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## ***Telephone Number Recall in Radio Advertising***

### ***Abstract***

Vanity toll-free numbers – telephone numbers that spell words or phrases – are a common response tool in many advertising media, including print, direct mail, outdoor, television and radio. Previous studies and anecdotal evidence suggest consumers retain toll-free vanity numbers better than ‘hybrid’ or numeric numbers, increasing the response rates of ads that include vanity numbers.

This study focuses on the recall rates of consumers using a variety of telephone number combinations in radio advertisements. The results show listeners are nearly six times more likely to remember a vanity phone number versus a numeric phone number and almost twice as likely to remember a pure vanity number versus a hybrid combination of vanity and numeric (such as 800-639-STUDY).

### ***800 Response***

800 Response, based in Burlington, Vermont, specializes in direct response marketing. Principals at Response have over 30 years of experience in the industry and have been featured in major industry publications including *Advertising Age*, *DM News*, and *Entrepreneur* as authors and subjects of articles on direct marketing and innovative ways for business to market their products and services. A previous study conducted by the organization, ‘Direct Response in Radio Advertising,’ is cited in the DMA’s **2001 Statistical Fact Book**<sup>1</sup>.

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## ***Executive Summary***

### ***Introduction***

A popular direct response mechanism in advertising is the toll-free number. Businesses incorporate toll-free numbers into a wide range of marketing communications, and consumers now expect such communications to include a toll-free number<sup>2</sup>. A recent study by Frost & Sullivan estimates 90% of Americans use toll-free numbers, with the use of toll-free services increasing explosively during the 1990s. Toll-free telephone services generated \$17.28 billion in revenues during 2000, the most recent year for which statistics are available<sup>3</sup>.

An earlier study by MATRIX Marketing (now part of Convergys) revealed that 84% of consumers had a positive opinion of companies providing a toll-free number, and 75% said calling an 800 number was the most appropriate way to contact a company for ordering<sup>4</sup>. Consequently, toll-free numbers are an extremely popular advertising response mechanism.

This study focuses on consumers' retention of toll-free numbers in radio advertising. Previous research revealed that twenty-nine percent of all radio advertisements include a toll-free number<sup>5</sup>.

### ***Findings***

Vanity 800 numbers were recalled by nearly 60% of the subjects of this study after only one exposure to a radio advertisement, and over 95% of the subjects recognized the 800 exchange as toll-free. The newer toll-free exchanges (866 and 877) were not widely recognized by subjects of the study as being toll-free numbers. Even the 888 exchange was not recognized as 'toll-free' by 20% of respondents – and only 18% of respondents knew that 866 was a toll-free exchange. The recall rate for non-vanity numbers was extremely low.

The results of this study confirm the value of vanity numbers as an advertising response vehicle, particularly in the context of radio advertising, and also demonstrate the degree to which consumers still associate 'toll-free' with the 800 exchange.

## **Objectives**

This study documents the retention of a variety of toll-free numbers when used as a direct response mechanism in radio advertising. A particular objective was to determine consumers' ability to retain different types of phone numbers. Specifically, respondents were surveyed on their ability to recall vanity, numeric, and hybrid numbers. Additionally, toll-free prefixes such as 800, 888, 877, and 866 were also tested.

## **Methodology**

Working with a team of three student researchers from Champlain College, Burlington, Vermont, 800 Response developed two surveys to measure subjects' ability to retain various permutations of toll-free numbers. Subjects from the local community listened to a compact disc containing radio advertisements. The format of the disc consisted of segments of two sixty-second radio spots for different businesses and then a weather forecast. Subjects were tested for number retention after listening to each segment. Subjects were given the opportunity to listen to each spot only one time.

*Step 1: Recording the ads* –An existing pool of radio spots from an out-of-market radio station were remastered at Hall Communications, Inc. of Burlington, Vermont. The radio spots included the following numbers:

- 800 vs. 877 Vanity
    - ♦ 800-NEW-LIGHTS
    - ♦ 877-NEW-LIGHTS
  - 800 VS. 866 Vanity
    - ♦ 800-NEW-JOBS
    - ♦ 866-NEW-JOBS
  - 800 Vanity vs. 800 Numeric
    - ♦ 800-NEW-ROOF
    - ♦ 800-631-8246
  - 800 Vanity vs. 800 Hybrid
    - ♦ 800-NEW-STUDY
    - ♦ 800-639-STUDY
  - 800 VS. 888 VANITY
    - ♦ 800-NEW-ACTOR
    - ♦ 888-NEW-ACTOR
- Following each set of advertisements, a sixteen second weather forecast was included to buffer the ad segments.

