

Outreach Methods Research

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Re: Commercial & Industrial Outreach Methods Research

Introduction

Several recent nonresidential studies¹ in Massachusetts have had trouble engaging customers and market actors. These difficulties have led to smaller sample sizes, which add uncertainty and bias to study results while adversely affecting study budgets and completion timelines. The struggles experienced in Massachusetts are not unique to the Program Administrators (PAs); they reflect an industry-wide decline in research response rates that has been particularly pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic.

This pervasive decline has made it clear that the PAs and the energy industry need to improve the effectiveness of existing outreach methods and identify and adopt alternative methods to reach target populations. Improving the effectiveness of outreach methods will benefit multiple near-term commercial and industrial (C&I) studies and future research efforts in the state.

Study Goals

The goals of this study were threefold:

- 1 |** Clearly articulate the barriers that recent C&I studies have encountered engaging customers and market actors in research and evaluation efforts, both inside and outside of Massachusetts.
- 2 |** Identify changes to improve the effectiveness of traditional outreach approaches, including phone, email, and mail.
- 3 |** Discover new alternative methods that evaluators and researchers can deploy to increase overall response rates and successfully reach C&I customer types and market actors that have historically been difficult to engage.

¹ These include, among others, the Existing Building Baseline Study (MA22C05-B-BSLN), Lighting Controls Impact Evaluation (MA22C06-E-LGHTCTRLS), and cyclical custom program evaluations.

Methodology

Our investigation included informal interviews with a broad section of relevant stakeholders, as well as a literature review which focused outside the energy program/utility industry. We applied a balanced lens, integrating both industry-specific and external perspectives. The resulting synthesis reflects a breadth of influence, while remaining attuned to the specific situation faced by C&I studies and research efforts.

Our research activities are divided by task. A broad overview of our research tasks is recounted below.

Task 1: Study Manager Interviews

As part of Task 1, our team conducted informal interviews with study managers. For our research, a study manager is a consultant or Computer-Assisted, Telephone-Interview (CATI) firm supervisor who led post-COVID C&I studies with meaningful outreach components, such as a recruitment for metering or an on-site inspection, in-depth interviews with market actors, or surveys with C&I customers. We sought input from this population based on the direct relevancy of their previous experience to future C&I outreach efforts in Massachusetts.

Our research team interviewed 12 study managers who had recently led C&I studies both inside and outside of Massachusetts. These interviews focused on outreach challenges in the field and the perceived impact of COVID-19 on response rates. Our conversations also covered adaptations or alternatives to standard practices that have yielded success.

Task 2: Interviews with Stakeholders

Concurrently with Task 1, our team conducted interviews with efficiency program stakeholders to characterize the landscape and solicit insight on potential interventions. Efficiency program stakeholders include other professionals engaging C&I market actors within the context of efficiency programs.

For our stakeholder interviews, we spoke to six individuals who could draw on recent experience engaging C&I market actors. We spoke to individuals working at CATI firms, academic institutes, representatives from the statewide marketing group, efficiency program vendors and implementation teams. This was a diverse group, representing a variety of outreach modalities and objectives, who nevertheless faced common barriers reaching targeted populations.

Across Task 1 and Task 2, we discuss outreach and engagement barriers relevant to the post-COVID landscape. As part of these interviews, we discussed potential strategies and adaptations to existing outreach approaches befitting of the “new normal” regarding business operations. These conversations were tactically focused, reflecting a shared frustration around growing challenges and yielding a variety of specific interventions.

Our full interview population (n=18) and their perspectives are listed below:

- Consultants leading Massachusetts C&I studies (n=8)
- Consultants leading C&I studies outside Massachusetts (n=2)
- Academic research institutes (n=2)
- CATI firms (n=1)
- PAs in the statewide marketing group (n=1)
- PA implementation team members (n=3)
- PA C&I vendors (n=1)

Task 3: Literature Review

Our team conducted a literature review focused primarily on sectors outside of the energy industry. This limited review focused on post-COVID outreach strategies and strategic adaptations within the following industries:

- COVID-19 response communications (e.g., public health and economic relief messaging)
- Healthcare.gov enrollment campaigns
- B2B sales campaign strategies
- Trade organization membership options and offerings

The scope of this literature review centered on outreach or sales efforts undertaken after the World Health Organization's declaration that COVID-19 warranted designation as a global pandemic in March 2020. In identifying and selecting suitable sources for the review, we prioritized outreach for C&I market actors and hard-to-reach groups. As part of this task, we also investigated trade union/association memberships as a mutually beneficial opportunity for collaboration. The sources reviewed are included in Appendix 1.

Key Findings

Outreach is not a singular action, but a staged process. The outreach process encapsulates a range of activities from developing population samples to inducing participation. Researchers face different challenges at each stage of the outreach process, and proposed interventions differ by stage. In recognition of this, our team organized barriers and recommendations by stage of the outreach process.

