

Salutations and Response Rates to Online Surveys

Jerold Pearson
Director of Market Research
Stanford Alumni Association
Stanford University

Roger A. Levine, PhD
Managing Research Scientist
Director, Cognitive Survey Laboratory
American Institutes for Research

A paper delivered at the Association for Survey Computing
Fourth International Conference on the Impact of Technology on the Survey Process
September 19, 2003 at the University of Warwick (England)

I. Background

As online surveys become more feasible for more populations, researchers are becoming more interested in understanding various issues related to response rates in the online environment. One issue of particular interest deals with the salutation used in invitations to online surveys. There has been much speculation about whether the salutation might affect response...and, if so, what kind of salutations work best for which populations. But there is little reliable data from which to make inferences.

An experiment was therefore undertaken to test four different salutations in a survey of alumni from Stanford University conducted on the World Wide Web in September 2002. The survey explored issues dealing with the university's logos, image, and branding; and, as such, was salient to the general alumni population, and not just to certain sub-groups.

II. Methodology

The population was defined as people who earned an undergraduate degree from Stanford from 1955 through 2002, who live in the continental USA, and for whom Stanford has an e-mail address. Alumni with only a graduate degree from Stanford were not included in the population, nor were Stanford employees, spouses of employees, or alumni flagged "Do Not E-mail."

Four random samples of 800 alumni were selected from the population, and each of the 3200 individuals was e-mailed a short invitation to participate in the survey. In addition to explaining the purpose of the study, its importance to the university, its salience to them as alumni, and its brevity, the invitations included a link to the survey (hosted on a Stanford web server) and a unique Respondent ID number. The invitations were exactly the same for all 3200 alumni – except for the ID number and the salutation:

- Sample 1 received a generic salutation ("Dear Stanford Alum").
- Sample 2 received a familiar personalized salutation ("Dear James").
- Sample 3 received a familiar personalized salutation without the "dear" ("James").
- Sample 4 received a formal personalized salutation ("Dear Mr. Bond").

The invitations were e-mailed on September 12, 2002, and two reminders were e-mailed to non-respondents before the survey was taken off the web on October 9, 2002.

Names, titles (ie. Mr, Dr, Ms, Professor, Reverend, Major General, etc), and demographic data (class year, gender, school, donor status, and Stanford Alumni Association membership) for each person in the four samples came from Stanford's alumni database.

“Donors” were defined as those alumni who had made a gift of any amount to any Stanford designation in Fiscal Year 2002 (September 1, 2001-August 31, 2002).

For the analysis of this data, undergraduate class year was used as a proxy for age:

- Class year 1994-2002 approximately correspond to alumni under 30.
- Class year 1975-1993 approximately correspond to alumni 30-49.
- Class year 1955-1974 approximately correspond to alumni 50 and older.

The random samples were proportionally representative of the entire alumni population (as defined above):

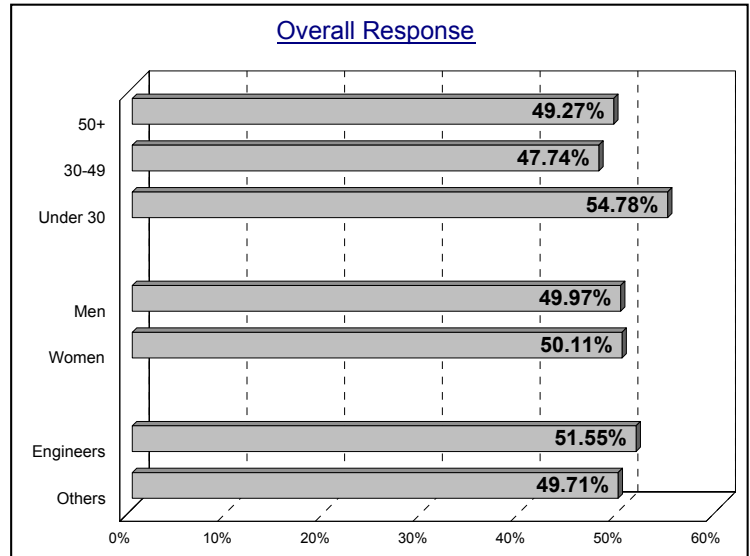
- 57% were men and 43% were women.
- 26% were under 30, 43% were 30-49, and 31% were 50 or older.
- 41% were donors and 59% were non-donors.
- 69% were Stanford Alumni Association members and 31% were non-members.
- 79% had undergraduate degrees from the School of Humanities and Sciences, 18% from the School of Engineering (which includes computer science and other computer-related departments), and 3% from the School of Earth Sciences.

