



Opinion Surveys Uncover Cultural Preferences

People's country of origin can affect their perspective on your organization, as a recent survey makes clear.

BY PETER COOLSEN

When the leaders of Soroptimist International of the Americas (SIA), an international professional women's organization, completed their strategic planning a few years ago, they decided that they needed a better understanding of their membership in order to address critical challenges which they were facing around the world. Like most other international service organizations, they were experiencing a declining membership in North America (Canada and the United States) and significant growth in Asia, Central and South America.

To gain insights from their members, SIA's leaders asked a U.S.-based consulting firm, Leadership Development Services/Surcon International, to construct a questionnaire. Translated into five languages, the survey was sent to a sampling of SIA's approximately 50,000 members in Asia, Canada, Japan, Central America, South America, and the United States.

The survey asked member opinions about a number of issues including: reasons for becoming a member, time commitment and club service priorities, importance of projects and programs of service, and member satisfaction with

various aspects of the international organization. The results proved to be very enlightening and offered important information about the differing opinions of the SIA international membership.

One of the findings of the survey was that members differ considerably, by country, in their opinions about issues related to membership. In essence, while there was considerable concurrence among member opinions in the five countries analyzed (Brazil, Canada, Japan, Mexico, and the United States), there emerged no one profile of an SIA member but a number of profiles based on country of origin.

Here are a few examples. Members in all of the countries, except one, ranked "Education" and "Status of Women" as the most highly valued programs among the six SIA programs of service. Japanese

members, however, placed their highest program emphasis on "the Environment," reflecting a strong cultural preference and concern for environmental issues.

Likewise, while members in all five countries generally agreed on their main reasons for joining the organization ("Community Service" and "Developing Friendships" being the top reasons), Brazilian members rated "Personal Growth and Learning" as their top reason for joining, reflecting a much stronger emphasis on learning and, perhaps, the fact that they have the greatest percentage of educators in their ranks compared to the four other countries.

Even though SIA is an international organization, members differed, by country, as to just how important the international connection was to them. Brazilian, Canadian, and Mexican members placed

People's interpretation of your mission may be influenced by cultural and national differences.



There is one sure-fire way to discover how your supporters feel. Ask them!

a significantly stronger emphasis on the value of internationalism compared to their counterparts in Japan and the United States.

The Soroptimist International of the Americas survey developed extensive information unique to SIA and its membership. However, there are a few implications from the survey that might be helpful to other nonprofit organizations.

First, you should not view all supporters as the same even though they reflect a common commitment to your organization. Their experiences and attitudes may differ significantly by both demographics (age, length of tenure with your organization, etc.), and by country of origin.

Second, in developing programs, international organizations should appeal to the unique values and priorities expressed by members in different countries. Even though all members are bonded by the same overall mission, such as SIA's "advancing the status of women," their interpretation of this mission may be influenced by cultural and national differences and may be reflected in their level of support for specific projects and programs.

Finally, the Soroptimist International of the Americas survey suggests that there is one sure-fire way for nonprofits to discover how a diverse group of supporters might feel about issues critical to the organization. Ask them! ■

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