Across our interviews participants commonly cited that outreach prospects have worsened since COVID-19, although there are indications of a longstanding decline. Although the landscape continues to evolve, outreach methods and researchers must continually strive to keep apace. There is no silver bullet that accomplishes this, but there are interventions that can be successfully deployed as a patchwork approach for improvement.

We treated outreach as a staged process, and we categorized different elements of outreach under three overarching stages. For each stage, we researched barriers, best practices for traditional approaches, and alternative methods worth considering. Those stages are listed below:

- 1 | Sample development** (i.e., getting contact information for the people you want to engage)
- 2 | Making contact** (i.e., successfully reaching the person of interest)
- 3 | Motivating participation** (i.e., increasing the likelihood of participation in the research once you've reached the right person)

Sample Development

Barriers

Sample development in research includes developing a population sample frame. Sample development begins when researchers access a source of contact information (oftentimes referred to as a "call list") for a population of interest and vet the list to identify unique and qualified contacts. Barriers at this stage include incomplete or outdated contact information and "do not call" lists.

Specific challenges faced by Massachusetts C&I evaluators and researchers include lack of email addresses in PA-provided data. Moreover, Mass Save® C&I programs typically collect contact information for one person per participant, which increases the likelihood of outdated contact information stemming from staff churn.

Solutions

Our conversations with stakeholders and study managers identified a few key suggestions:

- **Start with multiple lists.** Researchers should strive to compile multisource contact lists, drawing from PA, program tracking, and third-party contact data.
- **Use third-party business-to-business (B2B) databases.** While the quality of third-party B2B databases can vary, multiple interviewees noted ZoomInfo as a best-in-class provider of contact information.
- **Leverage preexisting panels.** Non-energy researchers lean heavily on existing online panels for general population research, a rarity for energy evaluation. These researchers indicate that they're cost-effective and fast.
- **Draw on stakeholder's contacts.** The PAs (especially their key account managers) and their vendors have their own professional networks. Study managers should use them to reach supply-side market actors or key customer decision-makers.
- **Join trade associations.** There are associations for most market actor groups that offer lists or access to membership for a fee. Groups are often local or regional.

Making Contact

Once a research team compiles a serviceable contact list, the challenge only grows as the team attempts contact. Typically, researchers focus on making contact through traditional methods like phone or email outreach. In our discussions around using traditional methods to contact target populations, a strong signal emerged: "it's getting worse."

Barriers

Across our interviews, researchers have seen response rates decline since the pandemic. One frequently expressed concern: “It’s hard not to sound like a scammer” across a backdrop of increasing robocalls and heightened sensitivity to scams. Other challenges include finding the right person for a specific request (i.e., access to a site or decision maker). Another noted concern was the length of research surveys—it’s common to lose respondents part way through and miss out on asking key questions.

Solutions

While the landscape poses some challenges for researchers, there are actions researchers can take to improve response rates.

- **Choose the right messenger.** Researchers find consistently better response rates when outreach comes from a familiar organization (better) or person (best case), which usually isn’t an evaluator. More often, the right messenger is the participant or contractor’s program point of contact.
- **And start with the right messenger.** We frequently turn to others (like implementation vendors) for help after our own outreach stumbled. Instead, studies should start with the right messenger, which requires more communication, and ensure messengers are compensated for their time.
- **Use client websites to lend legitimacy.** We find that adding outside partners to a well-recognized website and/or mentioning research initiatives on the site and directing respondents to that site lessens scam concerns (e.g., *MassSave.com/Research*).
- **Recruit across studies/surveys.** Conduct the study with the “widest net” first and use it as an opportunity to identify and create warm leads for subsequent studies.
- **Focus on the value of their perspective.** Explicitly connect research goals and the recipient’s input (“We want to understand your experience so we can improve the program for others”).
- **Plan for longer data collection periods.** We forget that market actors are salespeople. They are busy and can be on the road for multiple weeks at a time. Sometimes it’s not a dead contact; they are traveling. Start early and give researchers as much time as possible.

Motivating Participation

Barriers

Even if researchers have made contact, participation is far from assured. Typically, researchers induce participation through incentive payments to qualified participants. Motivating participation carries its own challenges. We've included a couple of commonly identified barriers include:

- **Protective gatekeepers.** It's tough to get past the front desk; they assume the worst when you call.
- **Small or lottery incentives are ineffective.** Nominal incentives don't motivate, and there are mixed results on lottery (i.e., one big prize) compared to small incentives for everyone.
- **Money-focused incentives don't work for everyone.** Some groups want information or can't accept incentives.