III. Results

Overall Response

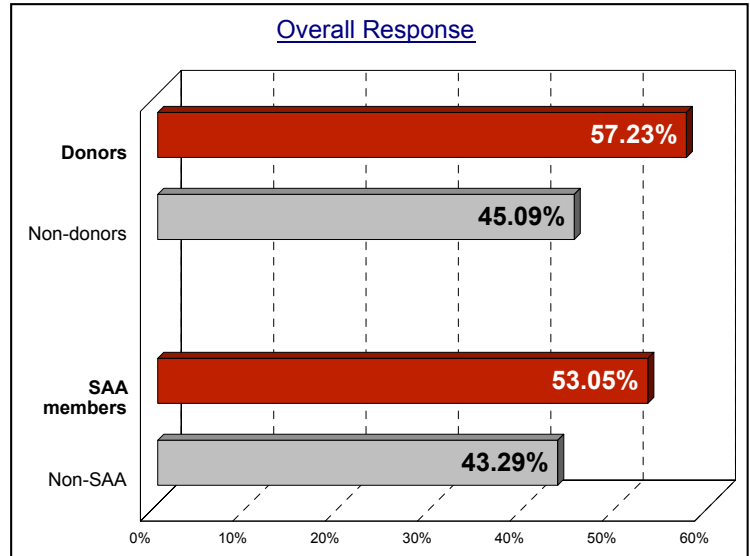
Only 92 of the 3200 e-mail addresses (2.87%) were invalid. Of the 3108 valid addresses, 1555 completed the survey (50.03%).

Current research among Stanford alumni indicates that women, non-engineering alumni, and older alumni are as likely as men, engineers, and younger alumni to have access to the web – but they *use* the web less frequently. So there is reason to be concerned that response rates to online surveys might be lower among these groups. Nevertheless, overall response (to all four samples combined) did not differ by gender or school (engineers vs non-engineers). And, while the response rate was a few percentage points higher among younger alumni, the difference is not quite statistically significant.



Not surprisingly, however, overall response was significantly greater among alumni with whom the university has the strongest relationship. Response was greater among:

- Donors (57.23%) than non-donors (45.09%). [p < .0001]
- Stanford Alumni Association members (53.05%) than non-members (43.29%). [p < .0001]



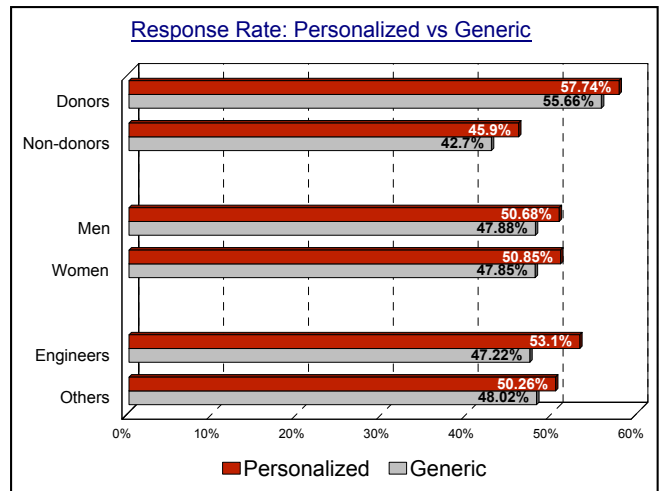
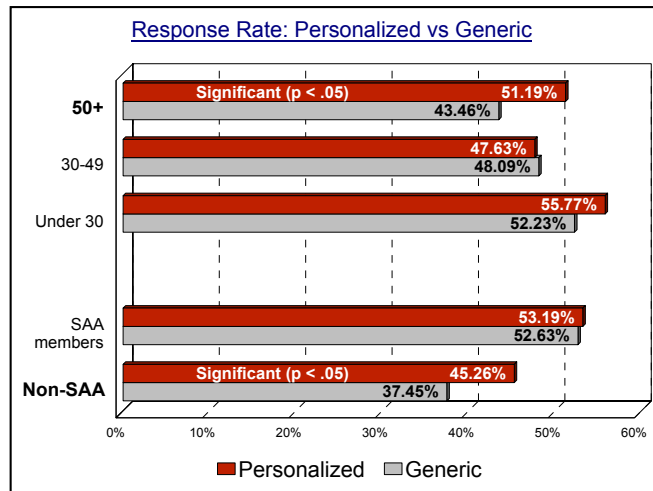
Response to the four salutations did not significantly differ overall; no salutation drew a significantly greater response than the others did:

