary (Estimation Method) response rate. The Empirical Method should be used to measure data collection efforts, and the Estimation Method during the analysis as a secondary measure to assess the quality of the survey data. Described below is the MRIA Empirical Method – the main response rate calculation.

Using the Empirical Method, the response rate is calculated by dividing the number of responding units by the sum of *all* in-scope and unresolved units. To understand this calculation, a few terms require definition:

- **Unresolved Units (U):** All non-responding units for which eligibility cannot be determined (e.g. ring, but no answer telephone numbers). All other telephone numbers are classified as resolved.
- **Resolved Units** are divided into in-scope and out-of-scope units.
- **Out-of-Scope Units:** These are telephone numbers that are invalid (i.e. not in service, or a business for household survey and visa versa). **These numbers are not calculated as part of the response rate.**
- **In-Scope Units** are classified as either responding or nonresponding numbers. The nonresponding in-scope units (**IS**) include refusals, lack of availability, language barrier, etc.).

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- **Responding Units (R):** All in-scope units (respondents) that provided usable information. This includes disqualified or ineligible respondents (i.e. those screened out at the beginning of the interview).

**MRIA Empirical Method**

↓

**Response Rate =**  
 **$R/(U+IS+R)$**

Source: Vue Magazine, June 2006

To apply the formula, divide the number of respondents by the sum of all units of the sample – unresolved units, in-scope nonresponding units, and responding units – to calculate the response rate for a telephone survey.

### **WHY ARE RESPONSE RATES IMPORTANT?**

Response rates are an important measurement in survey research because **they reflect the level of effort** undertaken during data collection and **help describe the reliability** of the resulting data. Survey nonresponse can bias samples (and therefore survey data) by making the sample composition substantively different from the target population. Bias, in this instance, refers to the difference between the sampled units and the target population. Just as a randomly-selected sample represents the target population, so too must the actual survey respondents. The biasing effect of nonresponse can potentially be greater as the response rate drops; therefore, **higher response rates are sought by survey organizations to decrease the likelihood of nonresponse bias**. Survey error resulting from nonresponse, however, will only occur when there are significant differences between respondents and nonrespondents. *Why?* Error resulting from nonresponse is a function of both the response rate *and* the extent of differences between respondents and nonrespondents. This means that low response rate surveys do not necessarily result in low data quality.

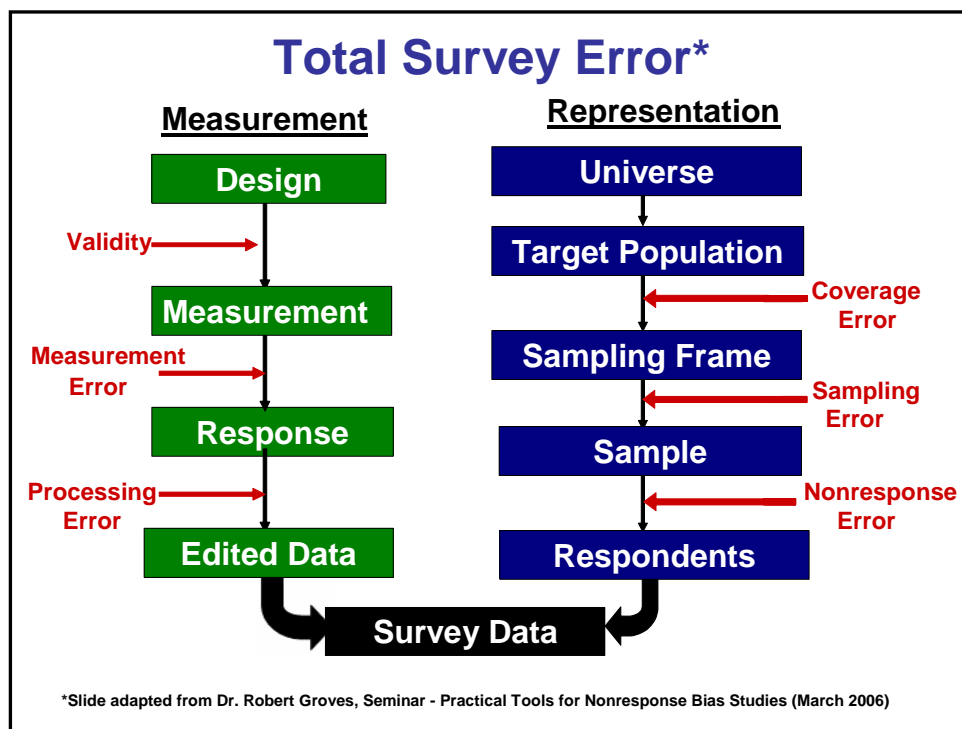
The general decline in response rates has resulted in a focus by the research community on the validity of data related to low response rates. Numerous studies have been undertaken during the last decade to advance knowledge in this area. Overall, the findings of these studies question the methodological tenet that low response rates *necessarily* compromise data validity (Visser et al., 1996; Keeter et al., 2000; Curtin et al., 2000; Merkle and Edelman, 2001; Halpenny and Ambrose, 2006). These studies suggest that higher response rates do not necessarily produce more accurate data, and that surveys with low response rates can still provide useful and valid data (other things being equal – provided sample selection and weighting, for example, are undertaken carefully). The studies reinforce the premise that survey error resulting from nonresponse will only occur when respondents differ from nonrespondents. The problem for survey researchers is understanding when nonresponse is ignorable (i.e. will not cause survey error) and when it is an issue for data

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reliability because of the introduction of bias – that is, under which conditions are respondents and nonrespondents most likely to be different?

In the absence of being able to predict when nonresponse will bias a sample, obtaining the highest response rate possible within the constraints of a particular study is beneficial to all those involved in survey research. Though increasingly difficult to achieve, **efforts should always be taken to maximize response rates**. However, efforts to increase response rates should be considered within the context of *total survey error* – sampling, coverage, and measurement errors all have the potential to negatively impact data quality. Any effort to maximize response rates beyond a certain point can be counterproductive if the measures divert resources from these other important sources of potential error. As well, increasing response rates often costs money – therefore, measures to address them need to be considered in light of the study budget, time-frame, the way in which the results will be used, and the level of accuracy needed. Response rates, in short, should be one consideration among many when undertaking research design.

As is illustrated in the diagram below, there are numerous areas where there is the potential for error to have an impact on the quality of the survey data, response rates being only one of these.



## WHAT ARE REALISTIC RESPONSE RATES?

There are no standards in place per se in terms of minimum acceptable response rates in Canada. In addition, there is no response rate threshold among the industry to use to determine when survey results might be subject to nonresponse bias (Groves, forthcoming). Realistic response rates will vary depending on the data collection method (telephone vs. online vs. mail) and the specific parameters of the survey (budget, time, target population, survey length, sample frame, etc.). Typical response rates for most commercial telephone surveys now tend to range from 10% to 20% (although some can yield response rates in the single digits, e.g. omnibus studies, political polling) (Halpenny and Ambrose, 2006).

The MRIA Response Rate Committee undertook analyses of telephone survey refusal rates and response rates in 1995, 1999, and 2002. According to these studies, response rates for one-time telephone studies (i.e. not tracking or omnibus studies), with incidence rates of 50% plus, using a random sample, and no identifiable sponsor, have declined as follows: 12% in 2002 from 16-17% in 1995-1999.

Response rates of 70% and over have been, and continue to be, achieved by some organizations, including Statistics Canada and other statistical agencies. These organizations benefit from a unique set of circumstances – mandated compliance, sponsorship advantages, longer field times, and often much larger budgets. Further, unlike POR which measures attitudes, knowledge and opinions, these organizations tend to collect factual information (e.g. the Census).

The Council for Marketing and Opinion Research (CMOR) in the United States also tracks response, cooperation, and refusal rates for studies. Recent averages (2004) are presented in the table below:

| <b>Average Telephone Survey Response Rates in the U.S.</b> |                   |        |
|--|-------------------|--------|
| <b><i>Response Rates:</i></b><br>September 2004            |                   |        |
| <u>Telephone overall:</u>                                  | Number of Surveys | Rate   |
| Average Response Rate:                                     | 1364              | 17.0 % |
| <u>Telephone RDD:</u>                                      | Number of Surveys | Rate   |
| Average Response Rate:                                     | 761               | 9.17 % |
| SOURCE: CMOR, 2004   |                   |        |

While these data are not directly comparable to the MRIA data due to differences in response rate calculations, they do suggest a similar direction with respect to response rates. The 2004 average response rate in the U.S. (for all types of telephone surveys) is 17% based on 1,364 industry surveys, and for RDD surveys it is 9.17% based on 761 industry surveys. These averages are somewhat lower compared to the data from 2001,

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when the average overall response rate for telephone surveys was reported to be 23.8% and 12.2% for RDD telephone surveys.

Average response rates for customer satisfaction, list-based samples, and business-business telephone surveys as tracked by CMOR are:

| <b>Average Telephone Survey Response Rates in the U.S.</b> |                   |         |
|--|-------------------|---------|
| <b><i>Response Rates:</i></b><br>September 2004            |                   |         |
| <u>Customer Satisfaction:</u>                              | Number of Surveys | Rate    |
| Average Response Rate:                                     | 69                | 32.96 % |
| <u>List:</u>   | Number of Surveys | Rate    |
| Average Response Rate:                                     | 414               | 30.93 % |
| <u>Business-to-business:</u>                               | Number of Surveys | Rate    |
| Average Response Rate:                                     | 120               | 17.15 % |
| SOURCE: CMOR, 2004   |                   |         |

As would be expected, these response rates are significantly higher than those reported for RDD telephone surveys. In all cases, the data collection efforts could draw on lists, while in some instances the respondents had an interest in responding to the survey (particularly the customer satisfaction surveys).

## **ORGANIZATION & USE OF THE BEST PRACTICES**

**This document includes 50 Best Practices designed to help ensure that the highest response rate possible is achieved for a particular study.** These Best Practices were developed after a comprehensive review of the most current literature related to telephone survey response rates. They are organized according to the four main stages of a research study: design, data collection, analysis, and reporting. Each Best Practice includes:

- Identification of the Best Practice or research standard.
- The rationale behind the Best Practice and issues of importance to consider.
- Implementation of related guidelines (i.e. mini-Best Practices).

**This document is designed to be a basic reference for Government of Canada telephone surveys,** augmented with a bibliography where more detailed information can be found. For the convenience of readers, cross-referencing is incorporated where applicable throughout the document. In addition, appended to this document is a **Best Practices Checklist** that can be used on its own or in conjunction with this fuller reference document. The Best Practices are labelled in a corresponding manner so they can be easily referenced between the Checklist and the full reference document.

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Finally, it is important to remember that while response rate issues can be addressed throughout a project, emphasis should always be placed on design and data collection features to maximize response rates. In addition, not all of the Best Practices outlined in this document will be appropriate or feasible for all POR studies. With this in mind, some of the Best Practices take priority over others in terms of maximizing response rates. All factors being equal, **one of the most important things that can be done to help maximize the response rate is to ensure that there is adequate time to collect the data.** Secondly, focus should be placed on the survey questionnaire to make sure that it is free of bias, measures what it is intended to measure, and is as short, clear and simple as possible.

## STAGE 1: RESEARCH DESIGN

### 1.0 CHOOSE AN APPROPRIATE DATA COLLECTION METHOD

#### RATIONALE

**Choosing the most appropriate data collection method is central to attaining a good response rate. The merits of each method must be considered within the context of the target population, the survey objectives, the type of information to be collected, the research budget, and the time constraints.**

#### BEST PRACTICES

##### 1.0.1 Select the best survey method.

Numerous self-administered and interviewer-assisted methods of data collection are available for survey research, including mail/fax/email-back surveys, online surveys, face-to-face interviews, and telephone surveys. The most appropriate method will depend on a number of factors. The focus here is to help answer the question: *When is telephone an appropriate data collection method?* Here are a few guidelines that should be considered:

- Target population. Consider conducting a telephone survey when the sampling population is the general public, that is, the national adult population of Canada. Online data collection in this circumstance has presented a few problems in the past for surveys of the entire Canadian adult population, particularly coverage and sample frame issues<sup>2</sup>. Internet access is widespread but still does not have the coverage/penetration of telephone, and its use among certain types of audiences is more limited than among others. In addition to these coverage problems, there is no complete sample list<sup>3</sup> available for Internet users ([see BP 1.1.1](#)). While the Internet is an excellent data collection method for certain audiences and research objectives, it has at the time of this report (June 2006) greater coverage and sampling limitations than some other methods.
- Sampling frame. The completeness of the sample frame is critical to limit coverage error. Aside from surveying the general population (for which telephone currently provides the best coverage), consider the quality and composition of the lists available for the target population. For example, online data collection might be appropriate and advisable with special audiences, such as scientists, academics, etc., where email addresses are available or attainable, and for whom contact by telephone is often difficult to achieve due to travel, voicemail, gatekeepers, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> For a good discussion of online sampling concerns, see Guha (2006).

<sup>3</sup> Random digit dialling can be used to help overcome the lack of complete telephone directories/listings, something that is not available for online surveys.

