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Letter to the editor

PREVENT NONRESPONSE BIAS

In a recent issue of *Marketing News* ("Success is in the e-tails," page 26, Nov. 15, 2004), Terry Davidson and Eugene Sivadas used the results of research conducted via e-mail with physicians to tout e-detailing (a pharmaceutical sales call via e-mail) as an approach that pharmaceutical companies can use to more effectively reach and communicate with physicians. While e-detailing may be a viable marketing approach per se, supporting evidence should be interpreted cautiously given the challenge in canvassing the opinions of a full range of representative physicians.

For valid conclusions to be drawn about the potential impact of e-detailing (or indeed any product-service line introduced within any industry), it is essential that the sample of survey respondents is truly representative of the actual market. If not, then problems of selective nonresponse bias can arise—the biases introduced when respondents who are willing to participate in market research hold different views than those who are not willing. In health care, these biases can be particularly acute given that many physicians disavow any interest in marketing research—constraints of time, inclination and even perceptions of the ethics of the practice preclude many from participating.

To illustrate the potential interpretational problem this poses in the Davidson and Sivadas study, only 9.6% of the 10,000 physicians approached responded to the electronic survey. Logically, those most resistant to e-mail approaches (as would be the case in e-detailing) would be more likely to not participate. Thus the author's pro e-detailing findings are not surprising.

Effective strategies for addressing this issue could include: surveying a wider range of physicians by using mixed data collection methodologies such as phone and Internet; using creative approaches to try and recruit physicians who traditionally do not participate in research; and benchmarking results by including some prescribing data in surveys that can be weighed against extant physicians' data (should the researchers have access to physician databases).

Taking steps such as these may make research more costly and time-consuming. However, devoting more resources for research that takes steps to diminish nonresponse bias potentially pays off "in spades" by providing more valid data to underpin marketing strategy recommendations.

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