- 47.87% for “Dear Stanford Alum.”
- 50.26% for “Dear James.”
- 50.25% for “James.”
- 51.77% for “Dear Mr. Bond.”

Generic vs Personalized Salutations

Overall response to the three personalized salutations taken as a whole (50.75%) was about 3 percentage points higher than response to the generic salutation (47.87%), but the difference is not statistically significant. Similarly, within most of the demographic groups, response was a few percentage points higher for the personalized salutations – but the only statistically significant differences are among:

- Alumni 50 and older – 51.19% of whom responded to the personalized salutations, compared to only 43.46% who responded to the generic salutation [$p < .05$].
- Alumni who are *not* members of the Alumni Association – 45.26% of whom responded to the personalized salutations, compared to only 37.45% who responded to the generic salutation [$p < .05$].



It may seem surprising that the personalized salutations made more of a difference with non-members (with whom Stanford has a *less* personal relationship) than with members of the Alumni Association. Upon reflection, however, a plausible explanation comes to mind. As noted, Alumni Association members were more likely to respond overall; perhaps their closer ties to the university help elicit a similar response rate regardless of the salutation. Non-members, on the other hand, may feel that a personalized salutation suggests that the university still recognizes them and still considers them part of the community, and they might respond favorably to that.

The Full Monty: All Four Salutations

While there were not many significant differences in response to the generic vs the personalized salutations (as a whole), more differences are revealed when we take a more granular look at response to each of the four salutations. In other words, among certain demographic groups, some personalized salutations elicited a greater response than others did.

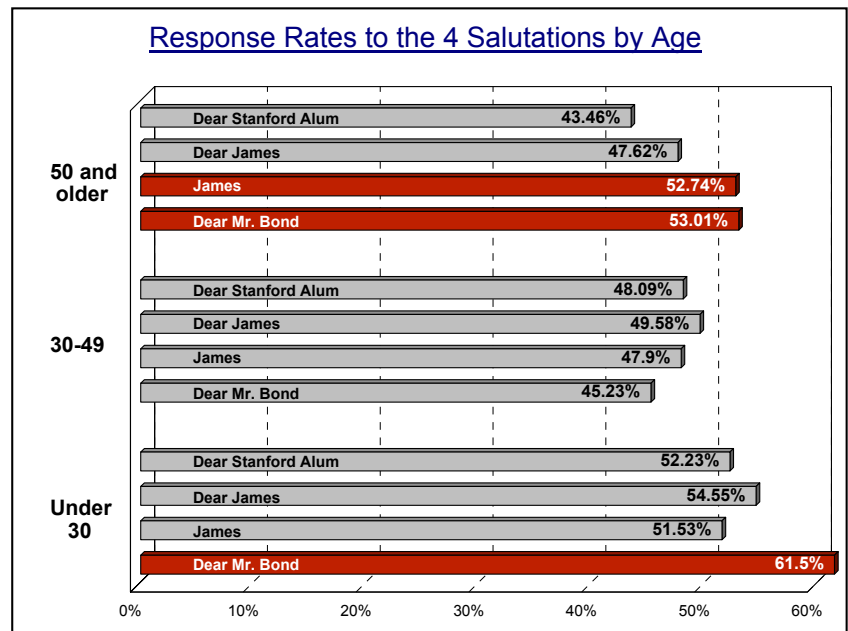
Age: Among alumni 50 and older, the formal salutation (Dear Mr. Bond) and the familiar salutation without the “dear” (James) drew greater responses than the generic salutation did. Perhaps “older” alumni appreciate the respect that the formal salutation may imply. If so, their similar response to the familiar salutation is baffling.