Solutions

These barriers have *several* opportunities for mitigation. Our interviews yielded a few interesting modifications to traditional approaches or alternative methods that might improve outcomes.

- **Use "pledge drive" language.** Research shows people respond at a higher rate to the you-can-help-us-meet-our-goal style of messaging.
- **Frame around collaboration.** Similarly, research also shows "together we can" language associates your research with the target audience's problems and encourages participation.
- **Set incentives to equivalent hourly rate.** If a contractor charges \$150/hour, you need to match or beat that; do some homework before setting incentives.
- **Disperse incentives immediately.** This is particularly important for snowball sampling. There are many instant incentive add-on features for web survey tools (like Qualtrics) that can make this possible at low cost and effort.
- **Keep the survey short.** If 8 minutes is the max, then establish and commit to that length during survey development and stakeholder review; don't allow duration creep and hope for the best.
- **Show their progress.** Include a progress bar for online surveys. If you don't, respondents assume the worst and are more likely to stop before the end.
- **Multiple follow-ups are key.** Expect, plan, and budget for multiple follow-ups to reach folks, especially underrepresented groups.
- **Tell a friend.** If outreach doesn't require statistical sampling (e.g., contractor in-depth interviews, ask respondents if they can recommend someone else for you to speak with. Alternatively, ask who they see as their biggest competitors.

Summary

This study sought to articulate the barriers faced by recent studies with meaningful C&I outreach components and identify potential modifications and alternative methods for researchers to include as part of their toolkit. Through our interviews with other researchers and targeted literature review, we identified a few small actions that, when implemented together, work in tandem to improve overall response rates.

A patchwork approach is likely necessary, but one large-but-simple opportunity remains available to PAs. The PA research portfolio runs on a three-year planning cycle. PAs can use the portfolio-level evaluation planning process to identify connections between studies and complete them in an efficient order. We recommend starting with studies that cast the widest net, which is oftentimes easy to identify as each cycle includes one large-scale data collection effort (e.g., the baseline study as part of the 2022–2024 cycle). One potential approach could be:

- Create as complete a list of desired studies as possible.
- Identify linkages and common respondents across studies.
- Launch the studies with the widest nets first.
- Use those studies to proactively screen for customers and/or market actors with a specific technology (like an environmental management system or characteristic (small business) relevant for a subsequent study.
- Ask for permission to recontact, set timing expectations, and collect back-up contact information (i.e., create a warm lead).
- Follow-up as soon as possible.
- Add contact to study-independent database for future engagement (e.g., opportunistically and incrementally build a C&I panel).

A.1 MA C&I Outreach Methods Research

A.1.1 Reviewed Sources

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A.1.2 Summary of Trade Association Membership Research

Trade Association	Represents	MA Local Chapter?	No. of Members in MA?	Cost of Membership	Membership Benefits
The Air Conditioning Association of New England (ACA/NE)	Heating, ventilation, and air-conditioning, and refrigeration (HVAC)/R tradespeople across six New England states	No.	Approx. 100	Corporate = \$1,000 per annum.	Corporate Membership: Access to quarterly dinners, which offers an opportunity to meet and network with members and potentially distribute materials
Plumbing-Heating - Cooling Contractors of Massachusetts (PHCC MA)	Plumbing and HVAC contractors in MA	Yes.	Approx. 180	\$950 per annum.	Associate Membership: Per application <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Access to PHCC of MA Contractor Member information for direct mail application. • Access to monthly local Chapter meetings for presentations and networking. • Significant discounts on booths at Annual Trade Show. • Significant discounts on advertisements placed in New England Progress Magazine."
Massachusetts Electrical Contractors Association (MECA)	Electrical contractors in MA	Yes.	Unknown.	\$425 per annum.	Cooperating membership: MECA can include information/content in monthly email newsletters that are distributed to members. MECA would be open to including Mass Save fliers/collateral in new membership package for incoming apprentices/electricians.
National Electrical Contractors Association Greater Boston Chapter (NECA GB)	Electrical contractors in eastern MA, ME, and NH	Yes.	Approx. 83.	Not offering paid affiliate memberships at this time.	Not offering paid affiliate memberships. However, executives indicated they would be very receptive to building a relationship with and connecting NECA's electrical contractors with local utilities/Mass Save.
Air Conditioning Contractors of America (ACCA)	HVAC/R, indoor environment, and building performance system professionals	No.	Approx. 104.	\$99/month for utility and associate memberships. Both memberships offer essentially the same benefits.	Utility/Associate Membership: Access to a member directory, where you can access contact information for the company and their affiliated members. You can also directly message members through ACCA communication platform. For additional payment, members can purchase advertising in newsletters and websites.
Institute of Real Estate Management – Boston Metropolitan Chapter (IREM Boston)	Multifamily and commercial property managers in the greater Boston metro	Yes.	Approx. 1,000.	Associate: \$245 per annum. Industry Partner: \$650 per annum (Gold). \$450 per annum (Silver)	Membership: As a member of IREM, you will have access to a member directory and networking events. IREM Industry Partnership: Exclusive membership, carries certain responsibilities (i.e., participate in committees and attend at least three events). Industry Partners have access to IREM member names and addresses. Industry Partners eligible for branding on newsletters.