- Every advertisement was sixty seconds in length.

*Step 2: Questionnaire Design and Development* – Not all of the variables were tested in both surveys. The different variables were divided between the two surveys. In addition to questions testing the phone numbers in the radio advertisements, subjects also responded to a variety of general questions as follows:

- Was there music in the background?
- Was it a male or female voice?
- Was an Internet address given?
- What was the name of the company?
- Demographic questions (Age, Gender)

These questions served to disguise the purpose of the study (i.e., quantifying number retention) and also gathered demographic information on the study subjects.

*Step 3: Administering the Survey/Questionnaire* – 800 Response asked the student researchers to survey a sample size of at least 100 subjects, and that the sample cover a wide demographic range. The researchers ultimately surveyed 110 subjects, and the number of surveys was split equally.

**Charts**

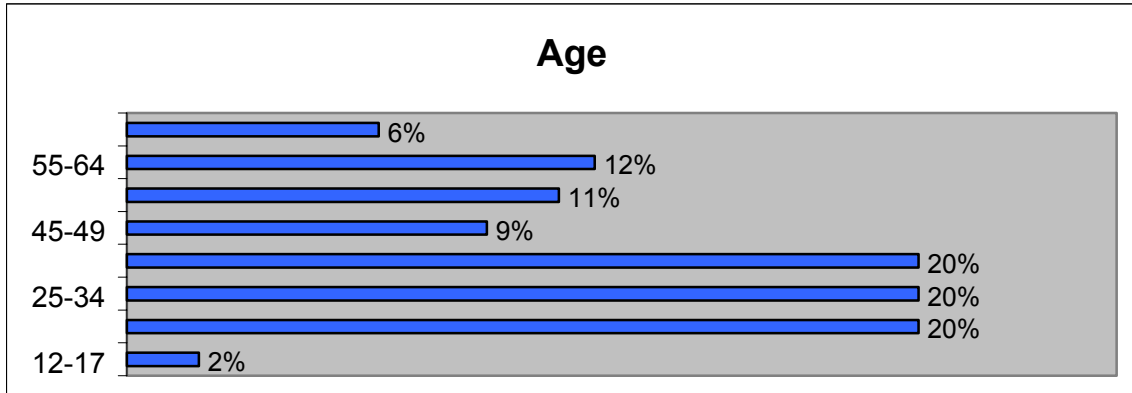


Chart 1: Ages of subjects in the study.

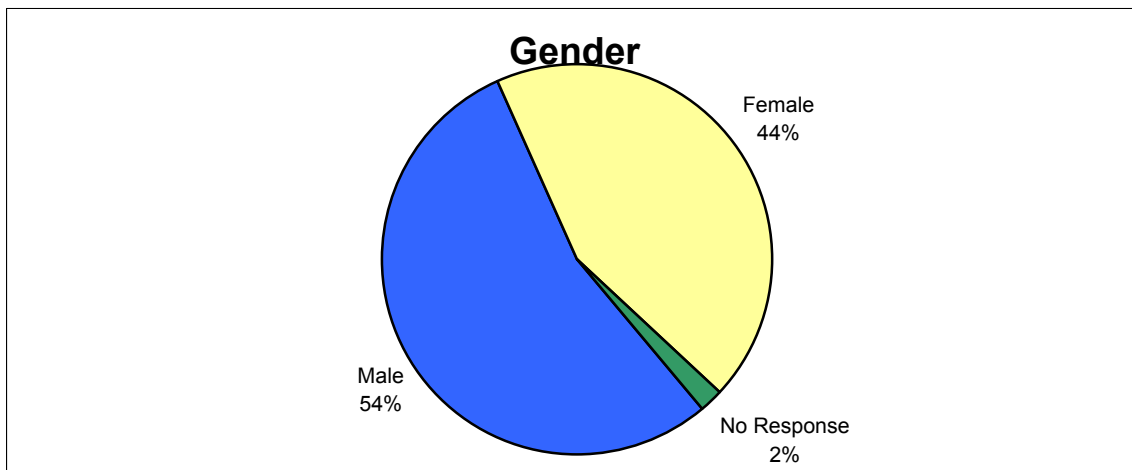


Chart 2: Gender breakdown of study subjects.

