

## High Response Rates Are Critical to Museum Audience Research

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Do your audience research results convey an accurate picture of the actual situation you are studying?

Are the conclusions you draw from your study grounded in substantial, verifiable results from a project that was conducted in a methodologically-correct manner?

Can you believe the results of polls that are reported in the mass media?

Unless researchers acquire data from a high percentage of the population they survey and their sampling procedures and question wording meet survey research standards, their data won't be credible and their conclusions could be erroneous. Data from poorly-conducted research can lead the museum astray and leave it more ill-informed than if it had never carried out a study.

One of the critical issues in all survey research is response rates. Unfortunately, many museum studies achieve only mediocre, even abysmal, response rates.

### Low Response Rates

For example, I received two calls within one month from medium-sized museums asking what they could do with results of their studies.

In the first case, the museum received a 15% response when it inserted a two-page questionnaire in its membership newsletter. There had been no previous announcement that members should watch for and respond to the questionnaire, there was no cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and encouraging prompt response, a self-addressed stamped envelope was not enclosed to facilitate response, and there was no follow-up on members who did not respond.

No follow-up was planned, the staff member explained, unless the museum received less than a 10% response. However, since she had not kept a numbered list of the questionnaires, by which she could identify returns, she had no idea who had not responded.

What concerned her was not that the response rate was unacceptable, but that the survey results reinforced status quo thinking about museum programs—a not unexpected result when a representative sample of the targeted population (members, lapsed members, visitors, community, class or program subscribers, etc.) is not achieved. Research has repeatedly shown that persons who care greatly about a study's outcomes, positive or negative, are the ones who respond to the initial mailing of a questionnaire. To acquire a sample that is representative of the whole population and a respectable response rate, the museum must assiduously follow up with at least a second mailing or a phone call to the nonrespondents.

Even worse than that example was the inquiry I received the following week. A staff member asked for "guidelines" on writing a report on a visitor survey she had conducted, from which she had achieved a 5% response rate. I replied, "Throw out the results; they are useless and will mislead you in your decision making." She protested that she had to give her director some report or he would condemn her for wasting money on printing questionnaires. I stated firmly, "The only report you can responsibly give him is that the proper place for such minimal results is the wastebasket."

If 5% and 15% response rates are not satisfactory, what should you aim for? As I wrote in *Visitor Behavior*, spring 1991: "Never accept less than a two-thirds response rate if you are using the results to guide decision making. If you expect to make a life-or-death decision, it may be necessary to get at least 80-85% response rate, to be sure you are proceeding correctly." Those words still hold.

### Critical Decisions

Such a life-or-death situation might arise if an institution were determining whether to make a massive change: striking out in a new direction as far as location, building, mission, collections. In such a case, even an 80% response rate might be inadequate if the organization had to depend on its members to supply funds for a building campaign or for moving to another site.

A church that proposed to move to a new location received a split vote of 55% for, 45% against, with 80% of the parishioners voting. If the remaining 20% of members were against the move or tepid in support of it, the church could have been in considerable difficulty in raising the necessary funds. Instead of polling the nonrespondents further, the church dropped its plan to move.

A seemingly comfortable lead in a political poll can prove to be amorphous when all the votes are in. One week before the 1993 New Jersey gubernatorial election, Governor Jim Florio had support from 47% of the voters polled; Christie Whitman, the principal challenger, had 37%; 1% supported minor candidates, and 15% of the voters were undecided. The 10-point lead was confidently predicted to be enough to re-elect Florio.

However, Whitman won, with 50% of the vote; Florio received 48%, and 17 independent candidates had a total of 2%. In the final week before the election, Whitman picked up 13 percentage points, Florio gained 1 point, and 1 point went to the minor candidates.

In one city where citizens have voted a tax levy to support museums, pre-election polling on voter support for levy increases has indicated at least 55% approval. When the ballots were counted, the levies were defeated, sometimes by as much as 15 percentage points. Unless such an issue garners at least 60% approval in pre-election polling, its outcome is probably uncertain.

### Misleading Data

Researchers should be wary when only people with problems respond to a survey, and conclusions and actions

are based on those data. A December 1994 AP story stated: "More than half of all clinics participating in a survey experienced at least one act of anti-abortion violence during the first seven months of 1994, The Feminist Majority Foundation said yesterday." The group had mailed surveys to 819 clinics that perform abortions; 314 answered, for a response rate of 38%.

The "more than half" of clinics were portions of the 314 that responded, though the story and headline indicated that clinic violence was up in a general sense. For each example of violence cited in the questionnaire, the number of clinics reporting it represented only 10-20% of all the clinics selected for the sample. Apparently, many of the clinics not experiencing violence had not replied. If they had, the story might have been different.