A.1.3 Summary of B2B Panel Research

Several interviewees recommended online panels for outreach. To provide the PAs with more information about the suitability of panels to support nonresidential research in Massachusetts, we reviewed the specific panel noted by the interviewees (LUCID, now called Cint) and a selection of other online panel and research technology (“restech”) providers. We identified the other panel providers primarily through the [GreenBook Directory](#), an online market research services database.

We reviewed websites and/or spoke to representatives from five panel providers. These providers use different methods for panel development. Some providers offer panels with long-standing relationships to participants, cultivated over decades. Others design a custom panel on request, using recruitment specifications like size of business and industry, and often recruit qualified contacts through LinkedIn or ZoomInfo.

We found panel provider websites offered minimal details regarding the size or composition of the available panels (number of businesses in the panel, the location and nature of those businesses, etc.). Most panel providers ask that interested parties contact a sales representative or request a demo for more information on their services. Consequently, to assess the viability of using online panels for Massachusetts nonresidential research, we reached out to panel providers for quotes on generic C&I study scenarios. For panel providers with contractor-specific panels, we inquired about the feasibility of two common study scenarios:

- Recruiting and completing a 15-minute, close-ended online survey with 40 Massachusetts-based general contractors.
- Recruiting and completing a 45-minute, in-depth interview (IDI) with 15 Massachusetts-based general contractors.

For panels that reach the general business community, we inquired regarding completion of 15-minute online surveys with Massachusetts-based C&I decision makers familiar with their electric and/or natural gas provider. We have included responses to our inquiries in the table below.

In general, our team’s research experience made it clear that the PAs—or vendors working on their behalf—will need to engage panel providers regarding specific outreach opportunities, to get more information and determine the viability of panel providers for a specific use case.

Panel Provider	Link	Panel Population	Offering	Response
Cint	Cint.com LUCID	Businesses (general)	LUCID, recently acquired by Cint Group, is a popular provider of panel research. LUCID has one offering relevant to this research, which was recommended by our interviewees. LUCID Marketplace connects buyers of survey responses to suppliers of respondents.	Cint declined to bid on the MA-based contractor survey, MA-based contractor IDI, and MA-based business decision maker survey. They indicates these survey scenarios were not a good fit for them, but other that other non-residential research studies may be suitable.
Symmetrics Sampling	Symmetrics Sampling Contractor Advisory Board	Contractor-specific panel	Symmetric Sampling provides opt-in surveys and interview recruitment to a preexisting network of panel respondents. One specific panel, Symmetric's <i>Contractor Advisory Board</i> , circulated surveys to their building and construction contacts since 1999. Symmetrics confirmed that the contractor advisory boards have Massachusetts-based contractors enrolled as panel participants.	<p>15-minute survey with MA-based contractors (n=40): Symmetrics provides a population sample, circulates a link to a programmed surveys (written and programmed by the PAs' evaluation contractor) to MA-general contractors, and recruits participation. Symmetrics confirmed that 40 completed surveys with general contractors was possible and would charge on a per interview basis.</p> <p>45-minute IDI with MA-based general contractors (n=15): Symmetrics can recruit 18 participants, schedule interviews, distribute incentives, and manage the project.</p>
Appinio	Appinio	Businesses (general)	Appinio offers an app-based survey panel, which reaches recruits participants through a "gamified social community" with global reach. Appinio partners with all third-party panels to ensure a large reach for client surveys. Appinio offers both B2B and B2C surveys.	No response
NewtonX	NewtonX	Businesses (general)	NewtonX offers panel development tailored to a specific survey. Specifically, NewtonX uses characteristics like size of business, industry, and title to identify and recruit qualified professionals from databases like ZoomInfo and LinkedIn. NewtonX can provide full research services or modular offering and surveys are priced per number of completes.	<p>15-minute survey with MA-based C&I decision makers: For this survey, NewtonX confirmed they could produce as many as 75 to 90 completes. NewtonX offers survey programming, survey or questionnaire development, and pricing variation with increased interview times. Price is offered per complete and would vary based on their role developing and managing the survey.</p>
Pure Spectrum Marketplace	Pure Spectrum	Businesses (general)	Pure Spectrum Marketplace allows subscribers to input audience characteristics and select from a variety of existing panels. Pure Spectrum offers B2B panels, which can be targeted based on criteria such as industry, company size, title, decision maker, department, revenue.	No response