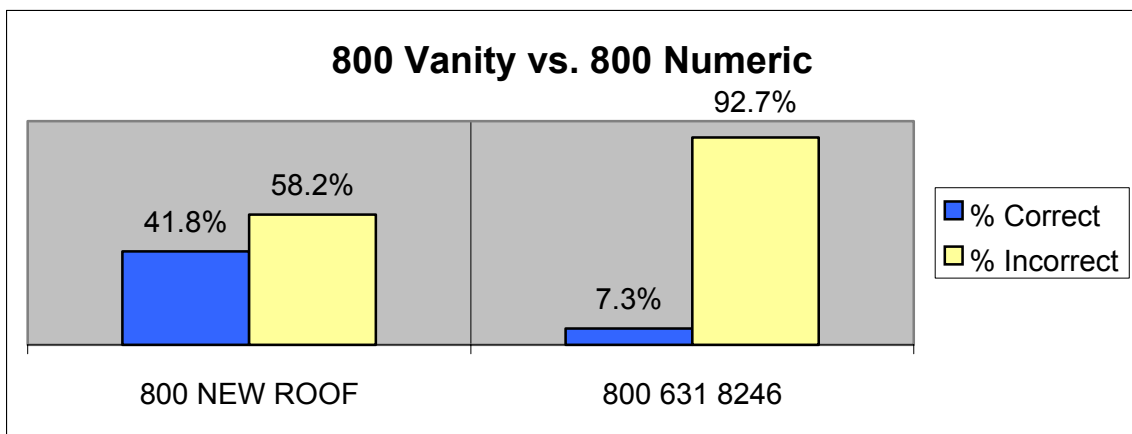


Chart 3: Results of testing recall of vanity numbers against numerics.

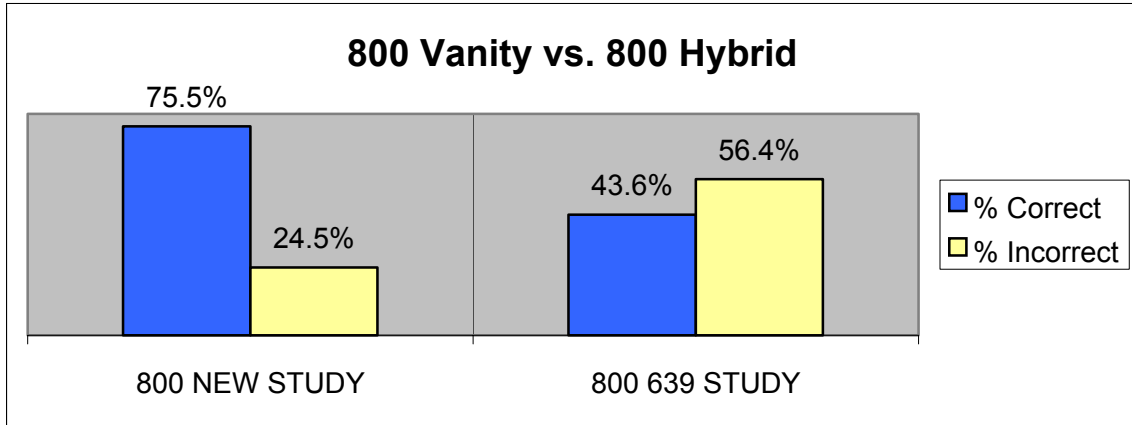


Chart 4: Results of testing recall of 800 vanity numbers against hybrid numbers.