One of the most disturbing examples of basing decisions on an inadequate sample came from one of my professional associations. Its survey polled a random sample of 2000 members plus 400 officers and chapter advisers. The response rates were 14% for the members and 10% for the officers and advisers (supposedly from one mailing), yet the president boldly asserted that "the board will use information from the survey in decision making." Without follow-up on the nonrespondents, who may have held very different views from the respondents, none of these data should have been used for decision making. These responses represented only the opinions of the persons who answered the initial mailing. That rarely produces response rates that reliably reflect the views of the entire sample.

### Faulty Sampling

Museums and other institutions can mislead themselves and their publics by depending on results from studies that produce minimal response, are not representative of the population being surveyed, or ask biased or incomplete questions.

A metropolitan museum had presented a series of six lectures, each on a specific topic under an umbrella theme. Attendees could have purchased a series subscription or an individual ticket to each program.

On the second and fourth evenings, the museum had distributed a short questionnaire to each person, asking for suggestions for the next series' theme and topics. It acquired a 50% response rate each evening. On the basis of this information it was blithely making programming plans.

I explained that it would have been better informed if it had distributed the questionnaire, attached to a firm writing surface, with pencil, to every second or third person coming through the door on each of the six nights, and had recovered all of the questionnaires each evening (when the form is attached to a base it cannot be easily stuffed into pocket or purse or overlooked, and persons who have filled it out once ordinarily decline to do it again).

About 100 persons had attended each evening and 100 responses had been received from the two evenings that were

surveyed. However, even 30 responses from each of the six evenings would have given a more reliable indication of participant preferences, because the sample would have been more representative of the whole as well as constituting a larger segment of the total attendance.

Strange conclusions can be drawn when survey directors misinterpret percentages. In my Ohio suburb, the Commission on Aging hired a polling firm to survey senior citizens on their needs (health, transportation, recreation, caregiving). Just 15% of 2000 questionnaires were returned (300 forms). No follow-up was done.

The survey director had expected to receive only 500 questionnaires, a 25% response rate, she said, because senior residents comprised 25% of the suburb's population (8500 seniors in a population of 34,000). I tried vainly to explain that a 25% response rate had no relation to 25% of the population being seniors, but she kept insisting "25% is 25%." Not in this case.

To further muddy these troubled waters, the suburban weekly printed the questionnaire and urged readers to send in the form, thereby destroying any attempt at securing a representative sample. Unfortunately, the Commission, composed of unsuspecting volunteers, began developing plans based on the faulty results of the survey. Even my letters to the editor of the weekly paper and to the Commission, explaining how the study had gone awry, did not deter members from putting their trust in unsubstantiated results from the study.

### Question Wording

Wording of the questions can have a profound effect on responses and response rates.

A survey of 604 Ohio adults in November 1993, sponsored by the Council for Responsible Waste Solutions, found that two-thirds of the respondents were willing to accept a low-level radioactive waste dump in the state. The Ohio Greens, opposed to the dump, accused the survey sponsors of asking loaded questions, because none explained that the dump would serve states other than Ohio (it would receive radioactive waste from six states), described the nature of the proposed facility, or offered other options for disposal of the waste.

The most egregious example of how question wording can bias responses and response rates was committed by the reputable Roper Organization. Burns Roper, the founder, reported in May 1994 that the "so-called Holocaust denial question was flawed." Because there was a double negative in the question about whether people believed the Holocaust really happened, 22% of the respondents said it was possible it never happened, and 12% said they didn't know. To affirm belief in the Holocaust, the respondent had to agree that it was impossible it never happened. In a follow-up poll several months later, with a revised question and a brief explanation of the Holocaust, 9% of the respondents expressed doubt it happened and 4% were unsure, a total change of 21 percentage points on those responses.

### Trustworthy Results

There are examples of properly-conducted surveys that achieve respectable response rates and produce results that are trustworthy. By following all the protocols of social science research, I have never achieved less than 66% response rates in my studies, even when doubtful sponsors believed only half of the sample would reply. Attention to every aspect of the process produced quality questionnaires that respondents enjoy answering, high response rates, and substantial results that reliably inform museum decision makers.

The Ohio School Boards Association, which biennially surveys school districts to obtain a profile of Ohio school board members, regularly achieves a response rate of about 83%. Over time, these periodic surveys have shown slight changes in the composition of the boards (more members with school-age children, more women, shorter tenure). Because of the consistently high response rates, the data have credibility.

