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FROM EXPERIMENTATION TO IMPLEMENTATION: PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER TO FORM A COHESIVE CONTACT STRATEGY FOR THE U.S. ECONOMIC CENSUS

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Abstract

The U.S. Census Bureau conducts a mandatory, self-administered Economic Census every 5 years, collecting detailed financial data from approximately 4 million business establishments. Data are used by businesses, policymakers, local communities, and researchers for economic development, business decisions, and strategic planning, and provide key source data for the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and other indicators of economic performance.

The Census Bureau undertook a major re-engineering effort to modernize the 2017 Economic Census, including implementation of 100% Web data collection, adding a layer of risk to ensuring adequate response rates. Therefore, to aid development of an effective communication plan, we conducted several randomized experiments to test alternative contact strategies.

Since the Economic Census is an infrequent collection with heavy response burden, it was infeasible to conduct one or more census-like pilot tests to investigate alternatives, nor even to test a complete communication strategy from beginning to end. Instead, we tested one or more components by incorporating experiments into the production collection of several annual or sub-annual surveys. These experiments tested options from the following general approaches:

- Variations in the type, timing, and/or sequence of contacts
- Optimal targeting of escalation techniques under adaptive design scenarios
- Envelope appearance and labeling
- Alternative motivational messages

Experimental results indicated individual components to use or avoid, along with associated circumstances. Although tested separately, it was impractical to consider any of these techniques to stand alone. While this presentation will briefly describe the experimental findings, its focus will demonstrate how these results, along with other empirical evidence of survey response patterns, were woven together, under practical constraints, to form an evidence-based comprehensive, integrated data collection strategy for the 2017 U.S. Economic Census.



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