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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## Survey data: Still valuable and much harder to get

*When it comes to surveys and gauging public opinion, the old ways may not work anymore.*

Not so long ago, when we wanted to measure the community's pulse on a given subject, get their advice, or gauge support of a given issue, we turned to surveys. For really important issues, such as an upcoming bond measure, we used random-sample surveys to obtain accurate readings. These were usually phone surveys, but sometimes they were printed or sent via email.

Now we live in the age of unlisted and blocked phone numbers, reluctance to reveal email addresses, and canceled landlines. Our community members are barraged with spam phone calls and texts, so they ignore anything that is not vitally important to them. When caller ID says "school district," even parents of school-age children may choose not to answer.

### Finding out what your community wants and thinks

In many communities, only the most-experienced survey firm, armed with a special method for reaching a random sample of community members, can pull off an accurate survey that tells you true community sentiment, and their services are expensive. That means schools must be more creative than ever to find ways of listening to and involving the community while also relying on old ways that continue to work.

School districts that consistently maintain community support rely on time-tested successful ways of communicating and constantly search for new ways to assess community attitudes. When making critically important decisions, they ask the following questions and establish guidelines for obtaining the information they need:

#### 1. What do you really need to know?

Whose opinions are really important for this decision? What do we really need as opposed to what would be nice to have? Can we narrow the potential audience into a small enough group to assure we get a valid sample that reflects accurate opinions? Do we really need the opinions of every community member or only those who will be impacted by the decision? If we are formulating a policy that only affects students and parents, do we really need the opinions of our wider community? If we are looking for guidance for placing a measure on the ballot, do we really need the opinions of people who never vote?

#### 2. How do we get responses from people whose opinions we need?

If you truly need the opinion of the entire community, it is unlikely you will be able to get a true measurement without hiring a professional survey firm to conduct a comprehensive, non-

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biased survey. You will want to look at the firm's methods and make sure they have a way to reach a true random sample of the group you want surveyed.

If you can narrow the audience, you may be able to forego hiring an outside firm and conduct the survey yourself. If you need only the opinions of parents, you will want to look at communications methods that work with your parents. Do you have good results when you rely on phone calls, email, snail mail, instant messaging or other electronic messaging? Have you tried an online survey in the past and, if so, did you get responses from a true random sample that accurately reflects grade level, school, parts of town and other demographics? If you will place a measure on a future ballot, did you get a true sampling of those who will actually vote? Or did you only receive replies from those interested in the subject?

If you have to hire an outside firm, ask extensive questions about how they will obtain the true random sample you desire. What methods do they use? How do they formulate and test the survey questions? What is their success rate for obtaining a true random sample? If this is a survey leading up to a ballot measure, how close did this firm's survey results come to the actual election results?

It may be possible to get the measurements you need without an actual survey. If you are making significant decisions over the long term, can you establish an opinion leader group whose members communicate with and represent the group(s) whose opinions you need? If you have established a key communicator network, does the membership of that group accurately represent your community composition? If not, can you expand that group to include people who represent the groups you need to reach? More importantly, will each of your key communicators agree to gather the opinions you need in an unbiased way and report the results back to you?

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*Contributed by Gay Campbell, communications consultant*