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- Size of budget. Data collection conducted by telephone typically costs more than self-administered data collection methods. When the budget is limited, consider using online or mail/fax/email-back surveys rather than telephone data collection.
- Length of time available for fieldwork. If data is required *very* quickly (i.e. overnight or within a few days), and the response rate is not an issue, consider telephone or online data collection (but the latter only where coverage issues are not factors in the decision making).
- Level of precision needed for survey data. A telephone survey is appropriate when a high degree of accuracy or statistical reliability is a requirement for general public surveys.<sup>4</sup> Currently, there is no method for selecting random samples from general email addresses, which means that probability sampling is not yet possible using online data collection. This limitation notwithstanding, there are studies that show Internet panels have produced results similar to those of comparable telephone samples (Berrens et al., 2003). In addition, this concern is less important if the research sponsor only requires ‘directional’ information (i.e. data that provides approximate magnitudes, rather than precision). This is recognized as a contentious issue among survey researchers, and one that is quickly evolving based on new data and learning
- Research objectives. Telephone surveys are appropriate for shorter studies (e.g. 5-20 minutes) and where respondents can quickly respond to a question. Avoid conducting a telephone survey when the questionnaire is very long (over 30 minutes), or under circumstances where respondents are required to check things (e.g. get financial information from their files), or where visual aids are needed for concepts or complex scales. Under these circumstances, a self-administered survey might be more appropriate.

While selecting an appropriate data collection method will depend on many factors, choosing the most suitable method will increase the likelihood of achieving a higher response rate.

### **1.0.2 Consider alternative methods to contact hard-to-reach respondents.**

After selecting the data collection method, it is useful to consider strategies designed to help contact ‘hard-to-reach’ respondents. Depending on the target audience and subject of the survey, some respondents may be much harder to contact than other segments of the population. This includes low-incidence populations – those that are defined by quite narrow demographic (or other) specifications. As an alternative to relying solely on the telephone as a data collection method, a strategy to contact hard-to-reach respondents might involve the use of a mixed-mode approach to contact and/or to obtain

#### **Examples of hard-to-reach respondents:**

Corporate executives  
Elected officials  
Physicians  
Farmers  
IT executives

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<sup>4</sup> Tavassoli and Fitzsimons (2006) found that people respond differently to the same question when typing rather than speaking an answer. Response modes that require typed, not spoken answers (i.e. online surveys), change the representation of attitudes and behaviours. The implication drawn from this study is that online surveys may not be useful in discerning changes to attitudes over time.

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data from these individuals. Mixed-mode survey designs, in fact, are becoming more widely used by survey organizations to maximize response rates.

### **Possible mixed mode approaches:**

Telephone –  
mail/fax/email  
Telephone – Online

A mixed-mode approach increases the likelihood of contacting hard-to-reach respondents and can offer them the opportunity to respond using a method that they might find more convenient. Use of a mixed-mode approach assumes that alternate contact information is available for these segments of the population. A mixed-mode approach has the potential to increase the cost of data collection and the length of the data collection period. However, it can also shorten the length of time required to conduct the fieldwork and can reduce the costs associated with achieving the target number of completes (e.g. if numerous callbacks or conversion refusals are required to complete interviews with hard-to-reach respondents). Impact on cost and timing aside, **a mixed-mode does tend to yield higher response rates** for studies.

The impact of using a mixed-mode approach on survey *accuracy* also must be weighed against the potential bias of not hearing from these respondents. For instance, the use of different methods of data collection can result in data that are not entirely comparable – depending on the types of questions asked. Consider a question with a long list of responses that are read to respondents who are administered the survey by telephone. The items are rotated to account for primacy/recency effects (i.e. first asked, last asked items). However, this is not easy to accommodate with a paper-based, self-administered questionnaire (needs multiple versions of the questionnaire, with randomized ordering). As another example, pre-coded, do-no-read-list questions work well on the telephone (i.e. the question is an open-ended question to the respondent, but interviewers use a pre-coded list and the ‘other/specify’ option to record responses, which facilitates coding and data comparability). Yet this type of question does not work at all for online surveys, and its replacement by a truly open-ended question is not a good option because of the high non-response rate for open-ended questions in online surveys. In short, a mixed-mode approach has the potential to introduce a new variable that must be considered during the analysis (i.e. was there a difference in how people responded based on the method used – self-administered vs. interviewer-administered). A mixed-mode approach should be considered when the potential for nonresponse error outweighs concerns related to measurement error.

### **1.0.3 Consider allowing proxy respondents.**

There is a general consensus in the research literature that proxy respondents should not be used when the research is designed to measure attitudes, opinions or knowledge. Current evidence suggests that data from proxy respondents sometimes differs systematically from data obtained from respondents (Groves et al., 2004). Nevertheless, under the right circumstances, proxy respondents can contribute to a higher response rate by enabling survey organizations to reach respondents that otherwise would not have been able to take

#### **Proxy respondents**

Data are collected from one person who acts as a proxy for another individual or the entire household.

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part in the survey. For some studies, using proxy respondents is better than no response at all.

A clear set of circumstances should be identified for relevant studies regarding the use of proxy respondents. Proxy respondents can be viable for surveys that collect factual or experience-based information. If the information being collected is not opinion-based, it is reasonable to assume that someone other than the intended respondent could answer as long as they possess the needed information. Other circumstances could include a language barrier where the respondent speaks neither official language, or has a disability, such as hearing impairment. Should proxy interviews be conducted as part of the data collection, these cases should be clearly identified in the data set. This will ensure that tests can be run during the analysis to look for variations between proxy and non-proxy interviews.

### **1.0.4 Collect the data at the most appropriate time of year.**

Ideally, data collection should occur at the most appropriate time of year to achieve the highest response rate possible. Avoid surveying your target population during times of the year when people are less likely to be reached or are less willing to participate in research. Such times will depend on the specific audience, but efforts should be taken to avoid interviewing during major holidays or audience-specific relevant events, 3-day weekends and vacation seasons. After a specific number of callbacks (i.e. attempts to re-contact people who were not available when first called), these telephone numbers will be retired and new telephone numbers attempted to achieve the required number of completed surveys. Retiring valid sample (e.g. busy, no answer, answering machine) and adding new contacts will decrease the response rate.

#### **Example:**

Undertaking a survey of the general public during July and August when Canadians typically take vacations generally will result in lower response rates due to these absences. Likewise, avoid surveying accountants during tax season, or public servants during the March 31<sup>st</sup> fiscal year end.

If conducting data collection during these times is unavoidable, **a longer field period should be built into the project timelines.** Unless a longer interviewing window is scheduled, the response rate is likely to be lower and the sample of respondents might be biased (if survey respondents differ systematically from nonrespondents). To make sure that the sample is representative of the target population, the interviewing invariably will take longer to complete. This is the trade-off for conducting POR telephone surveys at less appropriate times of the year.

### **1.0.5 Allow adequate time to collect the data.**

**The length of the data collection period can have a direct impact on response rates,** and will depend on the sample size, interview length, and interviewing supplier capacity. Such factors aside, the field period should be sufficient to achieve a good response rate. A general rule is that **the longer a study remains in field, the higher the response rate**

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(although there is a point when the return on invested time and budget will diminish).<sup>5</sup> Telephone surveys with short interviewing periods tend to suffer from lower response rates because the sample records may not be subject to as many callbacks before being retired, or the callbacks are not as varied in terms of time of day/day of the week. As well, a person refusing one day, may be in a different situation or frame of mind a few weeks later, and more amenable to being interviewed.

The length of interviewing periods are an essential part of maximizing response rates to telephone surveys (Halpenny and Ambrose, 2006)<sup>6</sup>. A longer field time increases the chances of reaching a respondent and improves the chances of finding that respondent in a situation conducive to taking part in the survey.<sup>7</sup> The following table provides some indication (approximate only) of the range of response rates that can be expected from a general public RDD telephone survey depending on the length of the field period:

| <b>Response Rate</b> | <b>Field Time</b>     |
|----------------------|-----------------------|
| <b>7% to 15%</b>     | <b>2 to 6 days</b>    |
| <b>20% to 35%</b>    | <b>1 to 4 weeks</b>   |
| <b>35% to 60%</b>    | <b>6 to 12+ weeks</b> |

**\*Times assume sufficient field resources are available (i.e. budget, CATI stations, interviewers).**

The length of time allotted for data collection should also be sensitive to incidence level, target audience, and research objectives. All things being equal, a survey of a low-incidence population or one of hard-to-reach elected officials will require more time to complete than a survey of the general population.

In addition to these considerations, the type of information being collected can influence the length of the fieldwork. Should it be necessary to capture a reflection of your target population's attitudes or behaviours at a specific moment in time, a longer field period might compromise these objectives. An example is a 'recall' survey following an event like an advertising campaign. Without taking measures to mitigate the effects of the time lapse, prolonged data collection may not yield accurate data. As time passes, the likelihood of respondents recalling the advertisement decreases. Other types of POR studies where this might be apply include mailout recall, most recent service interaction assessment, or time-use studies (e.g. diary studies where an activity/behaviour must be recorded at a specific point in time).

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<sup>5</sup> Using data on response rates for 205 telephone surveys, McCarty et al. (2006) found that even a one day increase in the length of the field period (per 100 cases) resulted in a 7% increase in the response rate.

<sup>6</sup> Findings of studies undertaken by Keeter et al. (2000) and Halpenny and Ambrose (2006) found that response rates for identical surveys improved substantially the longer the surveys remained in field.

<sup>7</sup> Gallagher et al. (2006) found that maintaining consistently high response rates over time in parallel RDD surveys required an increasing number of field hours and call attempts per completed interview.

## 1.1 ENSURE ADEQUATE POPULATION COVERAGE

### RATIONALE

The response rate is *one* indicator of survey quality. Sampling and non-sampling errors can also affect the quality of a survey. No research design is perfect, but efforts should be taken to minimize sources of error, independent of the level of the response rate.

### BEST PRACTICES

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#### 1.1.1 Define the research population.

In survey research, the ‘population’ or ‘universe’ refers to the target audience or the group of people of interest (e.g. general public, private sector executives, seniors). The population to be included in the survey must be relevant to the research objective(s). Properly defining the population will determine who should be included in the sample (and who should not).

**Topic interest** plays a role in achieving high response rates. Generally, the more interesting the topic, the more likely people will be to respond (Groves, 2004).

This is essential to conducting good quality research, and has an indirect impact on response rates. The more important the individual being contacted perceives the research to be, and the more relevant it is to him/her, the more likely this person is to respond and take part in the survey. **When the target population has no direct link to the survey topic, an effective introduction is critical. Consideration should be given to how best to frame the research as relevant to these potential respondents ([see BP 1.3.2](#)).**

#### 1.1.2 Select an adequate sample size.

Select a sample size that relates to your target population, the research budget, the intended data analyses, and the required degree of accuracy. Sample size does not have an impact on response rates. Rather, it affects the accuracy of the results. **The larger the sample size, the smaller the margin of error, the more reliable the results.** Choosing the right sample size will help minimize unnecessary sampling error. It will not help to increase the response rate per se.

To determine the appropriate sample, consider the following:

- Target audience. The size of the survey population, in part, will influence the sample size. Typically, a 10:1 sample to completion ratio is used as a guide by the marketing research industry. This means that 10 records/pieces of sample are required to achieve one completed interview.
- Budget. Conducting telephone interviews costs money. The survey data collection costs, in part, are based on the length of the interview, the number of completes, and the incidence level of the population.

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- Data analyses. If there are subgroups that require analyses, the sample size would need to be large enough to accommodate these analyses with enough reliability.
- Accuracy. The larger the sample size, the smaller the sampling error. Consider the intended use of the data. This will help guide the size of the sample. If the results need to be highly accurate, the smaller the margin of error, the more reliable the data.

### **1.1.3 Reduce coverage error.**

The sample frame is like a ‘map’ that guides the research in terms of who is ‘eligible’ to participate (e.g. general public, Ontario teachers, users of a certain government program). It is important to put in place a sample frame that effectively corresponds to the population of interest. Following this, a sample list should be developed that includes all elements of the research population, and constitutes the source from which survey respondents will be drawn. Coverage error occurs when this list does not include all segments of your target population – that is, the sample is not fully representative of the survey population. Consider a telephone survey conducted with the general public. Focusing on landlines (only these are generally included in RDD samples, not cell telephones), household telephone penetration in Canada is approximately 94% (1.2% of households do not have any telephone, and 4.8% only have cell telephones), which means that a RDD survey of Canadians will have a minimum, but still some, amount of coverage error. Minimizing coverage errors will increase the likelihood that the information collected accurately reflects the target population.

A high response to a survey that is based on a flawed or incomplete sample frame may not produce valid data. Consider a telephone survey of the general population that results in a high response rate but uses local telephone directories as its sample frame. Given that approximately 10-20% of the population has unlisted or newly listed telephone numbers, not everyone has an equal chance of being contacted for the survey. The result – the survey data may not reflect the opinions or attitudes of the segment of the population with unlisted telephone numbers. If this segment of the population is demographically or attitudinally different than those with listed telephone numbers, the survey finding may not be valid.

There are a few common sampling methods for telephone surveys: RDD, list brokers (i.e. purchased sample lists), and in-house lists (e.g. clients, members, employees, etc.). Regardless of the sampling method used, the following should be considered:

- Ensure the sample frame and sample lists are appropriate and relevant to the survey objectives, questions and areas of investigation.
- Try to obtain good sample (i.e. sample that has been pre-screened for out-of-scope telephone numbers). Poor quality sample can have an impact on the field budget because interviewers will spend time trying to contact inappropriate (e.g. not-in-service, fax/modem) or non-eligible respondents (business numbers for a household survey).
- Make sure the sample frame and lists are up-to-date and accurate. This includes how it is updated and when this was last done. To illustrate this point, take a sample frame developed from the previous year’s client list for a government

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program. Not capturing the entire target population (i.e. new clients) may introduce nonresponse bias into the data.

- Try to include as much demographic data as possible when pulling sample from established lists. Not only will this reduce the length of the interview ([see BP 1.1.2](#)), it will also provide information for nonresponse analysis if necessary ([see BP 3.03](#)).
- Identify under- or over-represented population segments in your sample list(s) in advance of the fieldwork. Studies indicate that **telephone coverage rates tend to be lower among low-income households and young people**. It is important when using lists (e.g. clients, stakeholders) to have a good understanding of whether there are under- or over-represented population segments in those lists. **Use of quotas or targets is a common method used to address any such deficiencies (i.e. more efforts to reach under-represented groups, limits established for over-represented groups)**.
- Ensure that the sample does not include duplication. If using a number of program or client service lists to reach the target population, they should be checked for duplication. It is possible that people could appear on more than one client list.