- Dear Stanford Alum: 43.46%
- Dear James: 47.62%
- **James: 52.74% [p < .05]**
- **Dear Mr. Bond: 53.01% [p < .05]**

No salutation drew a significantly greater response than the others did among alumni age 30-49.

Alumni under 30 also appear to have responded better to one of the personalized salutations than they did to the generic salutation. But, perhaps surprisingly, it is the *formal* – not one of the familiar – salutations that seems to have elicited the best response from them (although, because the samples are somewhat smaller, the difference is just a hair shy of statistical significance). Again, younger alumni may appreciate the respect implied in the formal salutation.

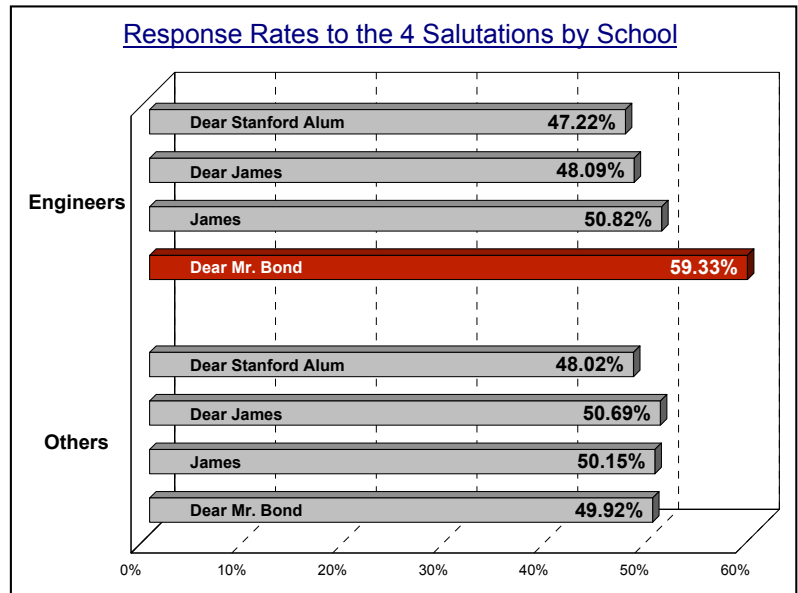
- Dear Stanford Alum: 52.23%
- Dear James: 54.55%
- James: 51.53%
- **Dear Mr. Bond: 61.50%**



School: The formal salutation (Dear Mr. Bond) elicited a greater response than the other salutations did among alumni from the School of Engineering.

- Dear Stanford Alum: 47.22%
- Dear James: 48.09%
- James: 50.82%
- **Dear Mr. Bond: 59.33%**
[p < .05]