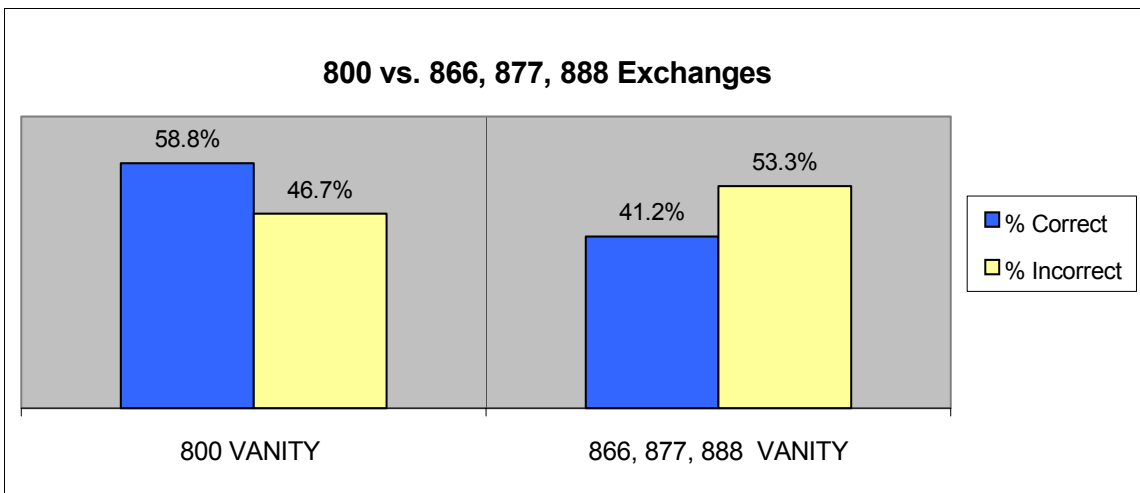


Chart 5: Results of testing recall of 800 vanity numbers against vanity numbers using the newer toll free exchanges (866, 877, 888).

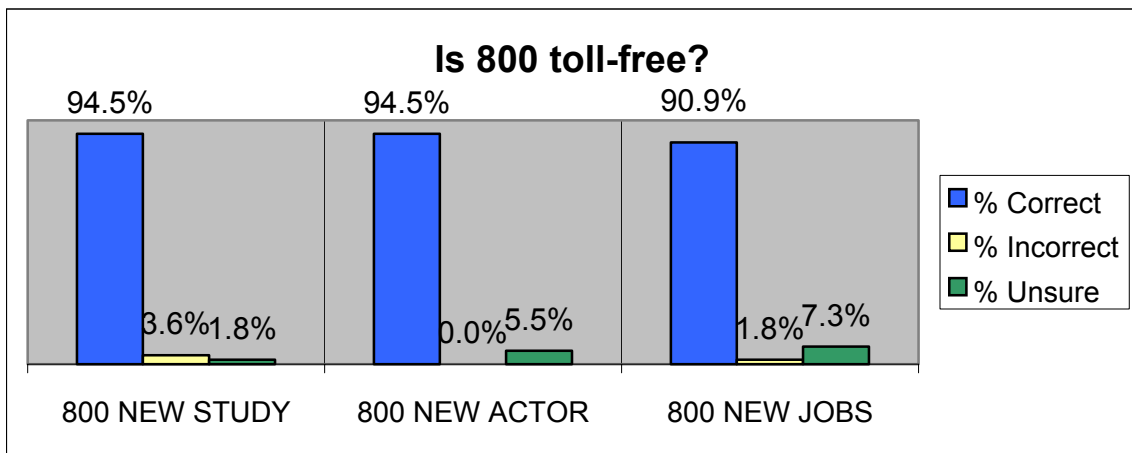


Chart 6: Percentage of subjects that recognized '800' as a toll free exchange.

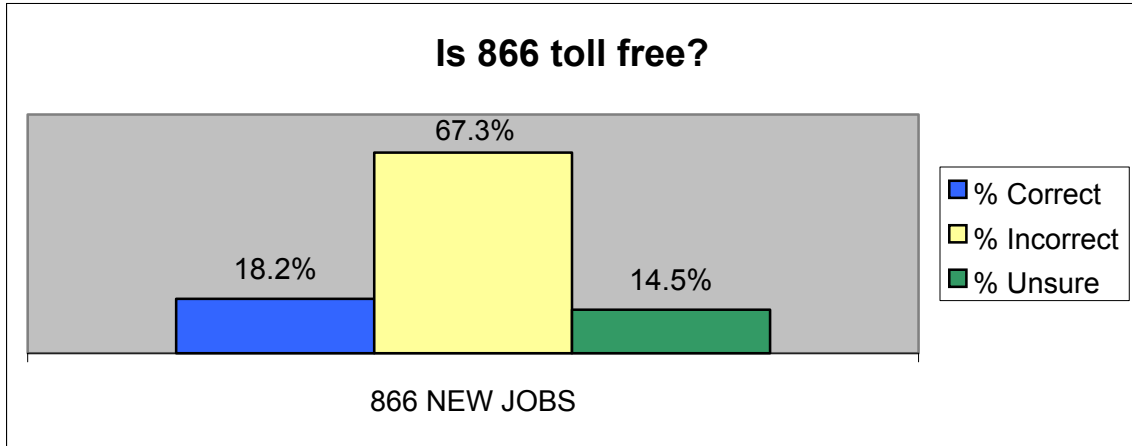


Chart 7: Percentage of subjects that recognized '866' as a toll free exchange.

