SISTER DISTRICT ACTION NETWORK

Call (or Text) Your Girlfriend: Personal Contact to Confirm Intention to Attend Increases Volunteer Attendance Rates

Sister District Journal, 2020

www.sisterdistrict.com/research

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Abstract

This experiment tested whether personal contact (calls with voicemails, calls with text messages in lieu of voicemails, and text messages) increased the rate of event attendance at an event for which volunteers had already RSVP'd. It was found that volunteers in the conditions including a text message confirmed their attendance at higher rates than people in the control condition and the call + voicemail condition. However, only participants in the call + text condition attended the event at significantly higher rates than participants in the control condition. It should be noted that both of the other treatment conditions trended toward marginal significance and produced more attendees than the control condition, who only received an email confirmation. Overall, the results indicate that personally contacting a volunteer to confirm their intent to attend after they've RSVP'd generally elicit more volunteer confirmations and event attendance, and that the call + text condition was particularly effective in this regard (as compared to the control condition). Implications and limitations of these findings are discussed.

Keywords

Volunteer engagement, activist engagement, volunteer confirmation, volunteer reminder, volunteer outreach, flake rate

Sister District is a grassroots organization with a large number of volunteer teams spread throughout the country that host events in support of progressive candidates. Research suggests that voters are especially influenced by personal contact, which has repeatedly been found to increase voter turnout in elections over less personal methods like cold SMS. Less is known about how these findings may apply to volunteer turnout (event attendance), and whether that contact may operate differently in the context of volunteer confirmation as opposed to in volunteer recruitment.

Campaign organizers have long believed that personal contact is key to reducing flake rate for events (i.e., getting volunteers who RSVP'd to come to actually attend), and it is fairly standard practice to confirm that volunteers plan to attend shifts they have RSVP'd for the day or two before the shift is set to occur. This helps event organizers to plan for the right amount of attendees, and also to remind volunteers who may have forgotten they signed up for the event in the first place. Although it is clear that people think personal contact is useful for reducing volunteer flake rates, it is less clear which modes of communication are ideal for confirming volunteer turnout.

This study builds on the SDAN volunteer confirmation pilot conducted in August-September 2018 by asking which method of personal confirmation contact, if any, increases response rates and attendance rates in RSVP confirmation efforts compared to email alone. The study utilized three modes of communication: calls with voicemails, calls with text messages, and text messages only.

It was hypothesized that: 1) personal confirmation contact would increase attendance to events for which volunteers had previously RSVP'd; and 2) that this would vary based on the contact mode used (although no specific hypotheses were made about which method would be most effective).

1. Volunteer Confirmation and Flake Rate

Flake rate, or the percentage of volunteers that RSVP'd but did not attend an event, is a key concern for organizers. When the flake rate is high, it may present a variety of issues, including having too large a space or using too many resources on an event that fewer people show up to than expected. This provides an incentive for organizers to try to reduce that flake rate as much as possible. It also means that confirming that volunteers who RSVP'd will attend an event can be especially helpful in both ensuring that volunteers are reminded of their RSVP, but also in getting organizers confirmation that volunteers will, or will not, attend. Knowing that information can help an organizer right-size an event, or let them know they need to recruit additional volunteers to meet capacity.

Research from social psychology suggests that people like to remain consistent with commitments they have made, a persuasion principle called commitment and consistency (Cialdini, 2009). It is assumed that people like to see themselves as consistent from one day to the next, and when they are reminded that they have made a commitment, they are motivated to remain consistent with that commitment and fulfill their obligations. This principle is regularly harnessed in commit to vote or pledge to vote cards, which are then mailed back to voters to remind them of their commitment to vote, and, hopefully, get them to act consistently with that commitment by voting (Burgess, Haney, Snyder, Sullivan, & Transue, 2000). The body of evidence around commitment and consistency suggests that reminding people of commitments they've made is a persuasive tactic that increases compliance.