### **Cell Telephones**

The increased use of cell telephones among some segments of the Canadian population presents a growing problem. As more households rely only on cell telephones, telephone coverage error might increase. Statistics Canada released the following in December 2005: 4.8% of Cdn. Households have only a cell telephone (7.1% in BC, 7.7% of low-income households) compared to 1.9% in 2003 (Statistics Canada, 2005).

Research undertaken in the United States has found that cell-only Americans differ from those with a landline (Purcell, 2006, Pew, 2006, Tuckel et al., 2006). They tend to be younger (18-29 years) and are more likely to be single, lower-income, and renters, not homeowners. Currently, however, evidence suggests that the cell-only phenomenon has not undermined national polls (Pew, 2006). Nevertheless, as the proportion of cell-only households increases, it may become prudent to augment RDD samples with cell samples to provide a more representative final sample (Purcell et al., 2006) – that is, one that includes, for example, younger audiences (which tend to be underrepresented in RDD surveys).

Sampling issues are typically handled by research suppliers. However, you might consider asking your supplier the following:

- The source of the sample frame and the date it was drawn. This should be included in the methodological section of the final report.
- Whether the sample has been pre-screened for out-of-scope telephone numbers and/or checked for duplication.
- If using RDD, whether it includes unlisted or cell telephone numbers. At this point, cell numbers are not typically included in RDD sample frames. Interviewing people on a cell telephone can present safety risks (e.g. driving while completing a survey), data quality concerns for the survey organization (i.e. is the respondent distracted or in a public location which may limit their attentiveness, the candour of responses, etc.), and ethical issues (i.e. cell telephone users will pay their provider

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for the air time to conduct the interview). If/when cell telephones are included in the sample frame, this should be identified in the methodology section of the report.

### **1.2 MINIMIZE RESPONDENT BURDEN**

#### **RATIONALE**

**Survey research is dependent upon the goodwill and cooperation of respondents. Increasingly, people are becoming harder to reach and less likely to take part in survey research. Research design should be attentive to the burden placed on respondents to maximize participation rates once contact has been established.**

#### **BEST PRACTICES**

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##### **1.2.1 Keep the length of the interview as short as possible.**

Response burden is an unavoidable part of survey research, but efforts to limit it can help maximize response rates. Shorter questionnaires, and identifying this to potential respondents, can have a positive impact on response rates.<sup>8</sup> In practical terms, surveys of 10 minutes or less are considered relatively short and not overly burdensome. Surveys of 15 minutes are common in federal government POR and do not tend to place an undue burden on respondents. Telephone surveys of 20 minutes or more are less common and can be expected to result in lower response rates, other factors being equal (i.e. survey topic, target audience, etc.). Unless necessary, avoid interview lengths over 15 minutes to help to maximize response rates. Keeping the length of the questionnaire to a minimum, while still achieving the research objectives, will help yield higher response rates for studies.

The **longer the survey**, the less likely people are to take part or to complete the full interview.

Before undertaking questionnaire design, it is a good idea to review what is already known about the target population in relation to the study objectives. Part of this exercise should include an assessment of the current information needs, a review of whether some of this information is available elsewhere, and a prioritization of issues/questions to make it easier to manage questionnaire length. This review will help to ensure that departments and agencies only collect information that is essential to the study. The result will be a focused questionnaire that collects quality information and is not any longer than is necessary. Not only will a shorter questionnaire have a positive impact on the response rate of individual studies, it might also contribute to respondent cooperation with future Government of Canada telephone surveys. Respecting respondents by limiting response burden will help

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<sup>8</sup> See for example: McCarty et al. (2006), or Dillman et al. (1993). While it is worth noting that the literature examining the impact of survey length on response rates is not conclusive (see: Bogen, 1996), logic and practical experience suggests that longer questionnaires will result in lower response rates.

to cultivate more favourable perceptions of survey research generally, and increase the likelihood of Canadians agreeing to an interview when contacted for future surveys.

### **1.2.2 Design a well-structured questionnaire.**

A well-designed questionnaire ensures that the data collected satisfies the objectives of the research and minimizes the burden placed on respondents. A good questionnaire collects *only* the information that is essential to the survey objectives. Consider the following guidelines when developing the questionnaire for a study:

- The survey content should be as relevant as possible to the respondent.
- **The language used in the introduction should be well-designed (see BP 1.3.2).** This is the only opportunity interviewers have to get a potential respondent to agree to an interview. Most people decide in the first seconds of a telephone call whether they will respond to the survey.
- Careful attention should be paid to screener wording when eligibility must be established to participate in the survey. Research has found that when potential respondents know the eligibility criteria, response rates decrease (i.e. people report themselves as ineligible when external eligibility data, census data for example, suggests that they should meet the inclusion requirements) (Shreffler et al., 2006).
- Definitions, explanations and instructions should be included for respondents and interviewers if necessary. If a respondent cannot be expected to understand a term used in the questionnaire, s/he should be presented with the definition if this will not compromise the data.
- Individual questions should be framed in the most relevant manner possible from the respondent's perspective. The latter can be determined, at least in part, through a pre-test of the questionnaire (see BP 1.2.3).
- Questionnaire transitions should be well-positioned and satisfactory to guide the respondent through the survey. Unlike online or paper-based questionnaires, page layout does not play a role in design for telephone surveys. The respondent is guided only by the interviewer and the transitions from topic to topic.
- **Questions should be clearly and simply written and avoid the use of jargon.** Attention should be given to the target population and ensuring the language is appropriate. Efforts should be taken to keep questions to a minimum number of words, or to replace long words with shorter ones, and to ensure that they are as direct as possible. If a question is difficult to understand when read out loud, this will compromise the data quality and make it more difficult for the respondent. Anything that increases the response burden, increases the potential for a negative impact on response rates.
- Questions should be answerable by respondents. Attention must be paid to the skip patterns. Respondents should not be taken to modules for which they cannot be expected to provide answers (e.g. if they have not used a service, they should not be asked to rate their satisfaction with the service). This will frustrate respondents, which can result in respondents terminating the interview before it is complete.

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- Repetitive questions should be kept to a minimum. This includes long batteries of questions (e.g. ‘please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following 20 items...’). While it is tempting to try to cover as much content as possible in a question, this can result in respondents providing less thoughtful or automatic responses that do not discriminate among the issues being explored. In addition to possibly compromising data accuracy, this can result in respondents terminating interviews before they are complete if they view the interview as repetitive.
- Repetitive response options should also be avoided for the same reasons as repetitive questions. If the same rating scale is used for each question, do not repeat it at the end of each question unless required by the respondents. Repetition of rating scales after each question lengthens the interview and frustrates respondents who can remember the scale.
- Use scales that are meaningful to respondents, ones that they can understand how to respond to. Measurement error can result when the scales used are interpreted differently by each respondent.
- Repetitive question *patterns*. For instance, a ‘yes/no’ question that leads to a series of questions if the respondent says ‘yes’ – respondents can quickly catch on to this and might begin to say ‘no’ to move through the interview more quickly.
- Avoid the over-use of open-ended questions or consider conducting qualitative research first to address this information need. Closed or semi-closed questions are easier for respondents to answer, require less coding, are easier to track over time, and typically provide more meaningful survey data.

### **1.2.3 Review the translated questionnaire.**

Closely review the translation of the questionnaire. The language must be as clear and simple as the original document. In addition, particular attention should be paid to the accuracy and appropriateness of the translation. The ‘correct’ translation of a text *might* not always reflect the popular vocabulary of the target audience. Efforts taken to produce a well-designed questionnaire in one language will be undermined if the translation is not subject to the same level of scrutiny.

### **1.2.4 Pre-test the questionnaire.**

**A well designed survey** will reduce the response burden, which can have a positive impact on the response rate.

Pre-testing the questionnaire is an excellent way to work out any potential problems with the research instrument in advance of the fieldwork.<sup>9</sup> A pre-test will help determine the length of the survey and ensure that the questionnaire is measuring what it is designed to measure, that respondents understand the questions and can provide the information requested, and that interviewers understand the questionnaire and the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing)

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<sup>9</sup> The importance of conducting a pre-test is reflected in the OMB Standards which makes this a mandatory requirement (unless the instrument has been successfully used in the field previously, e.g. tracking survey).

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programming. In short, it represents an important step in the development of the research instrument.

Consider the following when pre-testing the questionnaire for a study:

- Pre-test the questionnaire in French and English (if the survey will be conducted in both languages). Not only are the words used in the English and French versions of the questionnaire obviously different, there can also be differences in how information is interpreted by Anglophones and Francophones. If the translated version of the questionnaire is not available at the time that fieldwork needs to start, conduct the pre-test in the one official language, and then conduct the pre-test later in the second official language once that version of the questionnaire is available.
- Listen to the pre-test interviews and report any concerns to the research supplier (who should also be listening to the interviews). Here, attention should be paid to the flow of the interview, the comprehension of respondents, the feedback offered by respondents, whether respondents consistently need some questions repeated, and the interviewers' technique and ability to pronounce words in questions. It might be that adjustments to question wording will help elicit the right information from respondents, and make their experience as respondents easier and more pleasant. Should significant adjustments be required, consider the need for a new pre-test of the research instrument.
- **Ask the research supplier to hold a debriefing session with the interviewers** after the pre-test. This can serve two purposes. First, it is an opportunity to hear from the interviewers who conducted the pre-test whether there were any additional issues regarding comprehension, wording, survey flow, etc., that were not picked up in listening to the pre-test interviews.<sup>10</sup> The interviewers are the front-line delivery staff with respect to the survey, and are closest to the respondent, so they might have additional insight to share. Second, it is an opportunity to provide interviewers with direction that might help them take the respondent through the interview more professionally or efficiently based on adjustments desired by the research team (i.e. client and supplier). Pre-tests often result in adjustments to the way in which questions are dealt with by interviewers (e.g. probes, coding of responses, etc.), not only to question wording or sequencing. As noted, efforts to reduce the response burden can have a positive impact on the response rate. Data resulting from the pre-test should not be used as part of the sample if substantial changes are made to the questionnaire.
- For federal government projects, pre-tests with 15 interviews in each language are required under the current Standing Offer. Additional pre-test interviews may be required if substantial changes are made to the questionnaire.
- For lower-incidence populations (e.g. smokers – 20% of the population), it can be a more efficient use of time to record the pre-test interviews and then distribute the recordings to research team members for their review. This eliminates the 'down time' waiting for another respondent to be reached on the telephone.

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<sup>10</sup> If monitoring the pre-test interviews live at the field house, it is generally not possible for the research team to hear all of these interviews since they usually run concurrently.

As an additional quality control measure following the pre-test, but before the survey gets well into field, it can be helpful to **have the top-line frequencies run after 50-100 completed surveys**. Reviewing the frequencies can help determine if people are being routed through the questions they should be asked. This not only serves to help ensure that respondents are asked the questions they should be asked, thus minimizing potential frustration, **it is an excellent check on data quality, conducted at a time when adjustments to the questionnaire programming are still possible.**

### 1.3 INCORPORATE METHODS TO ENCOURAGE PARTICIPATION

#### RATIONALE

**Reaching a potential respondent is just the first step in the interview process. Once a potential respondent has answered the telephone, s/he needs to agree to take part in the survey. Incorporating strategies designed to encourage participation is critical to achieving high response rates.**

### BEST PRACTICES

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#### 1.3.1 Notify potential respondents in advance of the fieldwork, where possible.

The use of an advance information letter can help enlist survey participation and improve response rates (de Leeuw et al, 2006<sup>11</sup>; Link and Mokdad, 2005). An advance letter would explain the background of the study, encourage participation, and legitimize the research.

It is a method that can be used to effectively position the research as a consultative exercise, particularly among special audiences (e.g. stakeholder groups), something that might be more positively received by the respondent than simply being invited to do a survey. Likewise, advance notice from a organization surveying its clients shows respect for clients, which can have a positive impact on the response rate.

**Advance notification** is most common and practical for special-audience research, not telephone surveys conducted with the general public.

List-based sample frames, not RDD sampling, *best* provide this opportunity. Advance notification is less feasible in the case of RDD and most other telephone surveys with the general public when an accurate list of respondents is not available to the researcher – such as client, employee, or other types of stakeholder lists. In some instances, only a sub-set of potential respondents for whom mailing addresses can be obtained will receive the letter in advance of the telephone call. While the overall response rate may benefit, the sub-set that received the advance letter may be overrepresented in the final sample. If this happens, the

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<sup>11</sup> This recent meta-analysis of the impact of advance letters on response rates for telephone surveys concluded that pre-notification is an effective strategy. Average response rates went from 58% (no letter) to 66% (advance letter).

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result is that efforts to reduce nonresponse, in fact, can potentially introduce bias into the survey data.