A high response rate (95%) is also characteristic of the U. S. Justice Department's National Crime Victimization Survey. A random sample of 84,000 households is selected, to remain in the sample for three years. Over that time, household members are interviewed seven times about their having been or not been victims of crime. Findings show that all crimes declined by 6% from 1973-94, data that differ from the FBI Uniform Crime Report which covers only crimes reported to police.

While persons experiencing sexual harassment might be more likely to respond to a survey on that subject, the fact that one study achieved a 66% response rate affords credence to the findings. The United Methodist Church found that 77% of United Methodist clergywomen who responded to its nationwide survey said they had been sexually harassed, often by other members of the clergy. Among male clergy, 45% reported at least one incident of sexual harassment.

### Other Researchers

What do other qualified survey researchers say about response rates, sampling, and relevance of questions?

Dolsen and Machlis (1991) stated that some social scientists reject any response rate below 70%, but that attaining at least 80% might not be necessary for some surveys. When the results represent a relatively homogenous population, they may yield useful data when a response rate in the 65-80% range is achieved, these researchers maintained. High rates of 80-95% may not always be necessary, though they found that even with an 86% response rate, some bias can exist. Dolsen and Machlis warned that organizations should justifiably reject studies with return rates under 50%.

Dillman, whose book, *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method* (1978), is a "bible" of the survey research field, deemed an acceptable response rate to be 60-85%. Brown and Wilkins (1978) contended that considerable nonresponse bias can exist even with a return rate of 70%.

Gitelson and Drogin (1992) concluded that high response rates are most important when the respondents are not

homogenous on important characteristics, and when the respondents who require extensive follow-up are not similar to those who readily respond.

These researchers found that a major consideration in nonresponse bias is leisure behavior patterns, which may differ greatly among respondents to first, second, and third mailings. They emphasized that the most important variables in achieving high response rates are persistence in follow-up on nonrespondents and the importance of the topic to the respondents—do respondents care about the topic, do they perceive its relevance to their lives (and in the case of a member or visitor study, do they care about the museum and what effect their answers might have on the future of the organization)?

Cynthia Crossen, in her book, *Tainted Truth: The Manipulation of Fact in America* (1994), warns readers about suspect findings presented in the mass media. She attacks quickie overnight telephone surveys done with small samples and simplistic questions on hot topics. She suggests that readers of poll results in the mass media check who sponsored the survey, what the sponsor wanted to find out, what kinds of people were interviewed, how many were in the sample, and the time period over which the survey was conducted—good advice to all readers and researchers.

### Final Comment

Museum audience studies can become more reliable, accurate measures of the population being surveyed if staff follow basic social science research guidelines on conducting surveys. By becoming knowledgeable about questionnaire design, sampling, and appropriate response rates, museums can improve their probability of producing results that will dependably inform decision makers and planners with accurate results.

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## Ways to Increase Response Rates

Hood suggests that museum staff members can increase their response rates by employing several tested techniques:

- Adopt an outside-in focus for the questionnaire, so it emphasizes issues of importance and relevance to the targeted audience. This is the most effective factor in getting people to answer.
- Stress altruism in the invitation to participants (on site) or cover letter (by mail), by conveying the message that if the respondent will help the museum by giving his/her opinions, that will help the museum do a better job in the future.
- Insure anonymity and confidentiality. If the questionnaire and envelope have a survey number, explain these are only for checking in and no answers will be linked with any individual. If the questionnaire is answered in the museum, make sure that the staff and docents do not banter about the information they received or the people who offered it.
- Personalize the message to convince the respondent that "You are important to us; you have been selected in our sampling procedure. We want your candid thoughts."
- If you are sending a mail questionnaire, expect to send at least two 'waves' and budget the costs of questionnaires, stamped envelopes, and self-addressed stamped return envelopes before beginning the project. Use commemorative stamps for both envelopes, not the postage meter. Hand address the outgoing envelopes if at all possible. Use the director's name and signature in the cover letter. Send a pre-mailing notification, in the museum newsletter or by postcard, to alert respondents to the possibility of their receiving a form. Request their prompt response by the deadline. Print the questionnaire on white paper, with black ink; the next most effective is yellow paper, with black ink.

Each of these efforts tells the respondents that the museum cares about them and their answers. It reinforces the message that they count with the museum and that it's extremely important that they respond. Each of these techniques boosts the response rate a couple percent.

Sometimes incentives are offered (free admission on a future visit if it's a mail questionnaire) or a token of appreciation is presented after the questionnaire is answered on site (a poster, a postcard, a coupon). When we ask people to participate in our audience research, we are not only asking them to do us a favor, but we are offering them a chance to be heard. Make that opportunity the most worthwhile for both museum and respondents.

# VSA

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