Additionally, there is a large amount of evidence from the medical field that appointment reminders and medication reminders reduce flake rate and increases patient compliance to doctor advice. For instance, mailing patients reminders that they are due for important medical screenings increases the rate at which they receive those screenings (Sequist, Zaslavsky, Marshall, Fletcher, & Ayanian, 2009), and mail and phone appointment reminders have long been found to decrease broken appointments (Shepard & Moseley, 1976). While these findings are specific to the medical field, they do suggest that reminding people of what they should be doing does appear to increase compliance.

2. Communication modes

It is less clear how to best remind volunteers so that they are compliant and actually show up for their shift. It is common for organizers to, at minimum, send email reminders to volunteers who have RSVP'd for events to remind them of the event details. Volunteer RSVPs are generally confirmed in three ways: via email, via text message, and via phone call. For this reason, this research is focused on these three common modes of communications.

Email has become a key tool in the political toolbox for soliciting donations and mobilizing voters (Mejova, Garimella, Weber, & Dougal, 2014). However, organizers often report lackluster responses from email confirmation efforts, with little response from volunteers. Though email clearly has some utility in campaigns and digital fundraising, it is unclear if that effect extends to the context of confirming volunteer turnout. However, emails are tempting to use for volunteer confirmation considering the RSVP should indicate some volunteer investment and do offer the ease of emailing several people at one time.

While personal contact does not allow for this ease, it does seem to be particularly effective. Though it takes more time to call or text volunteers than to email them, both organizer and industry research suggests that personal contacts can be a powerful tool in motivating voters. Phone calls, also known as phone-banking, are a time-tested strategy and seem to cause a small, reliable boost in turnout (Gerber & Green, 2019; Nickerson, 2006; Nickerson, 2007). Other research indicates that text messages seem to boost turnout as well, compared to voters that did not receive text messages (Malhotra et al., 2011; Dale, & Strauss, 2009). During Get Out the Vote (GOTV), these modes of communication are regularly used to remind voters to turnout to vote, so it makes sense that that may also be useful in reminding voters to attend events they have RSVP'd for.

3. Hypotheses

Organizer knowledge inspired the two main hypotheses. The hypotheses were tested using the research design detailed below. Ultimately, this work argues that personal conversations between organizers and

volunteers are especially useful in reminding volunteers of their commitments, getting an idea of whether or not they will be meeting those commitments, and ultimately increasing attendance to the event.

Hypothesis 1. Personal confirmation contacts (calls with voicemails, calls with text messages in lieu of voicemails, and text messages) increase event attendance more than passive recruitment contact (email only).

Additionally, it was assumed that the modes would all have different effect sizes compared to the control group. However, there were no hypotheses about which modes would prove to have the largest effects.

Hypothesis 2. As compared to controls, the 3 different confirmation contact modes will vary in efficacy and significance.

4. Research Design

This study was designed in conjunction with Dr. Katherine Haenschen, Assistant Professor of Communication at Virginia Tech. It was a randomized controlled trial with 2 different samples and 9 different events. To test the hypotheses, the volunteer members of two different participating Sister District Project teams were randomly assigned to one of the four volunteer contact conditions (control - email only, call with voicemail, call with text message, text message). People in the treatment conditions were contacted by SDAN staff or fellow volunteers to remind them of their RSVP and ask them to confirm that they were attending the event.

This study did not have an informed consent procedure, but its design met SDAN's internal criteria for ethical review: 1) there was no risk to subjects, 2) there was no active deception, and 3) there were no recordings of the subject's private behavior made without their consent. Studies are given an external ethical review by a professional IRB if they do not meet the ethical criteria outlined above.

The details of the experiment can be found below.

4.1 Treatments

Event organizers often suggest confirming that volunteers will attend events they have RSVP'd to attend to boost attendance/decrease flake rate. However, it is less well known how effective each personal contact is compared to the other modes of communication. In this study, volunteers had already been recruited to attend events and had RSVP'd to do so via an official sign-up form. All RSVPs received an email reminder of their shift 1 day before the event. Targets randomized into the control condition had no additional contact. Targets who were randomized into the three treatment conditions received an additional personal contact 2 days before the event to confirm that they planned to attend. Targets in the call and voicemail condition received a phone call and a voicemail was left if they did not answer the call. Targets in the call and text group received a phone call and a text message instead of a voicemail if they did not answer the call. Targets in the text message group received a text message. All of the messages had a similar script, with the messages personalized for each location.