If the research design incorporates advance notification of the target population, **the letter should be sent by the federal department or agency on official stationary where possible (i.e. not by the research firm)**. This can serve to increase the credibility and perceived importance of the research. A good letter should be kept short – no longer than one page as a general rule – and include the following:

- A personal salutation when possible. Studies indicate that addressing potential respondents by name will help to increase the likelihood that they will agree to an interview.
- Information on the background and objectives of the research, including how the results will be used. This includes identification of any potential benefits that the respondent could be expected to receive as a result, either directly or indirectly (e.g. improved service). In some instances, it might not be possible to reveal the objectives/goals in order to not influence potential respondents prior to the interview ([see BP 1.3.2](#)).
- A department or agency contact person and telephone number that can be used to verify the legitimacy of the research. Not only does this lend credibility to the study, it helps to minimize any concerns people might have about agreeing to participate ([see BP 1.3.6](#)).
- Assurances of anonymity and confidentiality. When survey responses will remain confidential, it is important that potential respondents be made aware of this. Not only must they feel confident that their privacy will be safeguarded if they participate, this knowledge can encourage those who would otherwise decline participation to take part in an interview ([see BP 1.3.3](#)).
- A senior official signatory. Similar to including the department or agency contact for surveys, a senior official's signature on a letter will serve to emphasize the importance of the research and encourage participation. The level and position of the signatory should be decided on a case-by-case basis, and will vary according to the research objectives and the target audience.
- A short introduction (one sentence) to identify the research company conducting this research.
- Encouragement to participate in the research and thanks for considering doing so.

When use of advanced letters is not possible, consider, *only* on a case-by-case basis, the following strategies:

- Promote awareness of the telephone survey through department and agency Web site notices. This could be as simple as including a brief notice about the upcoming survey in the 'What's New' (or equivalent) section of the Web site. This will help to lend legitimacy to the study, as well as prepare potential respondents for the telephone call inviting their participation. Use of this type of research publicity is most often reserved for special POR initiatives only. Time does not typically permit this level of advance coordination.

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- Advertise the survey in local government service centres if the target population is program clients or benefit recipients (e.g. client satisfaction survey of Employment Insurance [EI] recipients). While not all clients/recipients can be expected to use in-person methods of service delivery, the same type of advertising could be used with the interactive voice response (IVR) system. This type of publicity can help to raise awareness among these Canadians that this type of research is taking place and that they might be called to take part.
- Work with department/agency stakeholders and other interest groups to obtain their endorsement or support in advance of the survey. Certainly this type of strategy would depend on the nature of the research subject and target population. This caveat aside, response rates for research with special audiences can be expected to improve if the key association endorses the survey and encourages members to participate (e.g. a telephone survey of family physicians will likely benefit from the support of the Canadian Medical Association).

### **1.3.2 Use effective survey introductions.**

Effective introductions are necessary to increase the likelihood that the person will take part in the research. Since most telephone refusals occur before the interviewer has an opportunity to request an interview, an effective introduction should be short and appeal directly to people. Studies have found that the majority of refusals occur during the first minute of the call (Groves, 1990). While survey introductions need to convey a number of points, they *should* try to do so in the most efficient manner. The introduction should accomplish the following:

**Survey research** needs to distinguish itself from telephone marketing and solicitation calls. Professional survey introductions can help accomplish this goal.

- Properly identify interviewers.
- Where such information is available, consider use of a personal salutation on a case-by-case basis. Knowing who you need to speak with will help to by-pass the gatekeeper, but it can also cause potential respondents to question their anonymity.<sup>12</sup>
- Identify the name of the organization sponsoring the survey when this can be revealed ([see BP 1.3.5](#)).
- Provide a brief description of the survey when the research objectives will not be compromised by revealing this information.
- Inform potential respondents that their help is both important and useful to achieving the research objectives.
- Mention that confidentiality and anonymity will be protected ([see BP 1.3.3](#)) if this is the case, but do so with language that is not officious or bureaucratic, or long

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<sup>12</sup> See ZuWallack (2006) for a RDD household respondent selection method designed to increase response rates and reduce survey costs.

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(otherwise this can serve to make people feel less comfortable, not more comfortable taking part in the survey).

- Refer to any incentive available to respondents ([see BP 1.3.4](#)).
- Offer an estimate of the interview length, particularly for shorter surveys since this can be expected to boost response rates (e.g. 10 minutes or less). If the survey length is not included as part of the survey introduction, there must be an instruction to interviewers to offer this information if asked by the respondent.
- Ask whether this is a convenient time for the respondent to conduct the interview, and if not, when might be a good time to call them back.

In terms of the subject matter of a survey, informing potential respondents about the topic can be expected to increase response rates in some instances (e.g. when it is an interesting topic or one especially relevant to the respondent). People cooperate at higher rates on surveys of interest to them, and this is most evident when the topic has salience in the introduction. However, it can also potentially compromise the research objectives (e.g. policy studies, where one wants to hear from all aspects of the general public, not only those most interested in the specific policy area). Identifying the topic can sometimes lead to unwanted self-selection, where certain types of respondents opt in to a survey and others opt out. If unsure about the impact on the research objectives of identifying the topic, the best approach would be to include topic-neutral language in the survey introduction (e.g. “calling to discuss current issues of interest to Canadians”).

### **1.3.3 Offer assurances of confidentiality.**

Assurances of confidentiality *can* allay concerns that potential respondents might have vis-à-vis survey participation. All surveys conducted by the federal government must contain privacy language, although the specific language included in survey introductions varies from department to department. While the specifics vary, privacy and confidentiality language should be appropriate to the survey, its objectives, and target population. The language used should not be officious or bureaucratic, nor very long or it can make people feel less comfortable taking part in the survey.

#### **Example: Confidentiality/Privacy Language**

Your participation in the survey is completely voluntary and will not affect any dealings you may have with the Government of Canada. Your privacy is protected by law.

Departments and agencies, in addition, should not request personal information from respondents that is not relevant or essential to the survey. If this information is essential to the survey analysis, explanations should be provided to respondents about why the information is important and how the data will be used (when necessary). This might include any demographic information not absolutely required for analytical purposes, such as racial background, religion, sexual orientation, that the respondent might view as sensitive.

### **1.3.4 Consider the use of incentives, where possible.**

There is a general consensus among survey researchers that incentives (monetary and non-monetary) are an effective way to increase the response rate of a study (Fahimi et al, 2006). Incentives are particularly useful in surveys where the response burden is high (i.e. exceptional effort is required on the part of the respondent).

**Incentives** present obvious logistical problems when conducting telephone surveys.

Where possible, the incentive needs to be given to respondents when they are first contacted to take part in survey research (Church, 1993). Compared to offering no incentive at all, incentives paid post-survey completion do not significantly improve response rates (Singer, et al., 2000). The drawbacks to incentives are that they present an additional cost, *may* increase the public's expectation for payment and induce perceptions of inequity (e.g. if used only to convert refusals), and *can* affect sample composition or responses to specific questions, with those receiving incentives potentially answering more positively. These concerns, especially those related to optics, are only amplified in the context of conducting research for the Government of Canada.

Despite these weaknesses, there are circumstances when incentives can be appropriate for Government of Canada telephone surveys. The use of incentives should always be weighed against the potential for bias due to nonresponse, the burden placed on the respondent, the extent to which the target population is low incidence (e.g. youth smokers ready to quit) or hard-to-reach (e.g. physicians), the complexity of the study (e.g. longitudinal studies, panels), cost savings (e.g. less expensive to offer incentives than to conduct large numbers of callbacks), and the overall research budget. If any of these factors are relevant, consider the possibility of incorporating an incentive strategy in the survey methodological design.

For special-audience research, the distribution of a summary of research highlights is a valuable and relatively common type of non-monetary incentive. Individuals taking part in such research tend to be stakeholders or other professionals who can benefit from, and attribute value to, the findings. Stakeholders are often interested in the outcome of the study to which they contributed, while other professionals see value in the competitive intelligence afforded them by a summary of the findings. Use of this form of incentive is appropriate and effective within the federal government context to increase response rates. Beyond sharing a summary of the research highlights, common incentives are monetary awards, gift certificates, and entries in prize draws. Regarding monetary incentives, some literature suggests that the incentive amount is less important to respondents than the fact that they receive an incentive (i.e. incentive needs only to be symbolic).

### **1.3.5 Reveal survey sponsorship.**

Revealing the sponsor of a survey can work to increase response rates depending on the legitimacy and public perceptions of the organization<sup>13</sup>. Research suggests that government-sponsored or conducted surveys achieve higher response rates than those of most other organizations (Heberlein and Baumgartner, 1978; Groves and Couper, 1998)<sup>14</sup>. As such, identifying the Government of

Canada or the department/agency sponsoring the survey can have a positive impact on the response rate. Except for instances when disclosing the sponsor will compromise the survey objectives (e.g. an awareness study), the practice should be to reveal sponsorship. The Government of Canada should be emphasized as the study sponsor before the name of the contractor conducting the research on behalf of the government. If the department or agency is not well known, the survey introduction should identify the Government of Canada, either with or without the department/agency name (e.g. ---, a department/agency of the Government of Canada).

**Caution:**

Identifying the sponsor of a survey can increase favourable opinion toward the sponsor. Attitudinal results from sponsor-identified surveys should not be compared to surveys where the sponsor is not identified (e.g. general omnibus surveys).

### **1.3.6 Offer a validation source.**

Government of Canada telephone surveys should offer potential respondents a validation source for the study, if requested. This should be the name and telephone number of a contact at the department/agency commissioning the research. Typically, this would be the POR buyer or end client who commissioned the research. The level of the individual is far less important than their knowledge of the POR study, including why it is being conducted, how individuals' contact information was obtained by the research firm, and how the data collected through the survey will be used by the government. Either one bilingual contact person or one for each official language is required. In addition, *all* surveys should be registered with the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association's (MRIA) Survey Registration System to allow Canadians to verify that a survey is legitimate. Respondents can call an MRIA 1-800 number to determine that the survey is legitimate and has been registered.

Another approach to validation that is very effective in some instances is for interviewers to refer potential respondents to a relevant 1-800 number in the government blue pages of their telephone directory (e.g. telephone number for the Employment Insurance Program or for the Canada Pension Plan/Old Age Security Program). This is particularly useful when surveying seniors because they are often the target of telephone scams and can be more cautious in dealing with unsolicited telephone calls. Naturally, the relevant government call centre needs to be informed about the survey and given information on how to respond

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<sup>13</sup> Research conducted by Beebe (2006) found that familiarity with a survey sponsor increases the likelihood of participation.

<sup>14</sup> Harris-Kojetin and Tucker (1999) found that during times when public opinion of the government was favourable, cooperation rates on a major government survey were higher.

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to such enquiries. This may not be practical for all POR telephone surveys; however, it is worth consideration depending on the scope of the research and the target audience.

A related approach is to offer respondents the telephone number of the media relations office of the sponsor department/agency.

### **1.3.7 Inform relevant government call centres or offices about survey.**

Related to the previous point, call centres and/or offices of the sponsoring department/agency should be informed, in advance, of the survey. Even when not used as a contact point for validating the survey that is offered to respondents by telephone interviewers, call centres/offices can receive calls from potential respondents asking them about the research. This is particularly relevant for client and stakeholder surveys. POR officials should notify relevant officials about the survey and provide them with information on to respond to enquiries. One way to handle the logistics would be to develop a brief Q&A document and give it to the media relations officer in the communications area of the department/agency undertaking the study.

## **STAGE 2: DATA COLLECTION**

### **2.0 ENSURE EFFECTIVE SAMPLE MANAGEMENT**

#### **RATIONALE**

**Good sample management is imperative to achieve a high response rate. If the sample is not worked thoroughly before it is retired, the response rate will suffer. A new sample can be added to achieve the target number of completed interviews, but this will decrease the response rate. In general, the response rate is the proportion of sample records attempted versus those who completed an interview.**

#### **BEST PRACTICES**

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##### **2.0.1 Hire a data collection firm that submits to recognized field audits.**

Most reputable data collection firms are **Corporate Gold Seal members** of the Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA) or, in Quebec, members of L'Association de l'Industrie de la Recherche Marketing et Sociale (AIRMS). Speak with the research supplier to determine whether the firm, or the data collection conducting fieldwork on behalf of the firm, are members of either association. This will not guarantee quality fieldwork, but it does offer greater insurance that professional and ethical standards of research practice are consistently met. The MRIA, for example, conducts regular independent audits of its Gold Seal members.

## **2.0.2 Ration sample resources.**

**The appropriate rationing of sample should be discussed with research suppliers.** It is tempting to add new sample so that interviewers can quickly achieve the target number of completed surveys. Efforts to contact hard-to-reach people are sometimes not as stringent as they could be in favour of completing interviews with easier-to-reach people. In practical terms, this means that fewer callbacks are attempted per sample record and the people invited to take part in the survey may only be those available at certain times of the day when calling is undertaken.

Any **new sample** added for the data collection *must not* invalidate the sample frame. Sample replicates, or small random samples drawn from the larger sample, can guard against invalidating the frame. Since each replicate is a miniature sample in itself, they can be added to the active cases, as needed, without concern that the sample will be skewed.

Sometimes it is not possible to ‘work the sample’ thoroughly because the field period is not long enough to accommodate this. The trade off, however, is lower response rates. The more telephone numbers that are attempted to obtain the required number of interviews, the lower the response rate.

**Time in field is a critical factor when it comes to achieving high response rates** ([see BP 1.0.5](#)). In addition to lower response rates, ‘burning’ through the sample can risk compromising the representativeness of the respondents. If some segments of the target population are not reached to take part in the survey, this increases the risk that nonrespondents might be systematically different from respondents. The result is a low response rate and the potential for nonresponse bias.

