

And the survey says . . .

How to create surveys for PR stories

By Joe Hopper, Ph.D.

Surveys and statistics can be powerful in PR campaigns because numbers help you tell stories. How many, how much, how big, how fast?

If done correctly, then telling a story with numbers will make your message come alive as surely as any anecdote. The problem today is that new technologies have made surveys easy to execute, leading to an explosion of poorly executed and ill-intentioned surveys that have flooded the media with meaningless numbers and suspect data.

For a survey to work, it has to be rigorous and valid, and it has to be carefully designed around a larger campaign's central theme. This can help a PR team gain credibility, exposure and placement for its client.

But how do you do it? Here, we outline several steps that we—and our clients—take when developing, fielding and analyzing a survey for a PR campaign. It reflects what we have learned from over a decade of survey work for some of the best agencies and corporate communications teams who successfully use surveys in their campaigns.

- **Conduct a media audit.** Once you decide that a survey is appropriate and you have an idea about which topic you want to explore, conduct a media audit to find what other research has been completed. You want to understand how you can shed light on a topic or give it a new angle. You also want to understand media receptivity, the kinds of stories that the media have carried and the level of rigor that they have required for similar surveys. You can do this with Google, or through a comprehensive database such as Factiva.

- **Write dream headlines.** Don't start with survey questions. Instead, come up with a variety of dream headlines that you would like to see come out of the research. These headlines need to tie to the messaging and theme of your campaign. It is a critical way of ensuring that the story coming out of a survey will support your campaign.

- **Carefully consider who you want to survey.** The survey should relate strongly to your client's service or product so that you can speak about relevant solutions. But

should you survey the people who reflect your client's target audience (for example, moms with children between the ages of 3 and 11) or should you survey a broader audience? The first option might seem self-serving to a reporter who would be more interested in hearing about mothers with children of all ages, but the second option might not make sense for your client. You need to weigh the pros and cons of each.

- **Pick the right sample size.** You can draw statistically valid conclusions from any sample size, but a small sample means the margin of error (± 5 percent, for example) is larger. So selecting size is always a judgment call. Sample sizes for PR surveys typically range from 300 to 1,200 respondents.

- **Identify the purpose of every question.** It is important to begin with the end in mind, which means asking yourself exactly how you will use the information from each question in a news release or in marketing collateral. As you write a question, make an educated guess about how people will answer—usually you have a good idea,

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because you are close to your client's issue—and draft a statement based on the data. If you can't think of a good way to use the data in support of your campaign, then cut it or revise it.

- **Avoid using numeric response scales.** Market research firms love them; you should hate them. These scales are great for sophisticated data analysis, but they are hard to report in stories because your sentences get tangled with too many numbers. Imagine having to say, "Fifty-four percent of patients gave a score of 6 or 7 on a 1 to 10 scale when asked to rate how satisfied they are with their physicians" versus "Fifty-four percent of patients said they were only somewhat satisfied with the care they received from their physicians."

- **Make it rigorous and credible.** Use valid survey, sampling and interviewing techniques. Also write unbiased questions, balance the sample or weight the data and use appropriate analytical methods. Conducting quickie polls based on volunteers who read a Web site or polling the people you know through Facebook are unlikely to be rigorous enough for your campaign. If you're unsure how to ramp up the rigor, then find a survey and statistics expert who can advise you.

- **Build a story around contrast and tension.** Chances are, your dream headlines won't pan out exactly as you had hoped. However, if the survey is designed correctly and the data is thoughtfully analyzed, then there is always a story worth telling that will support your

efforts. The key is to find contrasts that highlight where you can help. For example, awareness of an issue is high, but misunderstandings persist. Contrasting high awareness with low understanding makes a compelling case for better information, which might be exactly what your campaign is designed to do.

- **Keep it honest.** This is critical. Sincere efforts to document issues through rigorous surveys are often successful — and when performed the right way, numbers influence people. Trying to shock with sensationalist, biased and phony data has limited impact, and will make pitching a story harder the next time you try.



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