



Are You Offering People the Data They Want & Need?

It's time to examine how your research delivers value to your audiences.

By Wes Tomer

Research has long been central to the value that nonprofit organizations offer their constituents, but the type of research they need has changed. Today, people expect timely and relevant information that keeps pace with the 24-hour news cycle. They require up-to-date information that can support rapid decision-making. They want help sifting through vast amounts of information to find the data most valuable to them.

While their audiences' needs are evolving, nonprofits haven't always been so quick to keep up. There's a temptation to continue offering the same reports that have been successful in years past. In addition, there's the challenge of funding the investment needed to modernize data programs. But if organizations don't update their data programs and research offerings to reflect new expectations, they risk losing relevance among current and future constituents. Here are some common problems and how to address them:

Not Delivering Timely Data

Organizations of all types need access to timely information to guide the rapid decision-making in demand today. Surprisingly, however, some nonprofits remain reluctant to move away from publishing the traditional annual report. In an increasingly fast-paced world, the value within those stagnant volumes is quickly outdated.

Pulse surveys (brief sets of questions sent out on a regular basis) provide a valuable counter to this outmoded approach. They offer your constituents crucial, up-to-date information on the issues that matter most to them.

Done well, pulse surveys can capture a clear picture of an issue with a few short questions. They take less than five minutes to complete so they minimize the demand on the survey-taker; thus, you'll see a greater response than with longer surveys. Pulse surveys make it easier to secure input from individuals beyond your base audience, connecting you to new channels, partners, and potential customers.

Despite their brevity, pulse surveys can deliver great value. They offer up-to-the-minute perspectives into how similar organizations compare. They can also provide updates between the release of more in-depth reports and insight into the evolution of key issues over time. That's because a pulse survey's value increases as data accumulates, revealing trends in the data. This information can help you develop strategies to weather marketplace challenges.

Crafting pulse surveys is relatively simple, as they contain only a few questions. You can send them out weekly, biweekly, or monthly. At their most effective, pulse surveys provide a narrative that attracts new viewers, including media, policymakers, and potential donors. These quick-hitting surveys may also provide a jumping-off point into more targeted, personalized reporting.

Not Formatting Data to Meet All People's Needs

The sheer amount of data available from a range of sources means that your constituents value having easy access to the information that matters most to them. If you don't use

data to produce content in meaningful formats, you risk falling short in keeping people engaged.

With so many options for content, it can be difficult to determine the right strategy for your target audiences. At first, this shift in delivery can feel overwhelming. However, you can approach data delivery much as you do a marketing campaign. The first step is to ensure you know your core audience. Creating personas (fictional characters who represent your target audience) can be a useful exercise in identifying the types of data of most value to each constituent and the way each person prefers to receive this information.

The most significant points from your research can drive your strategy. The nature of your findings may help you decide whether to present them in a webinar, an infographic, or a blog post, for example. You may want to do a split test (also known as A/B testing), in which you offer a few different solutions to different audiences to see which leads to the best response. You can also track key metrics to see which drive the highest levels of response.

Modern data tools offer interactive features that make it easy to drill down to the specific level of information you need. Through the use of application programming interfaces (APIs), you can reduce the human error that can occur in the data collection process. Rather than having a person manually collect the data, the API does all the work to compile, categorize, and aggregate the information into static or dynamic reports. The use of APIs also allows your constituents to automatically plug the research results directly into their own internal systems.

Dashboards are another tool that can help your supporters customize their views to reflect the information that matters to them. An interactive dashboard frees them to more easily compare their data against broad industry trends. It allows them to take a closer look at key data without sorting through pages of superfluous charts and tables. This precision helps them make data-based decisions at a moment's notice.

Not Seeing All Possible Value from Research


At first glance, data tools such as dashboards, split testing, and APIs may seem too expensive. But they can provide new income that will offset their up-front costs. By tailoring your research reports to different viewers, you can attract new participation and new revenue streams.

In addition to making it easier to collect data from your donors and other constituents, APIs make it far easier for you to integrate information from a wide range of sources. When you take all the data that your supporters need to make decisions and combine it into a single source, you strengthen your position as a hub for industry insight.

Yet it's not enough to update the way you collect information. If you continue publishing the same reports each year, you aren't delivering new value. In fact, you're decreasing the

value you provide because you aren't offsetting the costly investment in data collection. More data doesn't necessarily mean greater value.

Providing the same output year after year also ignores the fact that today's workforce is shifting in new directions and bringing in new expectations. With Generation Z moving further into the workforce, and more millennials serving in leadership roles, you must adapt to the needs of new generations. Several recent polls reveal that both Generation Z and millennials overwhelmingly prefer to use social media to get news. Thus, you might consider the value of publishing research via infographics and posts that can be easily shared on social-media channels.

If you ignore these new demands for rapid, customizable data, you risk your ability to continue supporting your mission. Donors and other stakeholders pay for value. If the content you provide doesn't deliver the right level of value, revenue will eventually drop off, reducing your ability to provide any value at all. 

As CEO of Vault Consulting (vaultconsulting.com), Wes Tomer brings decades worth of experience to understanding the unique needs of nonprofit organizations gained through his roles in outsourced accounting, CFO, executive advisory, and consulting services. Wes's primary focus has been on charitable, educational, social service, and membership organizations.

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