

## **Research Helps Uncover Member Needs**

By Daniel Martinage

The key to running a successful association is to establish a clear understanding of members' needs and to offer benefits that provide clear and compelling value for their investment in the association (i.e., membership dues.) Understanding member needs and distinguishing the difference between product/service features of your association and the benefits provided to members is typically the first step in the strategic management of an association. This calls for the use of periodic research to ensure your analysis of members' needs is accurate and current.

Selecting the correct method and establishing a budget for a research project can not only be a challenge but can lead to faulty results and wasted resources if improperly planned. This article provides an overview of the research tools most commonly used by associations. In it you will find an explanation and summary of research tools, and guidelines on implementation.

### **QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH: THE STATISTICAL PICTURE**

Quantitative research in the form of surveys is one of the most common methods used for collecting data on members' needs. Surveys can be mailed, Web-based, conducted on the telephone or performed one-on-one by a trained interviewer at a convention or other membership gathering. By collecting a large amount of raw data in a survey, you can then apply methods to find statistically significant trends that might exist.

Producing effective surveys requires each issue to be condensed into a series of concise, objective questions. For associations, this works well when you are compiling statistical information on topics like:

- Member satisfaction
- Demographic profiles
- Salaries/benefits
- Sales or attendance forecasts
- Product/service pricing

While surveys are effective at collecting large amounts of data, they have one major shortfall. Questionnaires are a one-way flow of information—from the respondent to you. Without an actual dialogue with the respondent, there is no opportunity to ask for clarification or to glean valuable insight from subtle nuances.

### **QUALITATIVE RESEARCH: UNDERSTANDING MEMBER OPINIONS**

While quantitative research gives you the overall state of affairs, qualitative research seeks to explain these results. Focus groups or in-depth interviews are the methods typically used to obtain specific information and personal opinions. Focus groups are especially useful when an issue can't be explored through a set of discrete questions. Therefore, you must be able to use a group setting to explore an issue and have the respondents discuss what is foremost in their minds. For an association, this works well when you need first-hand impressions on such topics as:

- New product or service introductions (features and benefits)
- Feedback on a conference (e.g., best/worst features; comparison to others; etc.)
- Reaction to key branding or marketing messages
- Member perception of value.

There are some disadvantages with focus groups. Possible pitfalls are: the results may not be entirely representative of your membership, the skill level of the moderator may skew the results, and focus groups typically cost more than quantitative surveys.

### **IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS: POTENTIAL COST-SAVINGS VS. FOCUS GROUPS**

If budget or time is a consideration, qualitative research can still be employed by switching from a focus group to targeted in-depth interviews.

Interviews are usually conducted over the telephone or in person, and are based on a set of guidelines or a script designed to keep the discussion focused on the topic(s) under investigation. Like focus group research, the interviewer actually probes each response in order to uncover the respondent's feelings and impressions. Associations can best use in-depth interviews as a:

- Precursor to a written survey (this helps to highlight areas of focus)
- Vehicle for gathering stakeholder input for a strategic plan
- Confirmation of quantitative research findings
- Tool for gathering information from members in several cities when sufficient funds for focus groups are not available.

### **DUAL METHOD APPROACH: THE IDEAL SOLUTION**

When budgetary constraints are not a factor, a combination of qualitative (focus group or in-depth interviews) and quantitative (surveys) research can produce the most accurate results. For example, a focus group held before a survey can identify issues that will be tested quantitatively across the entire membership. Focus groups can also be used to test survey research conclusions. If survey data indicates your membership wants more variety in educational offerings, a focus group can be used to test new educational session possibilities.

### **SUMMARY**

Research plays an important role in helping associations establish a clear understanding of member needs. It also helps associations distinguish the difference between the association's product/service features and the benefits that members seek. This is key to ensuring members receive the maximum value for their membership investment. By understanding the various methodologies that are available, you can pick the right tool to meet your needs and streamline the costs and timelines associated with research.