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**2.0.3 Accurately track the disposition of calls.**

A record of all call attempts to reach a potential respondent should be kept for all telephone surveys. This is often referred to as the call history or call disposition. This information is needed to accurately calculate the response rate at the completion of a project. Interviewers assign a code to the outcome of each call, including busy signals, not-in-service numbers, wrong numbers, etc. The MRIA standard record of contact for telephone surveys is:

| <b>MRIA Standard Record of Contact Format for Telephone Surveys</b>   |          |   |
|---|----------|---|
| <b>Disposition of Last Attempt</b>  | <b>#</b> | <b>Explanatory Notes</b>  |
| 1. Not in Service<br>2. Fax/Modem<br>3. Business/Residential  |          | Include list errors   |
| 4. Busy<br>5. Answering Machine<br>6. Call blocking device<br>7. No Answer<br>8. Language<br>9. Illness, Incapable<br>10. Selected/Eligible Resp Not Avail. |          | Includes outstanding call backs/appointments  |
| 11. Household Refusal<br><br>12. Respondent Refusal<br><br>13. Qualified Respondent Break Off   |          | Before respondent selected<br><br>Before answering all qualifying questions<br><br>Any termination after qualifying   |
| 14. Disqualified<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>15. Completed Interview   |          | Any disqualification of household or respondent during screening process. Includes quota filled if identified during screening. Does not include quota filled based on sample data.<br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br><br>Include any qualified completes that are rejected in post-edit. Where needed add sub-categories for rejects and in-tab sample. |

Tracking the dispositions of calls will not help to maximize response rates directly, but will ensure that the reasons for nonresponse are clearly identified. The accurate identification of nonresponse – non-contacts versus refusals – will provide the research supplier with the information needed to target nonresponders and take steps during data collection to try to contact hard-to-reach respondents.

## 2.1 TAKE EFFORTS TO MAXIMIZE CONTACT RATES

### RATIONALE

**Just as the design of questionnaires should incorporate features to encourage participation, the data collection should be executed in a way that increases the likelihood of reaching potential respondents. Contacting people is the first step to completing an interview.**

### BEST PRACTICES

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#### 2.1.1 Vary the call scheduling.

**Varying the call scheduling reduces call attempts and increases the likelihood of reaching a household** (Cunningham et al., 2003). Potential respondents have a greater likelihood of agreeing to be interviewed if it is convenient for them to do so. The practice of calling during the dinner hour to reach people at home should be balanced by the fact that some refuse to participate, in part, because these calls are intrusive. If the ideal time to reach people at home is also the same time of the day that they are the least likely to agree to participate, then alternative call times need serious consideration. This could be as simple as beginning calls earlier in the afternoon, perhaps at 3:00 p.m. (not 4:00 p.m.). A good contact rate is insufficient on its own. People must agree to participate in an interview.

Certain audiences are more likely to be reached at certain times of the day. For instance, seniors might be easier to reach using daytime calling, as would most occupational groups being called using work numbers. However, unemployed individuals might best be reached using a combination of daytime and evening calling, while the general public is generally best reached during evenings and on weekends. Maximizing response rates requires calling at times that are most suitable for the survey's target audience while still ensuring coverage across those specific times in order to maintain the representativeness of the sample.

#### 2.1.2 Offer flexible callbacks and appointments.

Potential respondents are busy and their participation in survey research is essential. When possible, therefore, **offer potential respondents flexible callbacks and interview appointments for all telephone surveys. This is an aspect of the data collection for discussion with the research supplier.** Making it as convenient as possible for an individual to take part in a survey can have a positive impact on the response rate. Someone might be willing to take part in the survey, but might not have the time to consider this when s/he receives the telephone call. Scheduling a callback at a suitable time might result in a completed interview – a step towards a higher response rate.

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Much like flexible callbacks, offering potential respondents the opportunity to schedule a time to conduct the telephone interview can have a positive impact on response rates. Appointments differ from flexible callbacks in that the intent of the first contact or initial telephone call is to schedule, not conduct the interview. In the case of senior-level executives, it is reasonable to assume that they are very busy people who may not handle their own telephone calls or time scheduling. Building the use of appointments into a survey of executives, for example, will help to make the survey as convenient as possible for these individuals. If you are able to reach these executives on the telephone, the likelihood of them being able to conduct the interview at that time is low. Moreover, if survey participation is solicited at an inconvenient time, a refusal is a more likely outcome than a general or specific callback. Telling these individuals that the purpose of this telephone call is to inform them of the survey, and to attempt to schedule a time that is suitable to conduct the interview is a much more effective approach. Not only does it address the fact that these are busy people, it also conveys to them the importance of their participation (i.e. you are someone we want to hear, so we are working around your schedule).

When using specific callbacks and appointments, it is essential that the interviewers abide by the callback commitments. Interviewers should call back at the designated date and time. If they don't, this might decrease the response rate as the respondent would have been expecting the call at that time. A missed appointment can reduce the credibility of the survey (and research firm) and can jeopardize the respondent's willingness to participate.

### **2.1.3 Ensure an adequate number of callbacks.**

The number of contacts attempted with potential respondents has a positive effect on response rates. The rationale is simple – the greater the number of calls, the greater the likelihood of contact. The actual number of callbacks will vary depending on the research design, budget and length of the field period available, but numerous attempts to contact an individual or household will reduce nonresponse.

Making effective use of callbacks is one of the most common and effective ways to increase response rates. **Under the current Standing Offer of the Government of Canada, eight (8) callbacks are required before a sample record is retired<sup>15</sup>.** This includes callbacks due to non-contact (e.g. no answer, busy) and contact (e.g. missed appointments, inconvenient time, selected respondent not home, etc.). Increasing the number of callbacks, up to a certain point (depending on the audience, time of year and other factors), can result in higher response rates. In addition, varying the times of day/days of the week when the callbacks happen can make them more effective because this increases the chances of making contact with people when they are home/in their offices.

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<sup>15</sup> Cunningham et al. (2003) found that the majority of completed interviews, refusals, and ineligible cases are established by the sixth or seventh call attempt.

#### **2.1.4 Schedule extra callbacks to households with an initial language barrier.**

Scheduling extra callbacks to a household with an initial language barrier may yield a completed interview. Depending on the target population and the survey topic, this can be a valuable practice to employ to help maximize response rates. A language barrier code is attributed (in the call history) to a record when the person who answers the telephone does not understand the interviewer in either official language. If the target population is 18-30 year olds, for example, it might be a good idea to call back records with a language barrier code. It might be that a young person lives in the household and by calling back at a different time of day or day of the week, the interviewer may reach the eligible respondent. In this way, these callback attempts may have a positive impact on response rates.

#### **2.1.5 Leave messages for some studies.**

Messages can be left for potential respondents, either to inform them about the survey or to invite them to call back for an interview. After a specific number of callback attempts that result in non-contact (i.e. no answer, busy, answering machine), it can be useful, in some instances, to leave a message informing potential respondents that a Government of Canada telephone survey is being conducted. This serves as advanced notice that they will be called back at a later time/date. Should this tactic be used for a survey, it is a good idea to draft a standard message for use by callers/interviewers. This will help to ensure that the appropriate information is conveyed to each potential respondent.

As a general rule, it is not effective to leave voice messages for telephone surveys conducted with the general public inviting potential respondents to call back to be interviewed (Sangster, 2003). Not surprisingly, few call back. However, this can work for some studies with stakeholder groups, where the potential respondents are motivated to participate in the survey for one reason or another. The value of leaving messages would be limited to special situations, and would generally only apply to telephone surveys with target audiences that have a vested interest in participating in a particular survey.

#### **2.1.6 Provide a 1-800 for studies with hard-to-reach respondents.**

The number of callback attempts can be expected to have a positive impact on the response rate for a study ([see BP 2.1.3](#)). However, for some difficult-to-reach audiences simply increasing the number of contact attempts likely will not help very much to maximize the response rate (e.g. transportation workers rarely in their office). In such cases, having a 1-800 telephone number in operation during the study will allow the potential respondent to call the data collection firm at a time that is convenient for them. The 1-800 line could be linked directly to the call centre supervisor who could route the call to an interviewer working on the study. This technique is useful when potential respondents have a vested interest of some kind to participate in the survey (e.g. monetary or other incentive, topic, etc.).

## 2.2 TAKE STEPS TO MINIMIZE REFUSALS & TERMINATIONS

### RATIONALE

**A well-designed questionnaire with an effective introduction is only part of the equation. Effective interviewers are a critical component of a high quality telephone survey. No matter how good the research instruments are, they must be in the hands of a capable, well-trained interviewer, with a professional telephone manner who is skilled at encouraging participation and preventing early terminations.**

### BEST PRACTICES

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#### 2.2.1 Ensure use of well-trained, effective interviewers.

Telephone interviewers need to be well-trained in order to encourage people to participate in surveys and to collect data accurately. They should be professional, friendly, and mature sounding when they speak on the telephone. This is critical to the success any of POR telephone survey. To ensure that the data collection firm has well-trained staff, look for field suppliers that offer interviewers an acceptable industry training program. Training should emphasize how to:

- Introduce themselves to potential respondents.
- Encourage participation appropriately, including dealing with reluctant respondents.
- Use voice intonation skills to sound more professional, confident and assertive.
- Avoid refusals. Refusal-aversion training provides interviewers with techniques, strategies, phrases, etc. to help create a dialogue with the respondent to understand why they are “not interested” and explore ways to gain cooperation.
- Read questions as worded and record responses accurately.
- Record open-ended responses verbatim.
- Probe for details/clarification effectively.
- Not lead respondents to answers.
- Accurately code the result of calls.
- Explain to potential respondents how their name and telephone was obtained for the research, and why they are being included in the study.

**Interviewer briefings should be provided for all telephone surveys** – both verbal briefings and, ideally, briefing notes with appropriate background information. This is different from the general training that interviewers receive, and is project-specific. The briefings would include background information on the topic, government program, etc. that is the subject of the survey, any special challenges that are anticipated, information on the target audience if relevant, and related issues. If the questionnaire is complex or

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requires specialized knowledge, instructions and information should be provided to interviewers that will assist them with this. Not only will this work to ensure data accuracy, it can also help to maximize response rates. If the interviewer is skilled at moving through the questionnaire, respondent terminations will be minimized since the burden on the respondent will be lessened.

For smaller samples of special-audience research, it is usually advisable to go with a research supplier's team of most experienced interviewers. Interviewers that are mature and experienced are better able to handle studies where the target population is elite and/or difficult-to-reach (e.g. physicians or executives), and where the survey topic is sensitive. Having fewer, but more experienced interviewers can help maximize the response rate because the interviewers will become very familiar with the study, something particularly important for senior/elite audiences, and will be focused on completing interviews.

### **2.2.2 Request monitoring of data collection at all times.**

**Look for a field supplier that monitors at least a portion of the interviews throughout the data collection.** This will help to ensure the quality of the interviews throughout the field period by keeping the interviewers striving for top performance. In addition, interviewers' interaction with potential respondents can have an impact on the response rate (e.g. not tailoring the initial script based on cues from the potential respondent might result in a refusal rather than a completed interview). Monitoring data collection can help determine under which circumstances interviewer behaviour influences nonresponse and potentially may affect nonresponse error (Lavrakas, 1993). Field suppliers that are Corporate members of MRIA are required under the Code of Conduct to validate by on-site or remote call monitoring a minimum of ten percent of interviews for each project (unless specified otherwise by the client).<sup>16</sup>

### **2.2.3 Monitor reasons for nonresponse during data collection.**

It is useful to monitor the progress of the fieldwork. Not only will this help to keep the study on target and on budget, reviewing the reasons for nonresponse can help the research supplier make any adjustments necessary to maximize response rates. If nonresponse is high due to non-contacts, special attention could be paid to the call scheduling (i.e. conduct callbacks at different times and days of the week) in an attempt to reach more potential respondents. Conversely, if the call disposition reveals that high nonresponse is due to refusals, efforts could be made to ensure that only the highest quality interviewers (i.e. those with the best interview completion rates) are working on the survey.

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<sup>16</sup> For information about what survey organizations do to monitor interviewing, Burks et al. (2006) provide a good discussion of the range of practices.

#### **2.2.4 Monitor level of nonresponse of different segments of target population.**

In addition to monitoring overall response rates during the fieldwork, it can be important to review the response rate for specific segments of the target population. High response rates do not necessarily reduce or eliminate the possibility of nonresponse error. While a high response rate may be achieved in a study, the results may not be confidently generalized to the full target population if nonrespondents vary substantively from respondents. Consider the example of a survey of self-employed individuals. To complete the interviews quickly, regional, age or gender distribution might be sacrificed. More careful, slower fieldwork would strive to conduct interviews in the appropriate proportions for key characteristics.

If working the survey sample only results in more responses from one segment of the target population and not others, a high response rate will be achieved at the possible expense of quality data. Low response rates from sub-groups of the target population might introduce nonresponse bias. If nonresponse is expected to be higher among certain sub-groups, these elements of the sample should be monitored closely in addition to overall nonresponse call dispositions (Statistics Canada, 2003).

#### **2.2.5 Attempt refusal conversions.**

Refusal conversions are an important and essential aspect of data collection for survey organizations. This practice involves an attempt to convert someone who has already said that he/she does not want to take part in a survey (or who terminated an interview) into a respondent. Done during a subsequent telephone call, converting refusals relies on senior, experienced interviewers calling back people who initially refused to be interviewed to try to persuade them to participate. Typically a modified introduction is used, one that acknowledges the potential respondent's earlier reluctance to take part in an interview. The time and day of refusal conversion callbacks are varied. In some cases, a refusal conversion can be supported by sending a letter to the non-respondents in the hopes of getting a reconsideration. This can be less intrusive, but still requires the careful use of language. This might not be possible depending on the length of the data collection period and the availability of mailing addresses.

**Refusal conversions:**

- ✓ Senior interviewers
- ✓ Specialized training
- ✓ Secondary intro

Use of refusal conversions should be handled with care, but this technique is effective in terms of increasing telephone survey response rates.<sup>17</sup> Not only can it turn a refusal into a complete, another call to a household after an initial refusal might reach someone other than the person who refused, and result in a completed interview. Depending on the department and agency sponsoring the POR survey (and the study topic), there may be heightened sensitivity around the practice of refusal conversions. The Government of Canada does not want to be, or seen to be, pressuring Canadians to participate in telephone

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: Triplett, T., Scheib, J. and Blair, J. (2001). Moreover, Curtin et al (2002) found that the proportion of refusal conversions in the final sample of a national telephone survey increased from 7.8% in 1979 to 15.1% in 2002. Together with other efforts (e.g. callbacks), these were required to maintain consistently high response rates over time.

surveys. In these cases, the use of refusal conversions should be weighed against the potential for nonresponse bias should certain segments of the target population not respond to requests for an interview.