The call script that was read if targets answered the phone was, "*Hi, is [person name] there? Hi, this is [your name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm calling to confirm that you are coming to the [EVENT] at [LOCATION] on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. Will you be able to make it or not?" The voicemail script that was used in the call and voicemail condition when participants did not answer the phone was, "Hi [person name], this is [your name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm calling to confirm that you are coming to the [EVENT] at [LOCATION] on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. Please let us know if you will be able to make it or not." The text message script that was used in the call and text condition when participants did not answer the phone and in the text message condition was, "Hi [person name], this is [your name] from Sister District [TEAM] and I'm texting to confirm that you are coming to the [EVENT] at [LOCATION] on [DATE] from [TIME-TIME]. Please let us know if you will be able to make it or not.*"

4.2 Subjects

SDAN recruited large Sister District teams holding large events for which there would be numerous RSVPs. We asked those teams to collect both email and phone number on their sign-up forms so that all RSVPs could be included in the experiment. To lend additional validity to the results, the two teams came from very different geographic/demographic areas and represented both coasts. The day before confirmation contacts were made, SDAN took the existing list of RSVPs from the sign-in forms and randomized those volunteers into the four conditions. Event hosts and volunteers, Sister District Project staff, and people who knew about the

experiment were all eliminated from the experiment if they were among the list of RSVPs. These individuals were not tracked, but this procedure largely only resulted in the event hosts being removed from each sample. This resulted in a final of 152.

4.3 Random assignment procedure

All volunteers who had RSVP'd to the events, providing their emails and phone numbers in the process, of the participating Sister District teams were enrolled in the study (unless they met the elimination criteria outlined above). Volunteers were randomized at the event level due to number of events (i.e., event 1's members were randomized independently of event 2's members). Each volunteer who RSVP'd was assigned a random number and the dataset was sorted by the random numbers to create a random order. Then each volunteer was assigned to a condition by assigning the first individual on the randomly sorted list to condition 1 (control), the second individual on the list to condition 2 (call and voicemail), the third individual on the list to condition 3 (call and text), the fourth individual on the list to condition 4 (text), and repeating that pattern down the list until each team member was assigned to a condition. This order varied in the case of teams that held multiple events, in which case the first event started randomization with condition 1 (control), the second event started randomization with condition 2 (call and voicemail, the third event started randomization with condition 3 (call and text), the fourth event started randomization with condition 4 (text), and so on. This was done because events had odd numbers of RSVPs and starting with the control condition each time would have overrepresented the control condition in randomization..

4.4 Measurements

The main outcome measures in this study were Confirmation, which indicated that the volunteer responded to the contact and confirmed that they planned to attend the event, and Attended, which indicated that the person actually attended the event they RSVP'd to attend. Each variable was binary and coded 0 for no (no confirmation; nonattendance) and 1 for yes (confirmation; attended).

The team the volunteer belonged to was included as a covariate in order to control for individual differences between teams and was indicated by a two level categorical variable. While collecting data, callers and texters recorded whether the target responded to the personal confirmation contact in the binary categorical variable Responded, but this variable was not used in the analyses as it eliminated the control group from the analysis. Finally, if possible, teams provided SDAN with information about if the person had previously volunteered (Past Volunteerism) and the person's output at the event (e.g., how many calls they made). Due to differences in team records and procedures, both variables proved hard to collect and were missing for the over half of the targets. Because of these reasons, these variables were not included in the analyses.

4.5 Procedure

In the Fall of 2018, SDAN identified and approached a handful of active teams with large member bases via email to gauge interest in the study. Two teams ultimately agreed to participate in the study. SDAN worked with those teams to identify a variety of events they were planning to hold that were about to provide several attendees for the sample. The teams included email and cell phone number as requirements on the sign-up forms for the events to allow SDAN to use this information freely to assign them to conditions. Teams either gave SDAN access to the sign-up form or they provided the information from the sign-up form to SDAN, and this information was pulled 24 hours before the event in order to maximize the amount of RSVPs in the sample. After identifying and removing individuals who met elimination criteria (people involved in or aware of the study, Sister District staff), SDAN randomized each event's sample into the four conditions and created a contact tracker spreadsheet that separated contacts by condition, provided scripts, names and phone numbers, and allowed callers and texters to record aspects of the interaction.

