

Recruiting Farmers: Low-Cost and Costly Ways to Increase Farmer Response Rates

Step 1 of getting an agri-environmental program going is recruiting participants. We tested different recruitment strategies and evaluated their cost effectiveness.

Background

How can we design recruitment approaches so that farmers and landowners want to participate in programs and surveys? In prior Behavioral Insight Briefs, we described how to design programs for maximum effectiveness (for example [#8 - Ag-E MINDSPACE](#)) and how to test new program designs (for example [#6 - Test, Learn, Adapt](#)). In this Brief, we address the first step of getting a program going: recruitment. Providing economic incentives for participation is an effective way to boost recruitment numbers. Yet other less expensive strategies can also be effective. CBEAR tested some of these strategies in a series of large-scale field experiments. Here, we describe the strategies that worked best, and the strategies that are best avoided. The figures below illustrate the percent increase in response and the additional cost per respondent for each strategy.

Low-cost and Effective

1. Reminders. We all can relate to how helpful reminders can be in our daily lives. Reminders are also an effective way to boost farmer response rates. In a survey with almost 1,000 farmers, **producers who received a reminder were 7 times more likely to participate than producers that did not receive a reminder.** For more evidence, see this [USDA experiment](#).

2. The Messenger. How people respond to new information can vary depending on the source of the information. Selecting the right messenger can be an inexpensive way to boost recruitment rates. In an experiment with almost 12,000 producers, **recruitment was 50% higher when the messenger was a well-known university rather than a less widely known agricultural research center.**

Expensive but Effective

1. Larger monetary incentives. Money boosts recruitment rates, but how much to pay? In experiments with almost 20,000 farmers, increasing the payment from \$0 to \$50 raised recruitment rates by 60%, and increasing from \$25 to \$100 boosted recruitment rates by 64%. On the other hand, going from \$50 to \$75 had no effect on participation.

2. More credible payments. In the same experiments, including a Visa card in the invitation increased recruitment rates by 76% (payment could be loaded on card after participation).

Not Worth the Cost

1. Messaging. Although essentially costless, adjusting the message in a one-time mailing often does not have important impacts on response rates. We have tested competing theories about outreach to farmers. Contrary to conventional wisdom, **we found that one-time messaging had no significant impact on recruitment.** For example, we find no significant differences in recruitment among a private economic message (“You can save money”), a public economic message (“We need your help”), and a public environmental

message (“decrease damage from hogs”). (See also [#4- Climate Change Mitigation Outreach Experiment](#)).

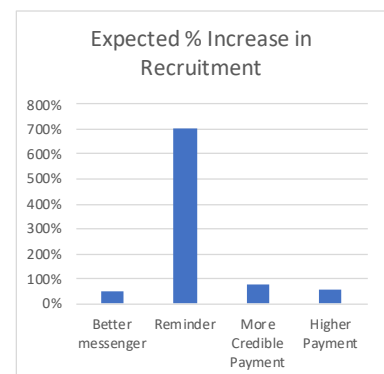
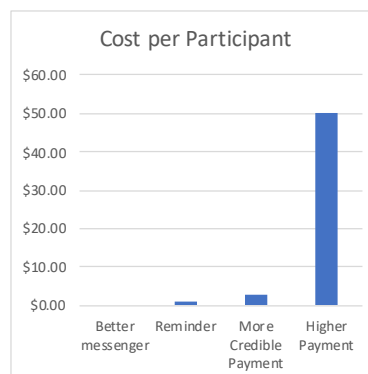
2. Emails. We found farmers are not very responsive to email recruitment messages. Using email, we recruited from a group of 5,000 farmers. None responded.

Testing Ideas

How much impact will these behavioral insights have in your program? This is an important question, and careful testing with randomized controlled trials will give you the answer. Using this approach, we can design evidence-based programs with greater levels of participation, participant satisfaction, and improved environmental outcomes.

Where to Begin

Begin with CBEAR of course! We are here to help design evidence-based programs and to test them to ensure their effectiveness. You can learn more by reading our articles, including “Challenges in Recruiting U.S. Farmers for Policy-Relevant Economic Field Experiments” which was published in *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* in 2020 (Early online view).¹ You can find a copy of it [here](#).



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