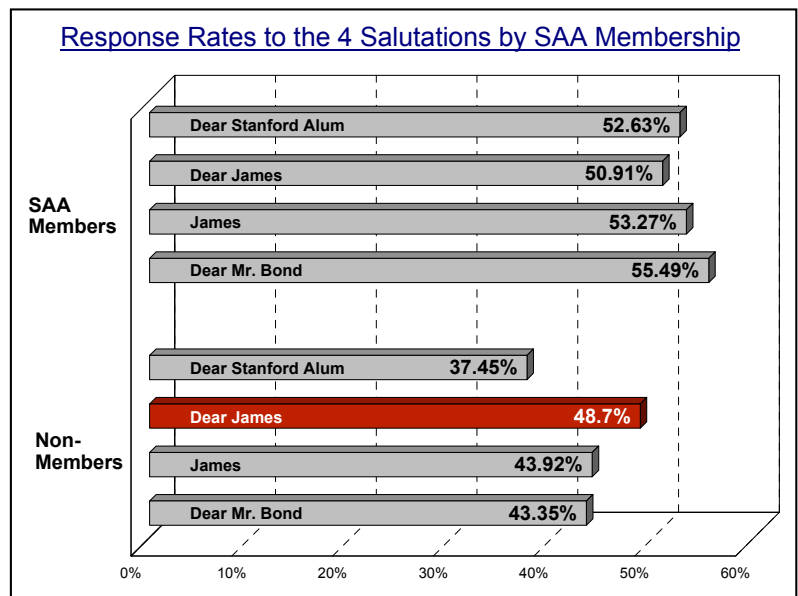
No salutation drew a significantly greater response than the others did among non-engineers (alumni from the School of Humanities and Sciences and the School of Earth Sciences).



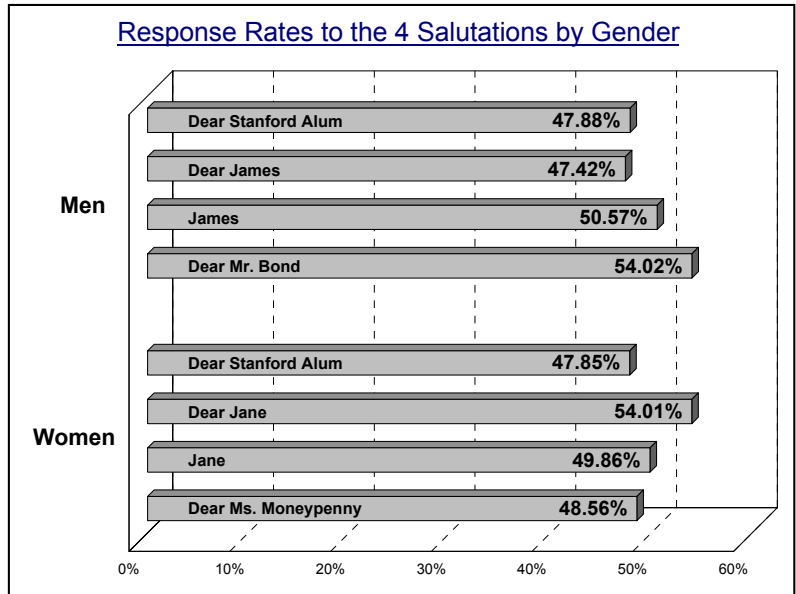
Stanford Alumni Association Membership: No salutation drew a significantly greater response than the others did among Alumni Association members.

But among non-members, the familiar salutation (Dear James) drew a significantly greater response than the generic salutation did, and a few percentage points more than the other personalized salutations did.

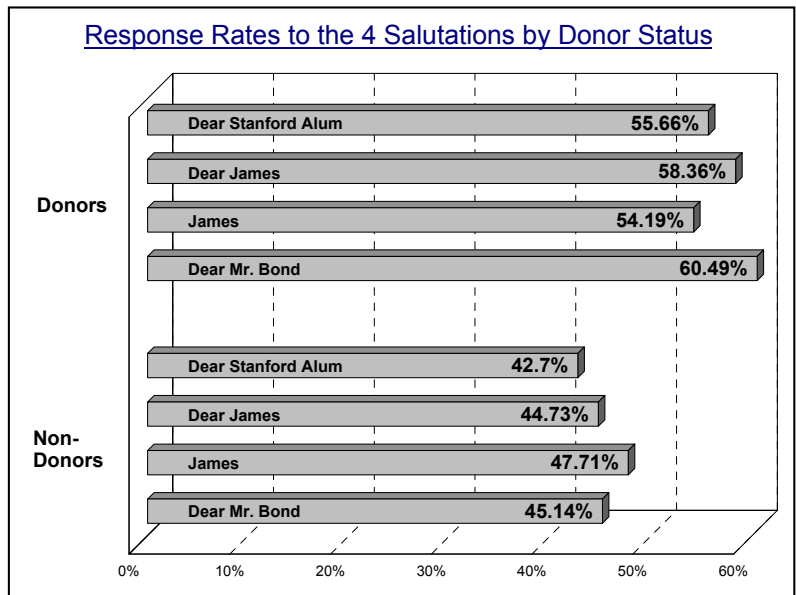
- Dear Stanford Alum: 37.45%
- **Dear James: 48.70%**
[p < .05]
- James: 43.92%
- Dear Mr. Bond: 43.35%