The day before the event, personal confirmation contacts were made according to the condition volunteers were assigned to and information was recorded in the contact tracker provided by SDAN. Contacts were made by members of the SDAN staff, event hosts, and team volunteers recruited by leadership members using either personal cell phone numbers or Google Voice numbers depending on volunteer preference. The events all took place over the period of October 11, 2018 - November 5, 2018 (the day before general election day). Teams tracked who attended the events, as well as the contribution made at the event if possible (e.g., the number of calls made at the event). They then provided this information to SDAN for analysis in the larger dataset.

5. Intent to treat analysis

First, a linear regression model was fit to determine the intent to treat effect of each condition in keeping with the method outlined by Green, Gerber, and Nickerson (2003). An intent to treat approach allows us to analyze the data with all individuals in the sample in the condition they were originally randomized into, regardless of whether or not those individuals were actually treated. Instead of inflating the efficacy of the treatments by removing all people who weren't fully treated, we can use a regression adjustment to determine the intent to treat effect and adjust it using the successful contact rate in each treatment condition. This analysis did not control for team membership or any of the other potential covariates.

An intent to treat approach was used because of the nature of the conditions and of phone capabilities. For conditions involving calling, several people answered the phone and did not receive a voicemail or a text message, essentially leaving them half-treated. For conditions involving texting, not all phones are able to receive text messages (numbers were read as untextable).

Table 1. Intent to treat analysis (attendance outcome)

Comparison with controls	Coeff.	Robust Std. Err.	Z Score	P Value	95% CI
Call + VM	0.1891892	0.1139752	1.66	0.097	-0.0341981-0.4125765
Call + Text	0.2992749	0.1068712	2.80	0.005*	0.0898111-0.5087386
Text	0.1621622	0.114666	1.41	0.157	-0.062579-0.3869033

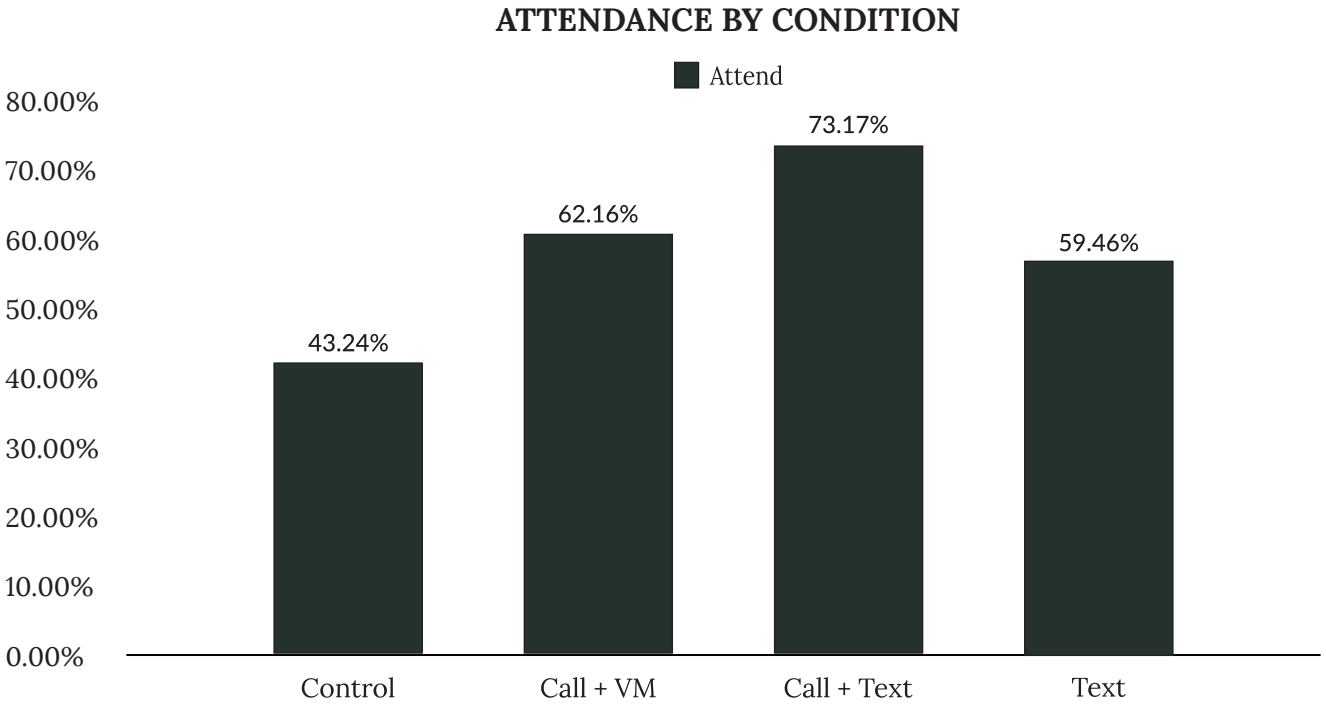
Table 2. Descriptives and adjustment (attendance outcome)

