

Tip #2

INCENTIVES AND EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

To incent or not to incent – that is the question (with apologies to William Shakespeare!). The issue of whether or not to use incentives to boost participation in employee surveys comes up regularly. Inevitably, somebody suggests encouraging managers to tell their employees that there will be a company-provided celebration (probably the most common is a pizza party or other type of lunch) for any department that can boast 100% participation in the survey. Other organizations set up “contests” where departments vie to see which can achieve the highest participation – again, with some sort of company-sponsored prize going to the winner(s). A few have attempted to enter individual participants into drawings, often with multiple prizes.

So, do incentives work? Well, in some cases they do. In fact, a lot of research has been done as to the effectiveness of using incentives with mailed surveys. Researchers can tell you how much money will get the best response, whether you should send the incentive with the survey or promise it as a reward post-survey, and whether material incentives like pens work as well as financial incentives. The problem is that the majority of this research deals with consumers or customers, not employees. And there are some strong differences between a generally disinterested, random population sample and the people who work for you.

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EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT

The average consumer or customer has no real vested interest in the results of most surveys. They respond only if they are somehow emotionally invested in the result. If the local transit authority sends you a survey asking about increasing bus service – but you don't ride the bus – you might not respond because it doesn't concern you. A researcher conducting a national study may have even less impact on you directly (at least the bus company was local!). So in order to get consumers more invested and improve the likelihood of their responding, incentives are used.

A number of theories rooted in social psychology have been used to explain why incentives are effective. The basic idea is that individuals seek a balance between their own inputs and the outputs they receive. When the two are out of balance, people tend to feel a sense of tension and behave in ways that will reduce that tension. By including an incentive along with a survey, tension is produced – in the form of guilt – among recipients, who feel awkward about accepting something and returning nothing. And so they dutifully send in their surveys.

This works well in consumer research, but most employees have a different view. Many focus on the **ethics** of the situation. They are insulted by the offer of an incentive to participate in a survey designed around issues in which they DO have a vested interest; it strikes them as condescending. One employee likened his company's offer of a prize drawing to being offered a “bribe.” Some felt that the company was deliberately

courting positive ratings by trying to pay people to participate.

A second response focuses on the **voluntary nature** of employee surveys. Organizations know that forcing people to participate can negatively affect their ratings; this is one reason why companies look for ways to improve participation using incentives. However, the very act of offering an incentive can be perceived as a form of coercion.

The bottom line is that employees are less interested in receiving a dollar for completing a survey than they are with you **acting** on their responses.

PRACTICALITY

There are also practical reasons for not using incentives with employee surveys. If you're using post-survey incentives, how do you maintain anonymity? If you have to verify that someone submitted an online survey or returned a paper survey in order to enter them into a drawing or give them a trinket, you have basically announced to your employee population that you know who took the survey and who did not. This goes against one of the basic rules of employee surveying.

If you use team incentives rather than individual ones, you will find resentment as some groups "win" and others "lose." There will be a tendency among the losing groups to attempt to find out who was responsible for their "loss" so they can lay blame. There is also the practical cost (in money and time) when multiple groups achieve their goals.

You could try pre-survey incentives (market researchers believe they work better than post-survey incentives). But in order for this to work, you need to make sure that everyone receives the incentive. This is

easier to do if you are using paper surveys; one organization included a complimentary pen in each survey packet so that people did not have to "search" for something to use in order to fill out the survey. If you are doing online surveying, it becomes trickier to ensure equal distribution but it can be done. Of course, if you are part of a large organization, this can come to a fairly substantial upfront investment. And there are no guarantees that the incentive will improve your response rate, given the issues already mentioned.

DOES ANYTHING WORK?

If you do want to try using incentives to improve your response rate, here are some things to keep in mind.

- **Do not make participation in the survey a competition.** Forget about individual winners or rewarding teams. Set a company-wide goal for response. An individual who chooses not to participate will feel less vulnerable to coercion.
- **Similarly, choose a company-wide incentive.** Make it meaningful to employees and feasible for the organization. One company routinely selects a charitable cause every year to which they donate if they achieve their participation goal. They have found that employees are less likely to view this type of incentive as a bribe, since it doesn't benefit employees directly.
- **Communicate the incentive plan often and well.** Rumors often arise around who is eligible and how response rates are calculated. Be sure you have consistent, fair rules.

Finally, don't rely on your incentive to get you the response you desire. There are better ways to improve the response rate on your employee survey.