

## Applying Survey Research to Boost Communications Performance



You know the saying: knowledge is power. And if you're like most PR professionals, you have an abundance of knowledge. You've obtained insights from your boss, mentors, clients, co-workers and countless strategy meetings and brainstorming sessions. But the power of your PR savvy is greatly diluted if you don't have the right knowledge. Among your top management, what are the expectations of the PR function? What attitudes do they have toward PR? Among reporters and editors, is your organization or client top-of-mind, or barely known? Do reporters find it easy to get the information they need from you? And, is that information credible?

We'd all agree that these are must-have pieces of information for planning and executing successful PR programs. But, how do you obtain that information? Basing your plans on the vibe you absorb in a meeting, or on anecdotes from colleagues, or even on recent press coverage is just too risky in today's ROI-driven environment.

Quite simply, you need to ask people the questions to which you want answers. In practice, however, asking questions in such a way as to elicit actionable, strategic information requires discipline and proper methodology. In other words, it requires a survey.

Survey research as applied in a PR context is fairly straightforward, but it can deliver multifaceted and unparalleled learnings. It puts hard numbers

behind attitudes, expectations and results, and identifies what needs to be changed in order to improve performance. Most importantly, this intelligence is obtained directly from your key stakeholders to help ensure that you receive meaningful, on-target information. Survey research provides vital intelligence to gauge the effectiveness of your current PR programs, as well as insights that can positively influence new strategies and tactics.

But for PR practitioners, the most useful insights can come from surveys of journalists and executives. Each of these instruments identifies and measures the perceptions of your work as held by the audiences that are most critical to your success.

A survey of senior executives – those who bankroll PR programs – can reveal what the C-suite knows and likes about current activities, what they wish to see change and what they expect in the future.

Surveys of journalists can determine how favorably or poorly reporters view your PR department as a reliable source; whether your online pressroom is easy to use and contains necessary information; and if they associate key messages with your organization. They can also provide direct insight into your competitors' PR efforts. Survey questions can determine which of your competitors are most likely to be contacted first by reporters, rank how companies rate on reputation, and identify best practices that you may not be using.

Here are five tips to help you plan and implement both types of survey research:

**1.) Do conduct surveys on a regular, ongoing basis.** At a minimum, conduct your surveys on an annual basis. What was true a year ago may not hold true today. Editorial focus, beat assignments, competitive landscape, management structure, business priorities – all of these can and do change. A one-time snapshot is helpful for planning purposes, but ongoing measurement is necessary to gauge performance against benchmarks and goals.

**2.) Collect competitive data.** By incorporating a competitive focus into your questionnaire, you'll uncover insight about best practices to adopt and activities to avoid, and maintain an edge in intelligence over your competitors.

**3.) Use solid survey methodology.** The wrong questionnaire design or improper implementation method (e.g., telephone, Web, in-person) can torpedo the effectiveness of a survey by generating invalid responses and suppressing the response rate. Be sure not to inadvertently assist the respondent's recall. Keep the questionnaire length manageable – reporters typically will give you less than 10 minutes of their time. Try to avoid too many open-ended questions that invite rambling. In questions that utilize a multiple point scale, avoid a self-serving scale (e.g., Good, Very Good, Excellent).

**4.) Employ an hypotheses approach.** Thinking about the actionable results you desire from the research helps to directly inform the design of the questionnaire.

**5.) Sync objectives with respondent type.** To get the most out of your research efforts, make sure the respondents to be interviewed have a knowledgeable basis for answering. Does the journalist cover this beat, or the proper geographic area? Has your client ever been in contact with the journalist before, or is this a "wish list" for the purposes of awareness only? Does the executive being interviewed have the appropriate level of authority for, or exposure to, PR programs?

Survey research is all about asking the right questions of the right people in the right way. Don't let the notion of conducting a survey strike fear in your heart – a good survey can:

- Provide the basis for continual improvement
- Help decision-makers link results to objectives
- Create a roadmap for future campaigns
- Clarify expectations and build trust among team members, executives and clients **PRN**

### CONTACT:

Craig Mitchell is vice president of Evaluation Services at Cision. He can be reached at [craig.mitchell@cision.com](mailto:craig.mitchell@cision.com).