Attended?	Control	Call + VM	Call + Text	Text
No	21	14	11	15
Yes	16	23	30	22
Total	37	37	41	37
Attendance Rate	43.24%	62.16%	73.17%	59.46%
Intent to treat effect	--	18.92%	29.93%	16.22%
Contact rate	--	97.30%	92.68%	94.59%
Actual treatment effect	--	19.45%	32.29%	

*Contact rate represents the percentage of people for whom treatment could be completed, or in other words, the individuals whose phones had the ability to be contacted as the study dictated (either through calls or text messages).

The intent to treat analysis (see Table 1) reveals that the call + text condition has the highest intent to treat effect at 29.93%, which improves to 32.29% when you account for the fact that SDAN was only able to contact 92.68% of people in this condition. This indicates that calling and texting effectively led to an increase in attendance by 32.29 percentage points over emails only (controls). Overall, each of the treatment conditions had higher attendance rates than the control condition (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. RSVP and Attendance rates by individual treatment condition



6. Results

Multiple logistic regression was used to assess differences between conditions with respect to confirmation rate and event attendance among people included in the sample, after controlling for team. Two regression models were run, one with a combined treatment condition that compared all of the kinds of personal contact to the control condition, and another that compared the treatment conditions to the control condition separately. Models were run with both confirmation and attendance outcomes. In the case of the confirmation outcome, which was not recorded for participants in the control condition, the call and voicemail condition served as the comparison group in lieu of the control condition.

More formally, the central questions posed in the main model is whether there is an association between receiving different forms of personal confirmation communication (calls with voicemails, calls with text messages, or just text messages), and confirmation (defined as responding to the contact and confirming a plan to attend) and attendance (defined as attending the event the volunteer RSVP'd to attend). To test these questions, multivariate logistic regression models were used.

To test the confirmation outcome, Confirmation was regressed on the dummy variable for conditions (call and text, text), and the dummy variable for team (Team 2). Both the call + text and text conditions were statistically significant compared to the call and voicemail condition, indicating that significantly more people confirmed that they would attend (as opposed to not responding) when they received a text message as part of the contact as opposed to when they received a voicemail. The results indicate that members of both teams were statistically indistinguishable from one another in terms of their confirmation rates.

Table 3: Main Model 1 - Outcome Formal RSVP

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=Call + VM)				
Call + Text	4.105234 (2.08)	2.79	1.523281-11.06359	0.005*
Text	5.141168 (2.77)	3.04	1.79158-14.75324	0.002*
Team (Ref=Team 1)				
Team 2	1.600048 (0.69)	1.09	0.6867405-3.727979	.276

$x^2(3) = 13.79$, p = 0.0032, pseudo $R^2 = 0.0970$; n = 114

** Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

To test the attendance outcome, Attendance was regressed on the dummy variable for a combined treatment condition that included all 3 treatments (treatment), and the dummy variable for team (Team 2). The model confirmed that people who received personal contacts were statistically more likely to attend the event than people who did not (control subjects). Members of Team 2 were marginally more likely to attend the event than members of Team 1.

