

Saving Money on Your Next Readership Study *(Lewis Copulsky, Principal, Lewis&Clark)*

Magazine publishing has never been for the faint of heart, but in recent years it has become increasingly difficult to succeed financially. Readership studies (and other market research) are frequently put in the “optional spending” category, but not conducting them on a timely basis can put you at risk of losing both readers and advertisers. There are, however, ways to trim the cost of readership research short of skipping it entirely.

Five Ways to Save Money on Research:

- 1) Scale back questionnaire length. For many years the standard mail readership survey was based on a four-page questionnaire. Cutting this back can save money on printing and data entry. To do this effectively you will have to be able to separate the “need-to-know” questions from the “nice-to-know” ones.
- 2) Trim the size of sample. A standard sample size for mail readership surveys has been 1,000 readers, but this is not fixed in stone. Ideally you want between 350 and 400 completed surveys (depending on your circulation). If, based on past experience, you can reasonably expect a response rate that will generate this number from a smaller sample size, you can consider this option.
- 3) Conduct the survey online. With an online survey, you can save on printing and postage as well as labor for mailing and data entry. To be sure that results are reflective of your entire readership you will need email addresses for most of your readers, with no one demographic under-represented. Be prepared for a lower response rate than a mail survey, meaning you will need to send a larger number of survey invitations.
- 4) Handle the survey in-house. Particularly if you are doing your research online, it can be feasible to conduct a readership survey without outside help. Be aware though, that even if you have the expertise to design and implement the research, there are some pitfalls. If your goal is to better understand your readers’ needs, you run the risk of viewing them through your own preconceived ideas about your publication. If you will be using data gathered in the survey to approach advertisers, your results may not carry the same weight as those from an independent source.
- 5) Involve other departments or outside interested parties. You may be able to gain additional research dollars from others in your organization who want to piggy-back on your survey with a few questions of their own. Similarly, advertisers may be willing to pay to have specific questions added to the survey, the results of which only they will see.

Finally, before you set your budget for your next research project here are a few things to keep in mind:

- A large part of the cost of readership research is in designing the questionnaire and analyzing results. These tend to be fairly fixed regardless of some of the methodological adjustments discussed above. Consider that you may lose long-term value from your investment at the price of some short-term savings.
- Don’t skip the incentive. Traditionally, mail surveys are sent with a token \$1 incentive for participation (i.e., \$1,000 for a sample of 1000); for online surveys, respondents are frequently offered a chance to enter a drawing for one or several gift certificates, the total of which may range from \$500 to \$1,000. While tempting, you should resist cutting back in this area, as a low response rate will affect the reliability of your results.
- A good research provider will happily work with you to design and implement a survey methodology that meets your objectives without sacrificing quality, while staying within your budget. Don’t hesitate to have this discussion with them.