

Surveys Provide Crucial Feedback

Before you make a change in your organization, find out what people think.

BY JESSICA TETRAULT

When you want to be sure you're doing the right thing for your organization, it never hurts to ask the people who matter most: your members, customers, or clients.

For the Montgomery County Association of Realtors (MCAR), getting feedback from members before embarking on a strategic plan was successful in more ways than one. The survey helped MCAR tailor its plan to suit members' needs. But it also made members feel good to know their thoughts mattered to the organization's leaders, says Gail Fusco, executive vice president.

"Our members were pleased we came to them," she says. "It strengthened their bond with us."

Fine-tune Your Ideas for Change

The Montgomery County Association of Realtors, an organization of 2,300 real estate professionals in Pennsylvania's Montgomery County, wanted to find out if it was on the right track before going full-speed ahead with the implementation of a strategic plan. So the association hired the Communication Solutions Group of Jenkintown, Pennsylvania, to survey both agents and brokers about the association's educational programs, benefits, communications, and social events.

The results helped the association fine-tune its ideas for change.

For example, the survey showed that a majority of members wanted to see a workshop on etiquette and professional

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conduct. Now, the association is including such a course in its professional development series.

The survey also asked members about MCAR's monthly publication, the *Communicator*. The newsletter had been discontinued as MCAR decided what direction to take. Through the survey, MCAR learned that its members found the publication useful. Thus, MCAR decided to bring the *Communicator* back to life. To do that, MCAR hired a staff specialist to oversee the publication, as well as to improve the association's other promotional materials.

The survey results also told MCAR that its members didn't find some events, such as holiday parties and showcases, to be beneficial. That led MCAR to discontinue them.

Know What You Want to Learn

Before hiring a company to conduct a survey, ask yourself these questions:

1 What information do you hope to gain?

Answer that question now, before the survey is conducted, so that you'll be sure to get all your questions answered.

Surveys can gauge people's thoughts on everything from educational programs to dues and social events.

2 What's the best survey format to use?

Depending on people's availability and willingness to participate, choose one of the following three survey types (or use a combination):

Written surveys can provide some general insights, but recipients tend to take them less seriously than other types of surveys and may discard or ignore them.

Phone surveys alleviate some of the problems of written surveys, since a specific time is scheduled with the recipient to conduct the survey. Phone surveys also have the advantage of letting the interviewer hear people's voices. The tone of someone's voice may prompt the interviewer to ask more questions and gather more information.

Focus groups of 8 to 12 people are another option. Led by a facilitator with a knowledge of group dynamics, focus groups can foster an open exchange of ideas and provide intensive qualitative feedback.

3 Whom do you want to survey?

Pick a wide variety of people, not just the ones you believe will give you a

A survey can strengthen people's bonds to your organization.

good review. Having a varied audience means your survey will be more authentic.

4 How will you maximize use of the data?

It's important to know how you will use the survey before getting started. In MCAR's case, the survey results became the foundation for change. The results elicited even more comments and feedback from members when they were published in the first edition of the new, improved *Communicator*. "We invited others to forward their comments through e-mail so we could engage more of the membership," Fusco says.

Don't Second-Guess

Surveys can be particularly useful when you are considering a change in direction or services, says Leza Raffel, president of Communication Solutions. By seeking people's opinions, you can find out what programs and services they will back before you sink lots of money into the endeavors.

"It's helpful to have survey information beforehand so you're not second-guessing what people want and need," Raffel says. "Survey results can give you the comfort of knowing you have people behind you."

Even if you think you have an idea of people's likes and dislikes, it never hurts to have a survey done to find out for sure, says Raffel. "Sometimes, you're right with your gut sense," she says. "But it helps to have the data behind you."

Fusco agrees. "As a whole, the results didn't come as a huge surprise to

me," she says. "The value was in validation. We felt comfortable we were going in the right direction." ■

Resources

Akchin, Don, "Quick & Dirty Research," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 19, No. 3.

Brinckerhoff, Peter, "Using Surveys & Focus Groups to Gather Market Data," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 3.

Simon, Judy, "How to Conduct Focus Groups," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 17, No. 5.

Young, Dennis, "What Does Feedback Have to Do with Governance?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 6.

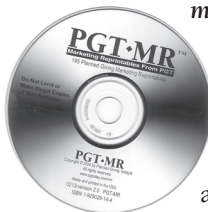
These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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