



MEMBER RESEARCH

Sue Froggatt, Independent Membership Consultant, discusses various approaches to conducting membership research.

Secretary At Work: Reviewed October 2012

In this article Sue Froggatt highlights the different types of research options, including the advantages of e-surveys and the key questions people ask when conducting research.

A common problem for membership associations is a tendency to be disproportionately influenced by active members who engage with staff on a regular basis. Their views may or may not reflect those of the majority of members. You therefore need to research the views of a much wider range of members when making key decisions.

I specialise in membership recruitment and retention. In this area alone you need to research at least four basic areas:

1. What factors are critical to attracting new members.
2. Why prospective members do not join (fail-to-join research).
3. What factors are critical to retaining members.
4. Why members leave (exit or lapsed member research).

Types of research

There are many different ways to conduct research. Traditionally the focus has been on postal questionnaires for quantitative research or focus groups for qualitative research where you can ask more open-ended questions.

Increasingly e-surveys and e-polls are the latest format and are great because they are fast, easy to analyse and flexible. Jane Broomfield of Intellegentia Ltd is an expert on e-surveys and commented: "One of the biggest advantages of online surveys is that you can build in intelligence so that each respondent only sees the questions that are relevant based on their previous answer. This reduces the size of the survey and improves response rates." They are popular for needs assessments, conference evaluations, readership studies, salary and economic surveys.

You will find more information about using e-surveys at www.suefroggatt.com.

Intercept research is also a handy approach to get lots of views in a short space of time and gives you the opportunity to get face-to-face reaction and ask open questions. This is where you 'intercept' people at a conference or exhibition and ask them to answer a few questions.

Key questions

Some of the most common questions that arise when conducting research are as follows:

- ✎ How do I make sure I get a good response? Firstly make sure it gets attention. You could provide incentives for members to take notice of it. For example, one association gets 100% response to its exit research because it pays lapsed members to complete it because the information is so valuable. Other ways to improve response are:
 - a. To highlight at the start what the benefit is to the member of spending valuable time filling it in;
 - b. to choose a controversial or topical issue;
 - c. to let members know that it is coming;
 - d. to make it anonymous;
 - e. do not make it too long; make it easy to fill in;
 - f. to personalise it.
- ✎ How many replies do I need to have to be 'statistically confident' in the results? If you know the size of the total membership group, then you can refer to a confidence table. These are used by statisticians and quantitative researchers. For example, if the size of the total population is 1,000 you will need 161 responses to be 95% confident in your results plus or minus 5%.
- ✎ How can I decide how much weight to give the results? Choosing a reliable sample size only forms part of the picture. You also need to consider the origin of the research to understand its focus, the design of the research, how the information was collected and handled, the independence of the people involved in interpreting what the results mean and how the findings have been reported and disclosed.
- ✎ How much information should we ask for? Your responsibility is to only ask for what you really need to know and are prepared to feedback to members. If a member has spent time completing a survey, always give them the option of seeing the results.

Member research is a huge area and a vital exercise for any association that wants to keep in touch with its members and community. The good news is that conducting research in the right way has a positive impact because members feel they are being involved and included, and involvement is one of the most important factors influencing retention.

Sue Froggatt 2010

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