## STAGE 3: ANALYSIS

### 3.0 ADDRESS SURVEY NONRESPONSE

#### RATIONALE

Response rates are best addressed during the design and data collection phases of research. During analysis, however, there are a number of Best Practices to be followed that can help account for nonresponse and guard against nonresponse bias. These efforts will not improve the response rate per se, but they will help to compensate for nonresponse and increase confidence in the data quality.

#### BEST PRACTICES

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##### 3.0.1 Compare response rates across sub-groups.

Compute and compare response rates on key sub-groups of the target population. This might include age, gender and region, for example, when conducting a survey of the general public. This method does not help determine the *extent* of nonresponse bias, but it can provide an indication of whether there might be nonresponse bias. If the response rates are quite similar across the sub-groups, there can be some assurance that nonresponse bias (should it exist) will be limited in its impact on the data. The problem with this approach is that there are other causes of nonresponse aside from such sub-group variables. In other words, it is unlikely that response propensity is affected only by the sub-group variables (Groves, forthcoming). Comparing these response rates is a good place start, but it should not take the place of other methods of addressing survey nonresponse.

##### 3.0.2 Weight survey data, where possible.

Statistical adjustment, or weighting by observable variables, is one of the most common approaches used to address survey nonresponse (Groves et al., 2001). Weighting the data can help the researcher ensure that the final results presented to the reader are representative of the target population – *where it can be assumed that no or little nonresponse bias exists*. With this method, the provincial, demographic, socio-economic and other descriptive parameters of the survey sample are weighted to account for nonrespondents. If a survey of the general public resulted in 30% of the responses coming from Ontario, weights could be applied so that these cases have the appropriate relative importance (i.e. represent 38% of the sample, which is Ontario's actual share of Canada's

population). A description of the weighting procedures and source of the weights should be included in the methodological section of the report to help to ensure that the survey can be replicated in the future.

Weighting is less effective in addressing bias that can result from nonresponse. Bias occurs when survey nonresponse results in differences between respondents and nonrespondents. To correct for nonresponse bias, researchers need to understand what factors affect the likelihood of an individual agreeing to an interview.<sup>18</sup> This is important because there can be systemic differences between responders and nonresponders, differences that extend beyond the observable variables of gender, income, region, etc., typically corrected for with weighting that is based on available demographic data.

A **source** often used for weighting purposes is **Statistics Canada demographic data** (e.g. region, education, income, gender, age and language). Statistics Canada demographic data can become dated, so it is a good idea to consider whether other sources of more current demographic data are available for weighting purposes. Regardless of the source, ensure the use of **valid external weights**. If the weights are derived from an unreliable source, weighting the data will not improve the survey data quality.

### 3.0.3 Compare respondents and nonrespondents.

Conduct post-data-collection nonresponse analyses, where possible, to compare the characteristics of respondents with nonrespondents. Reports that compare the attributes of these two groups enable the assessment of how different respondents are from nonrespondents based on demographic and/or other variables that are known. Any difference between the two is an indication of nonresponse bias. A few practical examples include:

**Nonresponse bias** is specific to each survey variable. It is important, then, to try to assess nonresponse bias on key survey variables, not just demographics available through Census data. As discussed with weighting above, if the sample composition closely matches the demographic distribution of Canadians, this does not necessarily suggest that there is no bias on other substantive, topic-related survey variables.

- **Use external sources.** External data sources may contain variables similar to key survey variables. The external data source is the benchmark against which the survey results can be compared for variations. When selecting a comparable survey, it is important to look for one with *very* high response rates to decrease the likelihood that the comparison source will contain nonresponse error. For example, if the survey measures Internet use, Statistics' Canada Household Internet Use Survey might provide a useful comparison source. Any difference related to frequency of Internet use between the survey and the other data source provides an estimate of overall bias.
- **Use available variables.** Rather than look for an external source to compare survey variables, consider comparing the final sample composition to key characteristics in

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<sup>18</sup> See Wang (2006) and Peress (2006) for promising research related to response propensity and nonresponse bias that warrants further investigation.

## *Best Practices: Improving Respondent Cooperation for Telephone Surveys*

the sample frame, or in a comparable source of administrative data. The difference between the two provides an estimate of nonresponse bias. For example, departments or agencies undertaking program evaluations or client satisfaction surveys might have administrative data that can be used to compare survey respondents and nonrespondents directly. If there is no information that can be used to compare respondents and nonrespondents, which is quite likely to be the case with a RDD survey of the general public, consider linking the telephone exchanges to postal codes. From the postal codes, socio-demographic information about households in the area can be obtained and then used to compare respondents and nonrespondents (e.g. Canada Post's GeoPost).

- **Observations during data collection:** Interviewers make observations about the sample units (respondents and nonrespondents). When observations correlate with key survey variables, they may be informative of potential nonresponse bias in survey variables. For instance, when determining why a program contributor might not have applied for the program benefits, asking interviewers to assess language and comprehension of all potential respondents contacted (using a short assessment tool created for that purpose) can help to determine if the impact of language barriers (i.e. inability to converse in English or French) is understated in the survey findings (by comparing the proportion of those rating poorly on this scale who took part in the survey vs. those who did not – i.e. are they underrepresented in the final sample pool).
- **Seed the sample:** Find a source with highly reliable characteristics related to key survey variables, and include some units with and without this characteristic in the sample. At the end of data collection, compute the response rates by characteristic – the seeded cases versus the main sample – to estimate response propensity. If the rates are similar, estimates correlated with the characteristic have small biases.

Depending on the amount and nature of the information known about units in the sample frame, this has the potential to be a strong indicator upon which to assess the reliability of survey data<sup>19</sup>. If there are few differences observed between the two groups – respondents and nonrespondents – the likelihood of biased data resulting from nonresponse is correspondingly low.

### **3.0.4 Compare 'Early' to 'Later' Responders.**

Another method to deal with nonresponse is to compare responses for 'early' and 'late' respondents. Late responders are people that require more effort to respond to a survey (e.g. more callbacks, incentives, refusal conversion). They are not people who completed an interview toward the end of the data collection period per se. The rationale behind this is the assumption that 'late' respondents might approximate nonrespondents to some

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<sup>19</sup> See Groves (Forthcoming) for a good discussion of the various methods available to researchers to test for nonresponse bias.

degree because if extra efforts to reach these people had not been undertaken they would have been nonresponders too. If a comparison of these two groups reveals no statistical differences across core measures, then the survey data can be generalized with more confidence. The weakness of this method is that it assumes nonrespondents are similar to those respondents who are difficult to reach. Since this assumption may not apply universally, this technique offers imprecise information about the existence of nonresponse bias.<sup>20</sup>

### **3.0.5 Conduct nonrespondent follow-ups.**

A key to dealing with nonresponse is knowing the extent to which it might have an impact on the data through the introduction of bias. One method used to quantify the difference between respondents and nonrespondents is to survey a sub-sample of nonrespondents when the fieldwork is complete. The responses from this sub-group can be compared to those of the respondent group. Typically, the full questionnaire is not used as the research instrument. Instead, a shorter version of the original questionnaire is administered, one that includes critical variables of interest to the department or agency. If no statistical differences are observed between the respondents and the sub-sample of nonrespondents across these key survey measures, the overall results can more confidently be considered accurate and generalizable to the target population.

The drawback to a nonrespondent follow-up is that it can be costly and it requires time, which is not always available to the researcher. The department or agency commissioning the telephone survey might not have the time or the financial resources to undertake this type of follow-up. It stands to reason that if the nonrespondents were difficult to reach during the fieldwork or refused to take part, they will be equally difficult to reach as part of a follow-up exercise and equally reluctant to participate. These follow-ups involve callbacks and/or a change of data collection mode, and may require the use of incentives or elite interviewers to persuade nonrespondents to complete an interview. The level of survey nonresponse must be weighed against the potential for nonresponse bias. If there is a reasonable concern that nonrespondents may be *systematically* different from respondents, surveying a sub-sample of nonrespondents may be necessary or valuable.

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<sup>20</sup> Teitler, Reichman, and Sprachman (2003) found that increasing efforts to reach difficult-to-contact respondents had little effect on reducing potential nonresponse error because these respondents were poor proxies for nonrespondents. As well, other studies have found that 'late responders' are not different enough to affect survey results (Gentry, 2006; Curtin et al., 2000). This is not to discount this technique altogether, but to suggest that it does not appear to be a strong means of determining whether nonresponse bias exists in survey data.

## STAGE 4: REPORTING

### 4.0 DOCUMENT THE RESPONSE RATE

#### RATIONALE

**To address the issue of response rates in a comprehensive way, they need to be measured and recorded over time in a consistent manner. While response rates are best addressed during the design and data collection phases of the study, ensuring that they are properly documented will help to track them over time.**

#### BEST PRACTICES

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##### **4.0.1 Ensure the research supplier provides the record of calls.**

The record of calls for telephone surveys should be provided by the research supplier upon completion of the fieldwork. This record of calls, known as the call disposition, provides the basis from which the refusal rate, the response rate and the incidence rate for a survey can be calculated ([see BP 2.0.3](#)). Beyond providing the input data for these calculations, the record of calls offers valuable insight into the amount of effort required to reach respondents, as well as the quality of the sample frame.

##### **4.0.2 Calculate the response rate using an approved method.**

**As a best practice, response rates should be collected and reported for all Government of Canada telephone surveys.** Ask the research supplier to use the standard MRIA approach to calculating response rates, endorsed by Statistics Canada ([see Introduction](#)). While the reporting of response rates has no impact on the current study per se, this will ensure that response rates can be monitored over time and across different surveys. The monitoring of response rates, including the refusal and contact rates, will help both survey sponsor organizations and research suppliers develop effective strategies to maximize respondent cooperation.

##### **4.0.3 Ensure the response rate is recorded in the final report.**

As a best practice, the methodology section of final reports for telephone surveys should contain the response rate and a description of how it was calculated. The only way to effectively track response rates over time is to ensure that they are reported consistently. This is now routinely included in reports for telephone survey work commissioned by the Government of Canada. Dealing with response rates, and their decline, requires track-able information that can be periodically assessed to provide direction for government POR.

In addition to including the overall response rate, it may be desirable to ask that the response rate for each sub-group be incorporated in the report. This might also be done for

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each callback attempt. Inclusion of the former provides some indication of the data reliability, and the latter offers insight into the performance of the sample frame (which can be valuable, especially for tracking studies).

## CONCLUSION

This set of Best Practices was developed to be used as a reference for Government of Canada POR telephone surveys. To this end, we hope that the document provides useful strategies to consider to help ensure that each survey achieves the maximum response rate possible. For more detailed information on the topics covered in the Best Practices, we invite readers to consult the bibliography on the following pages.

To conclude, keep the following in mind when using the Best Practices:

- ⇒ *Not all Best Practices will apply to all telephone surveys.*
- ⇒ *Emphasize design and data collection features to maximize response rates.*
- ⇒ *Some Best Practices will have a greater impact on response rates than others, in particular length of time in the field.*
- ⇒ *Adoption of as many Best Practices as possible within the context of a study can be expected to have a positive impact on the response rate.*
- ⇒ *Not incorporating the Best Practices appropriate to a study can have a negative effect on the response rate.*

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The reader may alternatively contact Public Works and Government Services Canada at 1-800-622-6232 or at [questions@pwgsc.gc.ca](mailto:questions@pwgsc.gc.ca)

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## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| AIRMS                | L'Association de l'Industrie de la Recherche Marketing et Sociale (AIRMS) is the POR industry association in Quebec that represents member survey research firms.   |
| Audience             | Used to refer to the population of interest or target population for a survey. <i>Also referred to as the population or universe.</i>   |
| Battery              | A series or group of survey questions that use the same response scale.   |
| Call attempts        | The number of times a potential respondent is contacted during data collection.   |
| Call disposition     | The code assigned to a sample record (i.e. potential respondent) each time a call is placed in an attempt to contact the individual (or household or company) during data collection. The disposition code describes the outcome of the call (e.g. busy, answering machine, no answer) and helps to maintain data collection quality. |
| Call history         | The full record of call attempts and disposition codes for each potential respondent or sample record.  |
| Callbacks            | The number of contacts attempted (i.e. telephone calls) with each potential respondent or sample record.  |
| Callbacks – general  | The disposition code assigned to a respondent or household that does not decline to take part in a survey, but asks to be called back at another <u>unspecified time</u> (presumably at a time or day that is more convenient).   |
| Callbacks – specific | The disposition code assigned to a respondent or household that does not decline to take part in the survey, but asks to be called back at <u>specific time</u> to conduct the interview (presumably at a time or day that is more convenient).   |
| Case                 | This is used to refer to a survey respondent. One cases equals one record or one respondents in the final sample.   |
| CATI                 | Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing or CATI is a software program that is used during data collection for telephone surveys. This program tracks the sample and allows the interviewer to data enter respondents' answers during the telephone call.   |

