



Qualification Form Prepopulating and Controlled Circulation Quality: Research, Facts and Fallacies

Executive Summary

After extensive trial studies in numerous B-to-B markets, BPA member publishers, advertisers, agencies and associate members (including telemarketers, fulfillment bureaus and broadcast fax companies) concluded that allowing publishers to prepopulate requalification forms with subscribers' previously provided demographic data *would compromise the accuracy and validity of that data and undermine circulation quality.*

The only exception found was use of pre-population as restricted to single-response questions, and with the requirement that the recipient also confirm each of the prepopulated answers.

Further, the trial studies clearly demonstrated that *prepopulating does not increase response rates for requalification forms, whether Web, email, written or telecommunication.*

Based on the research and resulting recommendations of BPA's circulation and other advisory committees, in December 2004, BPA's tripartite Board of Directors voted that *prepopulation will not be allowed, except when used for single-response questions where the recipient must also confirm each prepopulated answer.*

Background, Research Methodology

Beginning in 2003, some BPA business publisher members and associate members suggested that the nature of the Internet/email and the changing source mix might call for BPA rules changes. Specifically, given that many Web sites now ask users to confirm, rather than re-enter, demographic and other data originally provided on their initial visit or use of a Web site, it was postulated that allowing prepopulation of demographics in the requalification environment might provide convenience for time-challenged controlled business publication subscribers and enhance the productivity and efficiency of requalification efforts.

In line with BPA's ongoing commitment to responding proactively to changing circumstances and needs within the media industry—while safeguarding the core auditor mission of providing media buyers and media owners with maximum assurance of circulation data accuracy—BPA responded by launching a research initiative. BPA member circulation managers designed, conducted and analyzed a series of "live" field studies to determine whether prepopulating in Web/email and/or other source channels could in fact be practiced without compromising the validity and quality of controlled demographic data.

A total of 19 field studies of prepopulated data were conducted between Summer 2003 and Spring 2004. The tests, conducted on randomly chosen samples of subscribers (average sample size: 2,955) from a total of 17 business publications, spanned a wide variety of B-to-B markets and two different test methodologies. They also encompassed Internet/email, fax and telecommunications sources.

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There were two rounds of tests.

First Round of Tests: Fourteen tests were conducted in Summer/Fall 2003. Ten different B-to-B titles each conducted one test, and two additional titles each conducted two tests. (One of the titles was Canadian, the rest were U.S.-based.) The publications' SRDS categories were: 1, 6, 9, 12, 32C, 40, 96, 97 and 107A.

Five of the tests employed the Web/email qualification source, seven used telemarketing, and two (including the Canadian title) used fax. Each test had two panels: Panel "A" received a form prepopulated with the actual responses they supplied on their most recent requalification forms, and Panel "B" (control panel) received a blank form, as usual. The responses from each panel were compared to the previous year's validated galleys.

Results Summary: In all 14 tests, respondents/subscribers using the blank forms made substantially more changes than those using prepopulated forms. Across the tests, the blank forms generated an average rate of change of 36.3% for business/industry questions, while prepopulated forms generated a change rate of 12.7%. Blank title/function questions generated an average change rate of 31.5%, while prepopulated forms generated a change rate of 9.3%. On multiple response questions, the differences in rates of change for blank versus prepopulated were even greater.

Further, across *all* tests, the prepopulated forms *did not produce any lift in response rates*.

Second Round of Tests: While clearly demonstrating that subscribers made far more changes on blank forms than prepopulated forms, the methodology of the first round of tests did not allow for determining which form generated the most *accurate* data. A second round of tests was needed to rule out the possibility that the changes/data being supplied on blank forms might be less accurate than data on forms that were prepopulated with the subscribers' own previously provided data.

In Winter/Spring 2004, five additional tests were conducted on five U.S.-based publications that did not participate in the first round of tests (representing SRDS market categories 2, 34B, H20, 107A and 142). Four of these tests employed Web-based forms and one was conducted by mail. In these tests, a third panel was added: Panel "C" received forms prepopulated with data that was known to be *incorrect*. In addition, in one of these tests, all of the questions on the incorrectly prepopulated forms given to Panel C required respondents to click a "confirm" button if they chose not to change the response to any given question.

Results Summary: Change rates for Panels A and B were consistent with those seen in the first round of tests. The results for Panel C were as follows:

Change rates on *multiple-response* questions that were prepopulated with incorrect data ranged from 30% to 57%, and averaged 36%.

Change rates on *single-response* questions that were prepopulated with incorrect data, with *no* "confirm" action required, ranged from 63% to 97%, and averaged 81%.

Change rates on incorrectly prepopulated *single-response* questions that *did* require the subscriber to confirm any answer that he/she chose not to correct averaged 97%. But change rates on incorrectly prepopulated multiple-response questions that *did* require the "confirm" action averaged just 31%.

And again, across *all* tests, the prepopulated forms *did not produce any lift in response rates*.