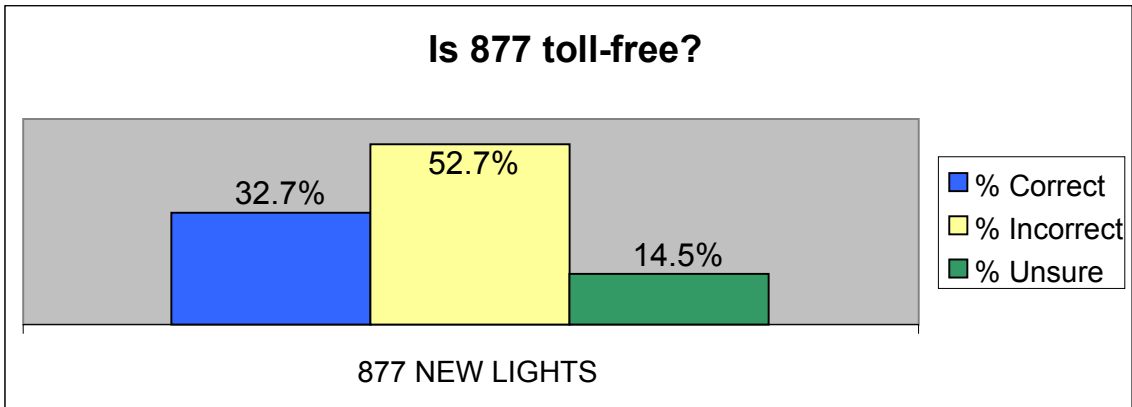


Chart 8: Percentage of subjects that recognized '877' as a toll free exchange.

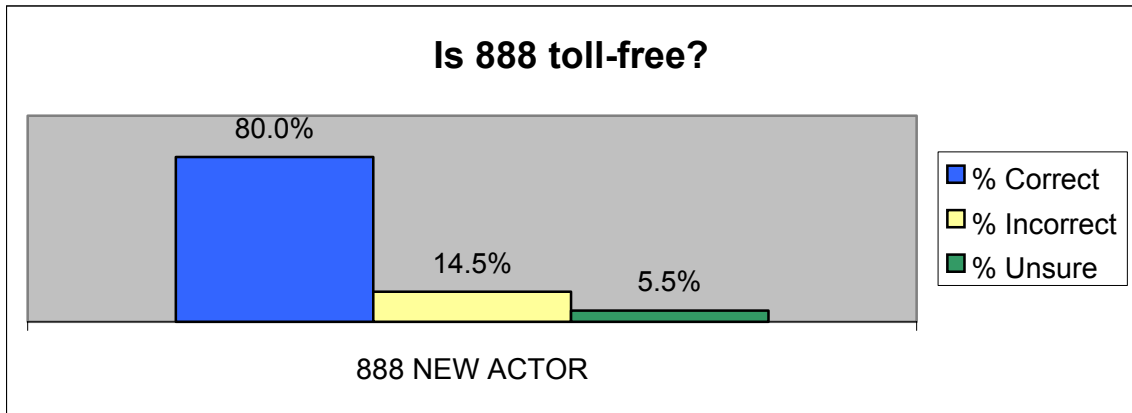


Chart 9: Percentage of subjects that recognized '888' as a toll free exchange.

***Conclusion***

This study was deliberately limited in scope: It measured the subjects' ability to recall toll-free numbers after a single exposure to a radio advertisement. Based on a single ad exposure, the results of this study reveal the extent to which consumers are able to recall vanity numbers, and vanity 800 numbers in particular. The results also show that even after the introduction of new 888, 877 and 866 toll-free exchanges, consumers still strongly associate 'toll-free' primarily with the 800 toll-free exchange.

Of the numbers tested, vanity 800 numbers will continue to be the most readily remembered. Although vanity 888 numbers have increased in consumer awareness over the years, 20% of respondents still did not recognize the exchange as toll-free. The vanity numbers utilizing the 877 and 866 toll free exchanges are an even weaker substitution; as only 33% of respondents recognized '877' as toll-free, and even fewer – 18% – were aware that '866' is a toll free exchange.

Not surprisingly, consumers had the most difficult time recalling pure numeric phone numbers. The response rate for this variable was extremely low. Hybrid phone numbers provided a more favorable retention rate. 'Pure' vanity 800 numbers were nearly twice as retainable.

