

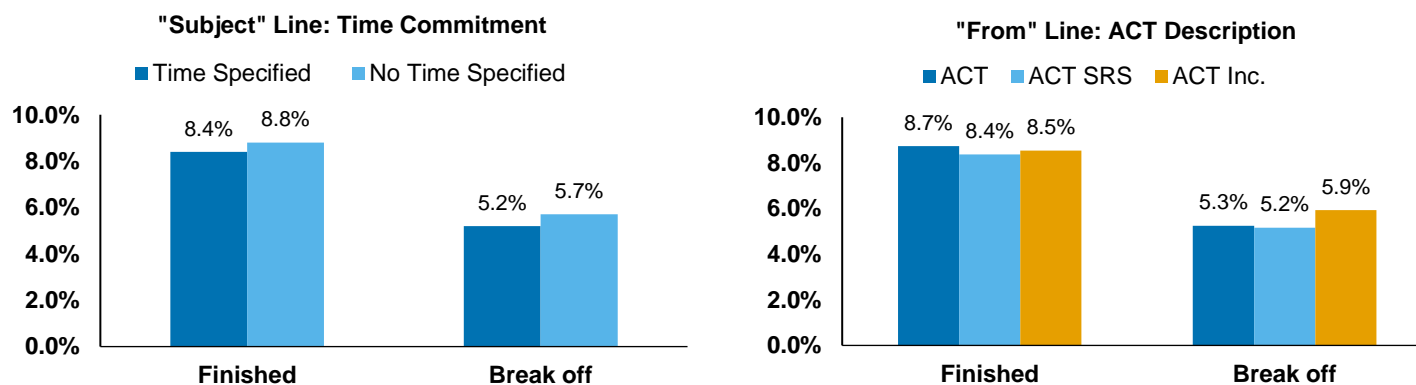
Raeal Moore is a senior research scientist specializing in survey methodological research and research on education best practices in P-12 schools.

## What Information Should be Included in the "From" and "Subject" Lines of an Email Invitation?

RAEAL MOORE, PhD

An invitation message's "subject" and "from" lines are a person's first introduction to a request for participation in a web survey. Therefore, determining the wording that resonates with potential participants is imperative. To investigate this issue, ACT invited a random sample of students who took the ACT® test in April 2017 to participate in a web survey. Using a randomized controlled research design, students received a message with a subject line that either indicated the estimated time commitment to complete the survey or one that did not. Students also received one of three possible "from" messages, which varied in terms of how the organization's name was presented (e.g., ACT, ACT Survey Research Services, or ACT Inc.).<sup>1</sup>

Finish and Break-Off Rates,<sup>2</sup> According to Wording of "Subject" Line and "From" Line



Note: To be classified as finished, a student had to answer all 30 items. Break off was defined as answering at least 1 item but not all 30.

<sup>1</sup> A random sample of students who took the ACT test in April of 2017 were invited to participate in a 30-item, online survey about their eating and exercise behavior (N = 60,000). Students were randomly assigned to one of two email "subject" line options: estimated 7-minute time commitment vs. no specified time commitment and one of three email "from" line options: ACT Survey Research Services, ACT, Inc., and ACT. All groups received the same email invitation to participate. A total of 8.6% of students answered all survey items.

<sup>2</sup> Students were categorized into three possible outcomes: never started the survey, broke-off before finishing, or finished. To be classified as finished, a student had to answer all 30 items. Break off was defined as answering at least 1 item but not all 30. Never started was defined as not answering any survey items. These outcomes were then compared to whether the student received the estimated time commitment in the subject line and to the message in the "from" line.

**Neither providing the time commitment in the “subject” line nor varying the “from” line improved the percentage of students who finished the survey.**

Slightly fewer students (8.4%) who received the estimated time commitment in the subject line finished the survey relative to those (8.8%) who did not receive this. The three “from” line descriptions also did not meaningfully differentiate the percentage of students who finished the survey.

**The language provided in the “subject” and “from” lines statistically impacted, but did not meaningfully change, break-off rates.**

Students who received the estimated time commitment in the subject line had a statistically significantly higher break-off rate (5.7%) than those who did not receive the time commitment. Likewise, there was a statistically higher percentage of students who received the ACT, Inc. “from” line (5.9%) and broke off from the survey, relative to the other two groups.

Although statistically significant, these differences are not particularly meaningful and may have limited practical applications. For example, the decrease in break-off rates yielded by specifying a time commitment in the subject line is quite small. Applying this method might be practical only when a very small number of students will be surveyed and even a handful of additional data obtained from them could ensure a survey’s success. ■