## ***GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CONT'D)***

|                     |  |
|---------------------|--|
| Census              | A census survey collects data from an entire population (not a sub-set: <i>See Sample</i> ). For instance, a census survey of all adult Canadians or all members of an association.  |
| Closed questions    | Survey questions that have a finite list of responses (e.g. scaled questions, agree/disagree).   |
| Confidence interval | This refers to the sampling error of a survey and quantifies the uncertainty about the resulting data. <i>Also referred to as the margin of error.</i>   |
| Confidence level    | This refers to the level of confidence in the margin of error (e.g. 19 times out of 20).   |
| Coverage error      | This is one of a number of sources of potential survey error that can affect data quality. It occurs when units of the target population are excluded, intentionally or unintentionally, from the sample frame.  |
| Estimate            | This is used to refer to survey data (e.g. 80% of respondents were satisfied with service quality). Surveys are conducted to estimate things, such as attitudes, behaviours, or knowledge, for the target audience or group of interest being investigated for the study.    |
| Fieldwork           | This refers to the collection of the data for the study (e.g. telephone calls for a telephone survey).   |
| Field supplier      | A research company that provides field services for data collection – e.g. CATI stations, interviewers, etc.   |
| Frequencies         | The top-line statistics for the survey. The count and/or percentage of the number of respondents that selected each response category for a question.  |
| Gatekeeper          | The person that monitors and/or facilitates access to another individual. In order to speak to a potential respondent, the ‘gatekeeper’ must grant access. Consider the example of a Deputy Minister – the gatekeeper would likely be this individual’s Executive Assistant. |
| Incentive           | Monetary or non-monetary compensation used to motivate potential respondents to participate in a survey.   |

## ***GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CONT'D)***

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Incidence rate    | The proportion of the target population that meets the survey eligibility requirements (e.g. proportion of disabled Canadians among the full population for a survey of disabled persons).   |
| Late responders   | This refers to people that require more effort to get them to respond to a survey (e.g. more callbacks, incentives, refusal conversion).   |
| Low incidence     | Populations that are defined by narrow specifications (e.g. youth aged 14-19 years ready to quit smoking), and so represent a small portion of the full population.  |
| Margin of error   | This refers to the sampling error of a survey and quantifies the uncertainty about the resulting data (i.e. 'the survey results can be considered accurate to within +/- X% points, 19 times out of 20'). <i>Also referred to as the confidence interval.</i>  |
| Measurement error | This is one of a number of sources of potential survey error that can affect data quality. It occurs when there are problems with the survey instrument – i.e., it does not measure what it is intended to measure for various reasons (e.g. the respondent does not understand or cannot answer the question).  |
| MRIA              | Marketing Research and Intelligence Association (MRIA) is the Canadian professional association that represents the survey research industry. MRIA was founded in 2004 after the merger of the Canadian Association of Market Research Organizations (CAMRO), the Canadian Survey Research Council (CSRC), and the Professional Marketing Research Society (PMRS). |
| Mixed-mode        | Mixed-mode surveys incorporate two or more methods of contacting and/or collecting data from potential respondents (e.g. combination of online and telephone surveys).   |
| Modules           | The different groups or sections of questions in a survey questionnaire (e.g. separate modules for telephone, Internet and in-person service in client satisfaction survey).   |
| Non-contact       | A person who cannot be reached during data collection for any number of reasons, including not at home, busy number, etc.  |

## ***GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CONT'D)***

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Nonrespondent        | A person who refuses to participate in the survey (i.e. refusal) or who cannot be reached during data collection (i.e. non-contact).  |
| Nonresponse          | Nonresponse occurs when a unit of the sample (i.e. a potential respondent) does not complete a survey. It comprises two groups: people who refuse to participate in the survey (i.e. refusals) and those who cannot be reached during data collection (i.e. non-contacts). Nonresponse can bias samples by making their composition substantively different from the target population. |
| Nonresponse bias     | Nonresponse bias occurs when survey nonresponse results in differences between respondents and nonrespondents.  |
| Nonresponse error    | Nonresponse error occurs when survey nonresponse biases the sample. The sample is biased because it no longer reflects the target population.   |
| Nonsampling error    | This refers to sources of error that are not related to sampling that can affect survey data quality (e.g. measurement, coverage, nonresponse, data processing/coding, etc.).   |
| Omnibus              | A regular, multi-purpose survey that explores issues of interest to its subscribers. This type of survey provide a cost- and time-effective way for organizations to obtain information.  |
| Open-ended questions | Survey questions that do <u>not</u> have a finite, pre-defined set of response categories from which the respondent can select a response (e.g. Question: Do you have any suggestions or feedback to offer to improve X?).  |
| Overcoverage         | This occurs when the sample frame includes segments <u>outside</u> the population to be surveyed. ( <i>See also: Undercoverage</i> )  |
| Population           | The target audience or group of interest to be investigated for the study (e.g. all Canadians, 18 years and older; men between the ages of 18-30 years who listen to the radio). <i>Also referred to as the universe.</i>   |
| POR                  | Public Opinion Research.  |
| Pre-test             | A set of interviews conducted in advance of the fieldwork to test the survey instrument and determine the actual length of the interview.   |

## ***GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CONT'D)***

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| Proxy respondents  | Data are collected from one person who acts as a proxy for another individual or the entire household.  |
| RDD                | Random digit dialling or RDD is a method of sampling that relies on the random connection of telephone numbers to working telephone exchanges that, among other things, enables unlisted telephone numbers to be contacted.   |
| Record of calls    | The final call disposition for the full sample. ( <i>See also: Call disposition</i> )   |
| Record of contact  | The record of the outcome of a call attempt for each potential respondent or sample record.   |
| Refusal            | A person who refuses to participate in a survey.  |
| Refusal conversion | An attempt to get a potential respondent who initially refused to participate in a survey to change his/her mind and complete the survey.   |
| Response rate      | The response rate refers to the percentage of a sample that responded to the survey. In general, this is calculated by dividing the number of responding units (i.e. those from whom data was collected) by the number of eligible units (i.e. the selected sample). Simply put, this is the number of people interviewed divided by the actual number of people sampled. |
| Sample             | The sub-set of the population from whom data will be collected for the study (e.g. company employees, association members).   |
| Sample frame       | This is used like a 'map' to guide the research in terms of who is 'eligible' to participate. From this, a sample list would be developed that constitutes the source from which survey respondents will be drawn.  |
| Sample list        | This is the list(s) from which the population to be surveyed will be drawn (e.g. telephone directories, client lists).  |
| Sample record      | This refers to each unit that is drawn from the sample frame (e.g. individual, telephone number).   |
| Sample replicates  | Small random samples drawn from the larger sample used for a study, which mirror the characteristics of the full sample.  |
| Sampling error     | This refers to the sampling error of a survey and quantifies the uncertainty about the resulting data. ( <i>See: Margin of error</i> )  |

## ***GLOSSARY OF TERMS (CONT'D)***

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
| Self-selection             | Self-selection occurs when using a self-administered method of data collection (e.g. mail, online) that relies on respondents selecting (or not selecting) themselves to complete the survey. This has the potential to introduce bias resulting from nonresponse. ( <i>See: Nonresponse, Nonresponse bias</i> ) |
| Semi-closed questions      | Survey questions that have a pre-coded list of responses for the interviewer to use to record responses. These lists are <u>not</u> read to the respondent, so sound – to the respondent – like open-ended questions. <i>Also known as pre-coded or quasi-open-ended questions.</i>                              |
| Skip pattern               | Skip pattern is a term used to refer to the structure of a survey in which subsequent questions asked of respondents vary depending upon earlier answers (e.g. question asked only of those who indicated that they used a certain program/service).   |
| Stakeholders               | Individuals or groups with an interest or stake in the activities of a specific organization. Stakeholders might not only be affected by the organization’s actions, they often can work to influence the direction of the organization.   |
| Sponsor                    | The organization that has commissioned the survey.   |
| Sub-groups                 | This refers to a sub-set of the population under study (e.g. men and women would each comprise a sub-group of a survey of the general public).   |
| Survey registration system | The Marketing Research and Intelligence Association’s (MRIA) Survey Registration System provides a way for the public to verify the legitimacy of a survey through use of a 1-800 number.  |
| Undercoverage              | This occurs when the sample frame does not include all segments of the population to be surveyed.  |
| Universe                   | The target audience or group of interest to be investigated for the study (e.g. all Canadians, 18 years and older; men between the ages of 18-30 years who listen to the radio). <i>Also referred to as the population.</i>  |
| Validation                 | The name and telephone number of an individual at the organization commissioning the research who can validate the survey (i.e. confirm its legitimacy).   |
| Weighting                  | Statistical adjustment that redistributes the survey responses to match the target population through the application of a set of ‘weights’ derived from the distribution of the target population.  |

## APPENDIX A: BEST PRACTICES CHECKLIST

This set of Best Practices is designed to help maximize response rates for Government of Canada telephone surveys. Use this checklist to guide decision-making at each stage of the research project. Remember, not all of these Best Practices will be appropriate or feasible for all POR studies. *However, it is the adoption of as many Best Practices as possible within the context of a study that can be expected to increase the response rate.*

|   |  |
|---|--|
| ✓ | <b>Research Design</b>   |
|   | <b>Choose an appropriate data collection method (BP 1.0)</b>                           |
|   | ▪ Select the best survey method. (BP 1.0.1)  |
|   | ▪ Consider alternative methods to contact hard-to-reach respondents. (BP 1.0.2)        |
|   | ▪ Consider allowing proxy responses. (BP 1.0.3)  |
|   | ▪ Collect the data at the most appropriate time of year. (BP 1.0.4)                    |
|   | ▪ Allow adequate time to collect the data. 1.0.5                                       |
|   | <b>Ensure adequate population coverage (BP 1.1)</b>                                    |
|   | ▪ Define the research population. (BP 1.1.1)   |
|   | ▪ Select an adequate sample size. (BP 1.1.2)   |
|   | ▪ Reduce coverage error. (BP 1.1.3)  |
|   | <b>Minimize respondent burden (BP 1.2)</b>   |
|   | ▪ Keep the length of the interview as short as possible. (BP 1.2.1)                    |
|   | ▪ Design a well-structured questionnaire. (BP 1.2.2)                                   |
|   | ▪ Review the translated questionnaire. (BP 1.2.3)                                      |
|   | ▪ Pre-test the questionnaire. (BP 1.2.4)   |
|   | <b>Incorporate methods to encourage participation (BP 1.3)</b>                         |
|   | ▪ Notify potential respondents in advance of the fieldwork, where possible. (BP 1.3.1) |
|   | ▪ Use effective survey introductions. (BP 1.3.2)                                       |
|   | ▪ Offer assurances of confidentiality. (BP 1.3.3)                                      |
|   | ▪ Consider the use of incentives, where possible. (BP 1.3.4)                           |
|   | ▪ Reveal survey sponsorship. (BP 1.3.5)  |
|   | ▪ Offer a validation source. (BP 1.3.6)  |
|   | ▪ Inform relevant government call centres or offices about survey. (BP 1.3.7)          |
| ✓ | <b>Data Collection</b>   |
|   | <b>Ensure Effective sample management (BP 2.0)</b>                                     |
|   | ▪ Hire a data collection firm that undertakes field audits. (BP 2.0.1)                 |
|   | ▪ Ration sample resources. (BP 2.0.2)  |

***BEST PRACTICES: CHECKLIST (CONT'D)***

|   |   |
|---|---|
| ✓ | <b>Data Collection (cont'd)</b>   |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Accurately track the disposition of calls. (BP 2.0.3)</li> </ul>   |
|   | <b>Take efforts to maximize contact rates (BP 2.1)</b>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Vary the call scheduling. (BP 2.1.1)</li> <li>▪ Offer flexible callbacks and appointments. (BP 2.1.2)</li> <li>▪ Ensure an adequate number of callbacks. (BP 2.1.3)</li> <li>▪ Schedule extra callbacks to households with an initial language barrier. (BP 2.1.4)</li> <li>▪ Leave messages for some studies. (BP 2.1.5)</li> <li>▪ Provide a 1-800 for studies with hard-to-reach respondents. (BP 2.1.6)</li> </ul> |
|   | <b>Take steps to minimize refusals &amp; terminations (BP 2.2)</b>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure use of well-trained, effective interviewers. (BP 2.2.1)</li> <li>▪ Request monitoring of data collection at all times. (BP 2.2.2)</li> <li>▪ Monitor reasons for nonresponse during data collection. (BP 2.2.3)</li> <li>▪ Monitor level of nonresponse of different segments of target population. (BP 2.2.4)</li> <li>▪ Attempt refusal conversions. (BP 2.2.5)</li> </ul>                                    |
| ✓ | <b>Analysis</b>   |
|   | <b>Address Survey Nonresponse (BP 3.0)</b>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Compare response rates across sub-groups. (BP 3.0.1)</li> <li>▪ Weight survey data, where possible. (BP 3.0.2)</li> <li>▪ Compare respondents and nonrespondents. (BP 3.0.3)</li> <li>▪ Conduct nonrespondent follow-ups. (BP 3.0.4)</li> <li>▪ Compare 'Early' to 'Later' Responders. (BP 3.0.5)</li> </ul>   |
| ✓ | <b>Reporting</b>  |
|   | <b>Document the response rate (BP 4.0)</b>  |
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure the research supplier provides the record of calls. (BP 4.0.1)</li> <li>▪ Calculate the response rate using an approved method. (BP 4.0.2)</li> <li>▪ Ensure the response rate is recorded in the final report. (BP 4.0.3)</li> </ul>   |

## **APPENDIX B: RELATIVE IMPACT OF BEST PRACTICES ON RESPONSE RATES**

Just as not all of the Best Practices will apply to all telephone surveys, each Best Practice is not equal in terms of its impact on response rates. Some of the Best Practices will have a greater impact on maximizing response rates than others. For example, response rates are best addressed during the design and data collection phases of a study; efforts undertaken during analysis and reporting will do nothing *directly* to improve response rates. In addition, it is important to remember that none of the Best Practices on its own can be expected to have a significant impact on response rates. Rather, it is the adoption of as many Best Practices as possible within the context of a study that can be expected to increase the response rate. Conversely, not incorporating the Best Practices appropriate to a study *can* have a negative effect on the response rate.