Table 4: Main Model 1 - Outcome Attended

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Treatment (all 3)	2.506595 (0.98)	2.36	1.168089-5.378886	0.018* †
Team (Ref=Team 1)				
Team 2	1.759356 (0.60)	1.66	0.9017082-3.432743	0.98

$x^2(2) = 8.31$, p = 0.0157 , pseudo $R^2 = 0.0406$; n = 152

*†Marginally significant ($p \leq 0.1$); * Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

To address the second hypothesis about the difference in efficacy between modes in influencing attendance, another set of regression models were run that broke the treatment condition out by mode. Attendance was regressed on the dummy variables for randomized condition (call + voicemail, call + text, text), and the dummy variable for team (Team 2). Here, only the call and text condition was statistically significant, and the call and voicemail and text conditions approached marginal significance, with the call and voicemail condition closer to marginally significant than the text condition. All 3 treatment conditions produced higher rates of event attendance than the control condition, regardless of statistical significance (see Table 2). The results indicate that the members of Team 2 were marginally more likely to attend the event than the members of Team 1.

Table 5: Main Model 2 - Outcome Attended

Variable	Odds Ratio (Robust Std. Err.)	Z score	95% Conf. Interval	p-value
Condition (Ref=control)				
Call + VM	2.190117 (1.05)	1.64	0.8558561-5.60446	0.102
Call + Text	3.677588 (1.80)	2.66	1.409098-9.59809	0.008*
Text	1.950861 (0.93)	1.40	0.7668792-4.962789	0.161
Team (Ref=Team 1)				
Team 2	1.774607 (0.61)	2.67	0.9054183-3.478206	0.095 †

$x^2(4) = 10.23$, p = 0.0367, pseudo $R^2 = 0.0500$; n = 152

*†Marginally significant ($p \leq 0.1$); * Statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)*

6. Discussion

Overall, the results are extremely promising, if underpowered at the current sample size (a series of two proportions power analyses show observed power estimates ranging from 0.21-0.70). The initial results indicate that more responses are elicited in both the call + text and text conditions than in the call + voicemail condition, which can be expected due to the difference in ease of responding to text messages vs voicemails. They also indicate that only volunteers in the call + text condition actually attended the event at statistically significantly higher rates than volunteers in the control condition, while the call + voicemail condition approached marginal significance over the control condition. Since results are underpowered and highly suggestive for both the call and voicemail and text conditions, these results should be substantiated in a larger sample size.

Looking at the gross attendance numbers suggests that it is likely true that all of the treatment conditions increased event attendance over the control condition, which had more flakers than attendees as opposed to the treatment conditions, which all had more attendees than flakers. Between this fact and the statistical significance of the call and text condition, these results are highly suggestive and deserve further exploration. Contact rates also affected the results, so future studies will restrict the sample to just cell phone numbers before randomization to ensure that we have higher contact rates.

Contact rates also affected the results slightly due to a few undeliverable numbers in a relatively small sample, so future studies will attempt to find a better way to vet cell phone information. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are also limited because this study was specifically done on Sister District volunteers, a very specific group of people (e.g., mostly women, mostly over 40, highly educated) and cannot necessarily be widely generalized beyond that context without caution.

Overall, organizer knowledge appears to be true. Practically, adding 6+ people to a volunteer force at an event is quite meaningful, indicating that personal contact is well worth it for confirmation, and that calling and texting may have the highest return of the 3 methods tested (as compared to controls who did not receive personal contact). Also, as event RSVP lists are often small and as most people don't answer the phone, this is a relatively low lift way to increase event attendance among RSVPs. Currently, it appears that calling and texting has the largest effect in increasing attendance over just emailing (the control condition), but results need to be replicated to ensure reliability.

Future directions for this work would be replicating this study in a larger sample or altering the messaging to try to test elements of persuasion or an emphasis on social identity.

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