

signature

Leave the
Competition
Behind—Yes,
Even in This
Economy

28 SURVEY SAVVY HOW GREAT READER RESEARCH BOOSTS YOUR EDGE

32 CHARLENE LI GETTING PAST FEAR OF SOCIAL MEDIA MISTAKES

42 SKY HIGH AMBITION EAA TAKES FLIGHT WITH MAGAZINE REBIRTH



Back to the Basics

While the Internet makes it easier to conduct a readership survey, gleaning the information you need is still a challenge. By paying attention to just a handful of basics, you can ensure reliable, actionable results.

By Lewis Copulsky

There is an old proverb that goes “if you do not know about a problem or a misdeed, you will not be able to make yourself unhappy by worrying about it.” In the world of association publishing though, if you do not know about a problem, you will be unable to fix it and may well lose readers and members as a result.

Uncovering problems before they get out of hand is just one reason to conduct a readership survey. You might want to gather demographic information for prospective advertisers or evaluate readers’ needs and interests to better shape content. You might also be contemplating a change in areas such as format (e.g. print to digital), pricing, or frequency and want to solicit reader input before making a decision.

While the Internet may have made it easier to conduct a readership survey, conducting one that provides the information you need is still a challenge. By paying attention to just a handful of basics, though, you can help ensure reliable, actionable results:

- 1. Keep it clear and concise.** Your last readership survey was conducted five years ago and now you finally have the time and budget to conduct a new one. You’ve got ten pages of questions you want answered and your advertising director has another five pages.

Unfortunately, you’ll need to do some serious editing if you want anyone to complete the survey. Ideally, your survey should take from 10 to 15 minutes to go through. Beyond that, you’ll find readers either rushing through it without giving any thought to their answers, or giving up completely.

Not only do you need to limit the length of the questionnaire, but also make sure your questions are clear – time spent

puzzling over what you're asking is time not spent thinking about the answer. In addition, answer choices need to be clear, and they need to cover all possibilities.

2. Speak to your reader. As an association professional, you know how to speak your members' language, and this should hold true in your survey as well. Most likely, your reader is not a publishing expert, so avoid publishing industry terminology. For example, if you're seeking reader input on a possible change to your magazine's size, don't just offer as choices tabloid, standard, and digest – include the dimensions as well.

When asking for reader feedback, focus on the things they are likely to care about. As an association-sponsored publication, you should already have some sense of who your readers are and what they care about. Don't waste time gathering information you already have. Use the survey as an opportunity to gain deeper insight into the issues at hand.

3. Choose the right methodology.

There are distinct advantages to using either mail or online reader surveys. A mail survey can reach a more complete cross-section of your readership, achieve greater participation, and allow for more thoughtful responses. An online survey can be less expensive, take less time, and be more easily done in-house with various web tools.

If your association lacks email addresses for a significant portion of members, and especially if the gap is concentrated in a specific demographic, an online survey may yield distorted results. Response rate will also affect the reliability of your survey findings. A mail survey typically

“When asking for reader feedback, focus on the things they are likely to care about.”

—Lewis Copulsky, Lewis & Clark

generates a higher response rate than an online survey, although this may vary depending on the target audience.

With no printing and mailing expenses, an online survey should be less expensive to conduct. While you would typically allow respondents up to a month to return a mail survey, online surveys are usually in the field for just one or two weeks. A variety of tools exist to create online surveys and analyze data. Many are low cost and require little training to use.

4. Ask and tell. Conducting a successful reader survey involves two parts: (1) asking the right questions, and (2) communicating your findings throughout your department and association. Don't avoid asking a question because you're afraid of the answer; but, at the same time, don't waste your readers' time asking questions if you're not going to use the information gathered.

Typically, a reader survey will generate a thick stack of charts and tables, which you will no doubt eagerly devour. However, there will be others in your organization that will need to have the information boiled down to a few pages. Take some time to review your results and identify a handful of important findings. Simple charts work best; frequently, a visual representation will help clarify relationships not evident in a data table.

5. Benchmark. A reader survey should not be a one-time event. Some associations conduct a reader survey once a year; at an absolute minimum,

plan to conduct one every five years. A significant revamp of your publication or changes in your association or industry that affect the information needs of members are also times when a reader survey can be especially useful.

Incorporate a core set of questions that are repeated from one survey to the next. Often, an association will look at the results of a finished survey and wonder how they compare with other publications. Every association and every readership is different, though, and the most valuable comparison is with yourself. By benchmarking important measures of reader involvement and satisfaction, you'll be able to track your publication over time and detect trends early on.

The Role of Social Media

While the basic approach to conducting a reader survey is unlikely to change in the next few years, the growth of social media offers additional opportunities to reach out to your readers on timely topics. Networking sites like Facebook allow you to rapidly conduct a focused poll of readers on a specific topic.

If your publication is available online, you can survey site visitors. There are even tools that allow you to conduct research via mobile phones. Just as your association needs to incorporate these new media into its overall communications strategy, there is a place for them in the research arena as well. ■

Lewis Copulsky (lewis@lewisclarkinc.com) is principal of Lewis & Clark.



Meet Guest Designer Sawsan Chalabi: 'Illustrations Add Warmth to Layouts'

Sawsan Chalabi, art director of the American Chiropractic Association and founder of Bird Cage Graphics, was born in Lebanon and raised in Ghana. A member of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, she has received multiple awards for outstanding

visual and technical skills. Using illustration, she evokes emotion in her designs to touch the viewer and enhance the message.

In this layout, she depicts the expert as much as their expertise. “Survey” suggests a plethora of data, papers, journals, books;

“New Media” iconifies social networks; and “Back to Basics” uses an allusion of survey elements invoking an impression of cave drawings.

Additional art and information about the artist can be found at www.BirdCageGraphics.com. ■