Gender: Men responded a few percentage points better to the formal salutation (Dear Mr. Bond) than to any other...while women responded a few percentage points better to the familiar salutation (Dear Jane). Nevertheless, no salutation drew a *significantly* greater response than the others did from either men or women.



Donors and Non-donors: No salutation drew a significantly greater response than the others did from either donors or non-donors – although, among donors, the formal salutation (Dear Mr. Bond) outdrew the others by a couple of percentage points.



IV. Summary and Implications

As expected, if the sponsor of a survey is identified upfront to respondents (as was the case with this Stanford survey), response will be higher among people with whom the sponsor has the closest relationship (in this case, donors and Alumni Association members). This will hold true regardless of the salutation used.

Although women and non-engineers may use the web less than men and engineers do, this survey indicates that they are just as likely to respond to a web survey (assuming the survey is of equal salience to them). However, response to a web survey may be a few percentage points higher among “younger” than “middle-aged” and “older” people, although the difference may not be statistically significant.

Response was a few percentage points higher to the personalized salutations than to the generic salutation – both overall and within most demographic groups. So if the added time, effort, and expense are not too onerous, it may be worth personalizing salutations when possible. There certainly appears to be no downside to personalizing (in terms of response rates). On the other hand, most of these differences were not statistically significant, so if personalizing is too difficult or not possible, overall response may not suffer much with a generic salutation.

Nevertheless, within certain demographic groups, some personalized salutations worked better than others, and response rates *were* significantly higher – suggesting that surveys conducted among specific homogeneous populations may benefit from personalization:

- Surveys conducted among older and (more surprisingly) younger people may net the highest response if they use a formal personalized salutation (Dear Mr. Bond).
- Surveys conducted among engineers (and perhaps by extrapolation) technically oriented people may also net the highest response if they use a formal personalized salutation (Dear Mr. Bond).
- Perhaps counter-intuitively, surveys conducted among people with whom the sponsor has a weaker relationship (ie. non-members) may net the highest response if they use a *familiar* personalized salutation (Dear James).

Again counter-intuitively, the salutation did not seem to matter to Alumni Association members, so surveys conducted among a sponsor’s closest constituents or customers may have less to gain from personalized salutations.

- Although the differences were not quite significant, it’s possible that surveys conducted with men may net the highest response if they use a formal personalized salutation (Dear Mr. Bond)...while surveys conducted with women may net the highest response if they use a *familiar* personalized salutation (Dear Jane).

Of course, surveys conducted with diverse or heterogeneous populations may also benefit from personalization if the demographic characteristics of each person in the sample can be identified and the salutation is varied accordingly. Using multiple personalized salutations, however, may entail even more time, effort, and expense.

It is worth repeating that this survey was conducted exclusively with degree holders from Stanford University, who are more highly educated than many survey populations are. Since some response effects are less pronounced among highly educated respondents, the results of this experiment may differ with the population.

Because this work was exploratory in nature, a large number of subgroup comparisons (about 72) were performed. Under these circumstances, one might expect about three or four Type I errors (spuriously significant results at $p < 0.05$), so it is possible that these significant results are due to chance. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that this experiment be replicated – especially if it can be replicated with different populations to see if the results vary by education or other characteristics.