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Carla Hillerns on Thoughtful Tokens of Appreciation to Encourage Study Participation

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AEA 365: Carla Hillerns on Thoughtful Tokens of Appreciation to Encourage Study Participation

Hello, fellow 365ers! My name is Carla Hillerns and I manage research projects in the Center for Health Policy & Research's [Office of Survey Research](#) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. Evaluation pumps me up because it offers the opportunity to discover ways to improve processes and results. To get there, my work relies on the willingness of individuals to share information, whether that's through an on-line or paper-based survey, focus group or interview.

It's in my best interest to find effective strategies for encouraging people to participate in the studies that I manage. I also want people to feel good about their experience so that they see value in future studies. So how can evaluators avoid burning out study participants? Try a thoughtful token of appreciation to encourage reciprocity.

Here are some tips for selecting the right tokens (or incentives) for your studies; I'd love to hear what's worked for you so please consider writing a comment to this post! Thank you.

Hot Tip #1: Be novel – a token can be an ice-breaker and make people feel good. For whatever reason, a \$2 bill is a rarity so it delivers a coolness factor that exceeds its monetary value.

Hot Tip #2: Be targeted – match the token to the characteristics of your participant pool (e.g., toiletries for homeless study participants; movie tickets for teens; coffee shop coupons for working professionals; and cash or general gift cards are good bets for a general population).

Hot Tip #3: Be inclusive – involve your team, especially the data collectors, in the selection of incentives. Token incentives can set data collectors at ease, too; it can be less intimidating to approach people to take a survey when you know that you can give them something for their time and any inconvenience.

Hot Tip #4: Don't be discouraged if you don't have funding for incentives – some tokens can have little to no cost. For example, offer to share the study results. If it's not possible, consider offering the name of a website, book, or article that provides more information about similar research/findings. After an informant interview, I like to send a personalized note or email to express my appreciation for the participant's contribution.

Hot Tip #5: Check with your organization's Institutional Review Board and/or Finance Department for policies and guidelines regarding participant incentives.

Lesson Learned: Funding for participant incentives can be limited. But many funders are agreeable to allocating a small budget for incentives (even if it wasn't part of the original plan). It may be worth exploring.