Given the differential impact of the Best Practices, and the unique constraints of budget and time for each POR telephone survey, it might be necessary to make trade-offs when designing research. Below is a guide to the relative (approximate) impact of the Best Practices on response rates to help inform this process.

| <b>RESEARCH DESIGN</b>   | <b>Impact</b> |
|--|---------------|
| <b>Choose an appropriate data collection method (BP 1.0)</b>                           |               |
| ▪ Select the best survey method. (BP 1.0.1)  | <b>High</b>   |
| ▪ Consider alternative methods to contact hard-to-reach respondents. (BP 1.0.2)        | <b>High</b>   |
| ▪ Consider allowing proxy responses. (BP 1.0.3)  | <b>Low</b>    |
| ▪ Collect the data at the most appropriate time of year. (BP 1.0.4)                    | <b>Medium</b> |
| ▪ Allow adequate time to collect the data. (BP 1.0.5)                                  | <b>High</b>   |
| <b>Ensure adequate population coverage (BP 1.1)</b>                                    |               |
| ▪ Define the research population. (BP 1.1.1)   | <b>Medium</b> |
| ▪ Select an adequate sample size. (BP 1.1.2)   | <b>Low</b>    |
| ▪ Reduce coverage error. (BP 1.1.3)  | <b>Low</b>    |
| <b>Minimize respondent burden (BP 1.2)</b>   |               |
| ▪ Keep the length of the interview as short as possible. (BP 1.2.1)                    | <b>High</b>   |
| ▪ Design a well-structured questionnaire. (BP 1.2.2)                                   | <b>Medium</b> |
| ▪ Review the translated questionnaire. (BP 1.2.3)                                      | <b>Medium</b> |
| ▪ Pre-test the questionnaire. (BP 1.2.4)   | <b>Medium</b> |
| <b>Incorporate methods to encourage participation (BP 1.3)</b>                         |               |
| ▪ Notify potential respondents in advance of the fieldwork, where possible. (BP 1.3.1) | <b>Medium</b> |
| ▪ Use effective survey introductions. (BP 1.3.2)                                       | <b>High</b>   |
| ▪ Offer assurances of confidentiality. (BP 1.3.3)                                      | <b>Low</b>    |

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|   |        |
|---|--------|
| <b>RESEARCH DESIGN (cont'd)</b>   |        |
| ▪ Consider the use of incentives, where possible. (BP 1.3.4)                          | High   |
| ▪ Reveal survey sponsorship. (BP 1.3.5)   | High   |
| ▪ Offer a validation source. (BP 1.3.6)   | Medium |
| ▪ Inform relevant government call centres or offices about survey. (BP 1.3.7)         | Low    |
| <b>DATA COLLECTION</b>  |        |
| <b>Ensure Effective sample management (BP 2.0)</b>                                    |        |
| ▪ Hire a data collection firm that undertakes field audits. (BP 2.0.1)                | Medium |
| ▪ Ration sample resources. (BP 2.0.2)   | Medium |
| ▪ Accurately track the disposition of calls. (BP 2.0.3)                               | Low    |
| <b>Take efforts to maximize contact rates (BP 2.1)</b>                                |        |
| ▪ Vary the call scheduling. (BP 2.1.1)  | High   |
| ▪ Offer flexible callbacks and appointments. (BP 2.1.2)                               | Medium |
| ▪ Ensure an adequate number of callbacks. (BP 2.1.3)                                  | High   |
| ▪ Schedule extra callbacks to households with an initial language barrier. (BP 2.1.4) | Low    |
| ▪ Leave messages for some studies. (BP 2.1.5)   | Medium |
| ▪ Provide a 1-800 for studies with hard-to-reach respondents. (BP 2.1.6)              | Medium |
| <b>Take steps to minimize refusals &amp; terminations (BP 2.2)</b>                    |        |
| ▪ Ensure use of well-trained, effective interviewers. (BP 2.2.1)                      | High   |
| ▪ Request monitoring of data collection at all times. (BP 2.2.2)                      | Medium |
| ▪ Monitor reasons for nonresponse during data collection. (BP 2.2.3)                  | Low    |
| ▪ Monitor level of nonresponse of different segments of target population. (BP 2.2.4) | Low    |
| ▪ Attempt refusal conversions. (BP 2.2.5)   | High   |
| <b>ANALYSIS</b>   |        |
| <b>Address Survey Nonresponse (BP 3.0)</b>  |        |
| ▪ Compare response rates across sub-groups. (BP 3.0.1)                                | Low    |
| ▪ Weight survey data, where possible. (BP 3.0.2)                                      | Low    |
| ▪ Compare respondents and nonrespondents. (BP 3.0.3)                                  | Low    |
| ▪ Conduct nonrespondent follow-ups. (BP 3.0.4)  | Low    |
| ▪ Compare 'Early' to 'Later' Responders. (BP 3.0.5)                                   | Low    |
| <b>REPORTING</b>  |        |
| <b>Document the response rate (BP 4.0)</b>  |        |
| ▪ Ensure the research supplier provides the record of calls. (BP 4.0.1)               | Low    |
| ▪ Calculate the response rate using an approved method. (BP 4.0.2)                    | Low    |
| ▪ Ensure the response rate is recorded in the final report. (BP 4.0.3)                | Low    |

## APPENDIX C: METHODOLOGY

The development of this set of Best Practices involved undertaking a comprehensive review of relevant literature, contacting industry associations and research institutes, and conducting a series of consultative interviews and/or correspondence with POR buyers within the Government of Canada, top field suppliers to the federal government, and key academics in Canada and the United States with expertise related to survey response rates. Below is a detailed description of the activities undertaken in support and validation of the Best Practices.

### Literature Review

The literature review covered a range of resources, including academia specializing in public opinion research and response rates. The review concentrated on research material on how to maximize response rates for telephone surveys, including identification of best practices, standards, and guidelines. In terms of timeframe, the literature review focused on research undertaken in the past 10 years, particularly in the past five years. As well, the review included:

- A wide variety of articles and studies on response rates and nonresponse bias were obtained by searching the collections of major journals and publications. The types of articles found covered topics including, but not limited to, current response rates, ways to improve response rates, and issues related to and debates on nonresponse bias. Journals consulted include, among others, *Public Opinion Quarterly* and the *Journal of Official Statistics*, which were the most useful in terms of relevant content.
- Reviewing past research papers and presentations given at industry and academic conferences dealing with public opinion and/or marketing research. Of specific importance were the annual American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) conferences. A large number of conferences, summits, symposia, and workshops have been held in the area of statistical methodology, with some specifically devoted to response rates and the impact of nonresponse. Conferences that resulted in numerous presentations or papers on the subject included the following:
  - MRIA's ASCENT 2006 Conference – held in Calgary, Alberta in June 2006.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on Telephone Survey Methodology – held in Miami, Florida in January 2006.
  - International Conference in Survey Non-Response – held in Portland, Oregon in October 1999. The conference was organized by a collection of professional organizations – American Statistical Association (ASA), American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR), Council of American Survey Research Organizations (CASRO), etc. An edited collection of articles resulted from this conference – *Survey Nonresponse* – which includes articles on topics such as perspectives on non-response, impacts of survey design on non-response, and non-response in diverse types of surveys, among others.

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- International Workshop on Household Survey Nonresponse – held on an annual basis since 1990 (not held in 1999 due to International Conference above). An overview of the papers presented at some of the conferences was available on-line.
- The U.S. Federal Committee on Statistical Methodology Research has held an annual conference over the past few years on these and other related issues. Again, conference proceedings and papers, etc., are available online.
- The Statistics Canada Symposium 2001 – Achieving Data Quality in a Statistical Agency: A Methodological Perspective. This included a number of presentations related to response rates and non-response. Again, related papers, etc., are available on the web.
- Contacting industry and professional associations to obtain potential resource material.
- Focusing library/database/online searches on universities and research institutes known to have significant public opinion research collections or instruction.

### Consultations

Three different groups of stakeholders were consulted to validate and strengthen the Best Practices. The consultation took place from April to July 2006. Those consulted were able to provide feedback in one of two ways – either through a telephone interview (see Appendix B for the discussion guide) or by providing comments directly in the draft document. Stakeholders included:

- *GoC POR buyers*: Feedback was received from eight federal departments/agencies, often including multiple individuals within a department/agency. Individuals were drawn from departments/agencies that are large-volume users of telephone surveys and that conduct such surveys with a considerable variety of target audiences.
- *Top field suppliers*: Feedback was received from 10 top suppliers to the federal government. This included both full service companies and field-only companies that do a high volume of telephone surveys for GoC departments and agencies.
- *Key academics*: Feedback was received from eight academics with expertise related to survey response rates. These interviews included methodological experts from both Statistics Canada and the Statistical Programs and Standards of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the United States.

The consultations resulted in many good suggestions to help strengthen the Best Practices, but overall the draft document was well received by stakeholders. Feedback was incorporated in the final version of the Best Practices.

## **APPENDIX D: KEY-INFORMANT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

- Initial contact:
  1. Obtain agreement to participate in interview.
  2. Email/fax discussion guide and Best Practices documents.
  3. Schedule time for interview.
  
- Subsequent contact:
  - Determine if person is available for interview.
  - If not available, schedule for another time.
  - Interview would take approximately 40 minutes.
  - Note that responses are confidential.
  - Mention that name/organization to be included on a list of stakeholders consulted if participant agrees – encourage this.
  - Record audience type, name, position, and telephone number.

CONFIRM THAT PARTICIPANT HAS REVIEWED BEST PRACTICES DOCUMENTS IN ADVANCE OF THE INTERVIEW. IF NOT, RESCHEDULE INTERVIEW. ASK PARTICIPANT TO HAVE THE MATERIALS WITH HIM/HER DURING THE INTERVIEW.

### **Introduction/Context**

KEEP THIS SECTION BRIEF.

#### ASK ACADEMICS:

I'd like to begin by asking a few questions about your research interests and activities.

1. What are your current areas of research interest?
2. Can you briefly describe your research or activities in the area of response rates, particularly as they relate to telephone surveys? What is the focus of your work – improving response rates, nonresponse bias, etc.?

Probe: - experimental research  
- key findings; issues to consider  
- hands-on involvement with telephone surveys

#### ASK GOVERNMENT OF CANADA POR BUYERS:

I'd like to begin by asking a few questions about you and your department.

3. Can you briefly describe your involvement in public opinion research (POR)?

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Probe: - length of time  
- role/function/type of involvement/clients

4. What type of POR does your department commission?

Probe: - number/volume of research projects  
- qualitative vs. quantitative (proportion that are telephone surveys)

### ASK RESEARCH SUPPLIERS:

I'd like to begin by asking a few questions about you and your research firm.

5. Can you briefly describe your position and responsibilities?

Probe: - length of time  
- role/function/type of involvement

6. What's your experience with quantitative research? Has your company done research on response rates or put in place best practices to increase response rates for telephone surveys?

Probe: - extent of field experience – in-house vs. contracted  
- experience vis-à-vis response rates

### **Issues Related to Response Rates**

7. In your view, what are the most important issues or challenges facing the industry in terms of response rates? Any others?

8. Thinking about the surveys that you do, do you set targets for response rates for telephone surveys? If not, why not? If so, what does this look like?

9. Do you take any measures to maximize response rates for telephone surveys? If so, what measures are taken? How effective are they in terms of achieving higher response rates?

### **Overall Perceptions of Draft Best Practices**

We sent you two documents that present draft Best Practices for telephone surveys – one is a summary checklist, the other is a more detailed reference document on the Best Practices. I'd like to ask you a few general questions about these documents. Please keep in mind the objective, which is to put in place the best, most complete set of Best Practices that we can that are appropriate and practical for federal government telephone surveys, in a real-world environment where budgets are limited, as are timeframes to do the research.

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10. What's your overall impression of the draft Best Practices documents? Why do you say that?
11. In your view, are these the types of tools that will help to maximize response rates for Government of Canada telephone surveys? If not, why not?
12. What about the format of the documents – is the information presented in a way that is effective? If not, how could this be improved?
13. These Best Practices are designed for government officials who work in the area of public opinion research. Do you think the information is appropriate and easy to understand? If not, what changes are needed to make it easier to use?

### **Assessment of Draft Best Practices**

As you know, the Best Practices documents are organized according to the stages of research. I would like to discuss the set of practices for each research stage.

14. Overall, what's your impression of the set of Best Practices in Stage 1: Research Design? Why do you say that?
15. Are these the most important measures to increase response rates for this stage of the research? If not, what's missing? Anything else?

Probe: - additional Best Practices  
- info/advise on how to implement it  
- info on rationale for it

16. Was the information easy to understand? If not, what was hard to understand or unclear?
17. Was the information easy to follow? That is, do the Best Practices link together in a logical, coherent way? If not, how could this be improved?
18. Do you have any suggestions to improve the set of Best Practices in this section?

**REPEAT QUESTIONS FOR EACH OF THE 4 STAGES.**

### **Effectiveness of Draft Best Practices**

19. Overall, how effective do you think these Best Practices will be in terms of maximizing response rates for Government of Canada telephone surveys? Why do you say that? How could they be made more effective?
20. Do you have any concerns about the adoption of these Best Practices? Are they feasible and appropriate for the federal government context? If not, why not?

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21. In your view, what might impede or limit the use of these Best Practices for federal government telephone surveys? How could this be overcome?

22. And what would facilitate or encourage their use?

### **Conclusion**

23. Do you have any other recommendations for how response rates could be improved for Government of Canada telephone surveys? Anything else?

24. Do you have any final comments or suggestions about anything we have discussed?

**THANK PARTICIPANTS.**