
National School
Public Relations
Association
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**June/July
2020**

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School-Family-Community Connections

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Surveys, Part 1

What do they think? Why and how to listen to your community

Schools must engage their communities to earn support for programs and election initiatives. There are many tools to reach people through two-way communication, which brings an expectation for meaningful, two-way communication and community involvement. But there is so much noise in today's media environment. It is hard to be heard and hard to build trust and credibility. It can also be hard to gather input on issues outside of current public attention.

Stakeholders — parents, business owners, staff, students, community members, taxpayers — want to be “in the know” about their schools. They want to know their opinions are sought and considered, and they have ready access to key decision-makers. They expect fast responses with clear explanations. And they resent any organization that only listens to “influential” opinions or the loudest voices for important decisions.

Fulfilling public expectations requires evolving our engagement approaches. Surveys that take four weeks to design, administer and analyze are very valuable for purposes such as finance election strategy, but they are not the right tool for social media users and texters who want immediate attention.

It is valuable to seek opinions from all corners of the community, but that's a big task when districts are balancing limited resources and the desire to listen to and respond to all community members adequately. Here are some ideas for gathering public opinion in ways that build trust without a high cost.

The self-selected online survey

This non-scientific short online survey allows a wide invitation to anyone and everyone who might want a say on the issue. The survey platform can be any online survey tool (e.g., Survey Monkey, Zoomerang). It costs very little and produces fairly comprehensive reports.

You can email a link or include it in regular printed communications. Mail a postcard invitation to every potential respondent with the URL for the survey and information about how to get a paper version for people who prefer a hard copy.

If used regularly, this survey tool can produce a vast database of opinions about your district that can be formatted for various uses and sorted by demographic groups. Results can be widely published and used for evaluating programs, making budget decisions and planning future programs.

(Over)

The advantage of this kind of survey is that everyone has the opportunity to express an opinion, and the process is fast and cheap. In some cases, the survey questions provide new information and help people know more about the organization.

The disadvantage of this kind of survey is that you don't have the statistically accurate results you would have if you had conducted a formal, random-sample survey. To extend the results to the greater community, you would need 40 percent of all possible respondents to take the survey. Forty percent is the statistical rule of thumb for validity in voluntary written surveys. Reaching that response rate is difficult to achieve. The people who tend to take this kind of survey are the members of your fan club and your detractors, leaving out those who are less interested but may share their opinions after an action has been taken.

The respondent-controlled online or phone survey

This type of survey, which gathers opinions from a pre-determined group of respondents, is increasingly used by firms and organizations. Some of these firms draw a random sample of people whose opinions they will seek on various issues. They then contact these potential respondents and ask them if they will take future surveys for the firm. Some firms offer a small incentive, such as credit toward purchases or free admission to events, in return for every survey they submit. Other organizations find volunteers who fit various profiles and promise to take surveys when asked.

Another way to use this survey method and assure a fairly accurate sample is to build a large pool of potential respondents. In this case, you have information about each respondent, including their age, geographic location, whether they have a school-age child in their home, how long they have lived in the community, or any other factor you might need to know when selecting respondents for a survey. Each of these people has agreed to take your surveys when asked. Surveys can be administered as needed to respondents with characteristics most desired that particular survey.

Any electronic survey, including this or the open online survey can be designed in many ways for many purposes. The survey can ask respondents to give their reactions to materials such as a sample publication, logo, marketing materials, short video clips or other visuals.

A respondent-controlled survey may be placed online or administered as a phone survey. If it is a phone survey, callers are staff members or others who have been trained in interview techniques that do not influence answers. If the survey is online and the desired number of responses has not been reached by the time the survey closes, some firms phone those who promised to take the survey but have not yet done so and urge them to respond.

The advantage of the controlled-sample survey is having more accurate results for a particular group than those obtained in the online survey. The main disadvantages are the necessity of building a database of random-sample respondents, obtaining needed information about those respondents and getting them to take the surveys.

Focus groups

A focus group is more labor-intensive, but it can provide very insightful input. It consists of 10 to 15 carefully selected participants who meet with a skilled facilitator who asks probing questions about a given subject. Focus groups are especially valuable for identifying and discussing potential attitudes and reactions. They may be used to glean a specific piece of information, explore potential questions for a more comprehensive survey or follow up on survey responses to further define the attitudes behind those responses.

Participants should be selected from groups that are likely to have the strongest opinion about the subject and, ideally, they are representative of your audience. Invitations should be extended personally and with an appeal to specific interests in your district or in recent decisions.

Focus groups generally last about an hour. The facilitator should have a neutral attitude about the discussion topic and should be skilled in guiding deep thought and probing for answers. Someone who is very proficient at taking copious notes should record as many comments as possible, and participants should be assured that their comments will be anonymous. Audio recording is often helpful, although videotaping can be distracting and may intimidate some participants.

The benefit of focus group research is the opportunity for face-to-face communications, group conversations and the ability to probe for reactions, deeper answers and rationale.

The disadvantage is that the results have limitations. They are the opinions of the 15 or 20 people who participated rather than a true sampling of community opinion. It is difficult to get the attendance of those who are not already interested in the subject unless participants are paid for attending, something most public agencies are reluctant to do.

Be clear about your goals

No matter what method you use, know what you want and be sure you get it. And be sure that your team and leaders understand the limitations of the results. A focus group, for example, is a useful glimpse of some opinions; it is not a comprehensive look at the views of your community.

The key factors in selecting the right research method are

1. Knowing exactly what you want to learn. Discard the things that would be “nice to know” explore goal topics in depth.
2. Determining whose opinions you need. In some cases, you may need to provide an opportunity for the entire community to participate. In other cases, you may want those who will be most affected by a decision.

To wrap up your survey process, be sure to report results to those who participated or were invited to participate. You may also want to report results to the entire community. This sends the message that you value and are using the information you gained and sets the stage for increasingly successful research. Community members will realize you do value their opinions and it is worth their time to participate in future surveys.

Contributed by Gay Campbell, communications consultant