As businesses continue to use toll-free telephone numbers as a direct response mechanism, and as the number of area codes expands (area codes in use in the United States increased by 80% in the 1990s, and as many as seventy new area codes may be required in the near future<sup>6</sup>), the use of vanity numbers will continue to increase. Given the strong association in the minds of consumers of 'toll-free' and the 800 prefix, the existing pool of vanity 800 numbers will remain extremely desirable for use in advertisements in radio and other media.

***Endnotes***

1. Chernis, Anna (editor), (2001) **Statistical Fact Book 2001**, 23<sup>rd</sup> Edition, The Direct Marketing Association, New York, p. 30.
2. Morrow, Kathleen, and Tankersley, Clint (1994), “An Exploratory Study of Consumer Usage and Satisfaction with 800 and 900 Numbers,” *Journal of Direct Marketing*, 8 (4) pp. 53-57.
3. Frost & Sullivan, (2002), **US Toll-free Services Market** (Executive Summary, available to subscribers of [www.icbtollfree.com](http://www.icbtollfree.com)), p. 1.
4. *Notebook* [unattributed column] (1995, June), **Marketing Tools**, p. 34
5. 800 Response (2000), “Direct Response in Radio Advertising”, p. i.
6. Federal Communications Commission website ([www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)), (2002) “Area Codes: Frequently Asked Questions”, document located at [http://www.fcc.gov/Bureaus/Common\\_Carrier/Factsheets/areacode.html](http://www.fcc.gov/Bureaus/Common_Carrier/Factsheets/areacode.html)

**Researchers**

This study, *Telephone Recall in Radio Advertising*, was conducted by 800 Response's Vice President of Marketing, Laura S. Noonan, with assistance from Jeff Gauthier, Marketing Coordinator. Survey field work and data compilation were performed by Elizabeth Claflin, Vickie Crocker, and Kerry Thomas, students in the business program at Champlain College, Burlington, Vermont.

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Reprints of the study are available free of charge to members of the press, professional organizations, and clients of 800 Response.

**Master Survey**Circle  
appropriate  
answers

Survey #1

---

A. Age:                    12-17                    18-24                    25-34                    35-44  
                                   45-49                    50-54                    55-64                    65+

Gender:                    Male                    Female

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B. Track 1:    800 NEW ROOF  
 Track 2:    800 639 STUDY  
 Track 3:    WEATHER

1.)Was there music in the background of the first ad? Yes            No            Don't know  
 2.)Was it a male or female voice in the first ad?            Male            Female            Both  
 3.)What was the phone number for the first ad?  
 4.)What was the phone number for the second ad?

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C. Track 4:    800 NEW STUDY  
 Track 5:    877 NEW LIGHTS  
 Track 6:    WEATHER

5.)What was the phone number in the first ad?  
 6.)Was the number toll-free?    Yes            No            Don't know  
 7.)What was the phone number in the second ad?  
 8.)Was the number toll-free?    Yes            No            Don't know

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D. Track 7:    800 NEW ACTOR  
 Track 8:    866 NEW JOBS  
 Track 9:    WEATHER

9.)What was the phone number in the first ad?  
 10.)Was the number toll-free?    Yes            No            Don't know  
 11.)What was the phone number in the second ad?

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12.) Was the number toll-free?

Yes

No

Don't know

Survey #2

Circle  
appropriate  
answers

A. Age:                    12-17                    18-24                    25-34                    35-44

                                  45-49                    50-54                    55-64                    65+

Gender:                    Male                    Female

B. Track 10: 800 NEW STUDY  
 Track 11: 800 631 8246  
 Track 12: WEATHER

1.) Was an internet address given in the first ad?    Yes    No    Don't know  
 2.) Was there music in the background of the first ad? Yes    No    Don't know  
 3.) What was the phone number for the first ad?  
 4.) What was the phone number for the second ad?

C. Track 13: 800 NEW LIGHTS  
 Track 14: 800 639 STUDY  
 Track 15: WEATHER

5.) What was the name of the company in the first ad?  
 6.) Was the second ad a male or female voice?    Male    Female    Don't know  
 7.) What was the phone number for the first ad?  
 8.) What was the phone number for the second ad?

- D. Track 16: 800 NEW JOBS
- Track 17: 888 NEW ACTOR
- Track 18: WEATHER

- 9.)What was the phone number in the first ad?
  - 10.)Was the number toll-free? Yes No Don't know
  - 11.)What was the phone number in the second ad?
  - 12.)Was the number toll-free? Yes No Don't know
-