



## **OPINION MATTERS: *DESIGNING A SURVEY AND INTERPRETING THE RESULTS***

Want to know what your members or people in the community are thinking? Conduct a survey! Surveys or polls provide the best direct source of information about public opinion and can provide the basis for research on local issues. Here are some basic guidelines for designing an effective survey:

### **Choose the Right Tool**

Before selecting a survey as your tool of choice, consider whether it is the best way to get the information you want. For example, evaluate whether the information can be collected through the survey process. If you're looking for a representative opinion of your audience/population, a survey is the right choice. If you want insights or to formulate ideas, messages, or questions for future research, it is likely that a focus group is a better alternative.

### **Set Specific Goals**

Goals help you stay focused on the desired result: to receive direct information about particular issues, which will yield solid statistical data. Surveys with specific goals result in data that clearly illustrate public opinion and are powerful informational tools.

### **ASK -- to Help Define Your Goals**

What is the major question we want to answer with the survey results? For example: The Maryland Association of REALTORS® wants to find out whether members value of the legal hotline resource. The question, do you value the legal hotline, may be too broad to get the specific answers. The more specific the question the best results you will get and it will also further define the goals of your survey. One way to define your question is to use the following criterion:

***Explore a new area?*** MAR want to expand the legal hotline service—what do the members think?

***Confirm an assumption?*** MAR believe that the legal hotline is an invaluable service—do the members agree?

***Learn about the attitudes and opinions?*** MAR believes members need more information about predatory lending—is this true?



Find the best way to communicate a message to your target audience? MAR believes the best way to provide legal updates are through email alerts—is this the most efficient way for members to get information?

### **Define your Audience**

When you have determined your goals, you are ready to identify your target population. This is a crucial step in survey design. Who should be sampled to answer your questions or achieve your objective? For example, “In this survey, we will sample brokers about the value of RPAC participation.”

To produce a statistically reliable sample, it is generally recommended that you interview at least 400 members of your target population. Mathematically, the number 400 is the threshold number necessary to produce a margin of error of +/- 5% at a 95% confidence level. That 95% is essentially probability---95% of the time repeating the process will get the same results with a 5% margin of error. The margin of error decreases as the sample size increases. The larger your sample means that statistically the data is more reliable

If you don't have 400 people to survey, it is generally recommended that you conduct face-to-face interviews or an Internet survey. These methods can most easily be adapted for small survey samples.

Here is a general rule of thumb regarding sample levels and margins of error:

<b><u>Sample Size</u></b>	<b><u>Margin of Error</u></b>
400-500	+/-5%
501-750	+/-4.5%
751-1000	+/- 3%

### **Design Your Research and Methodology**

This means how you should conduct the survey—choosing the survey method likely to produce the most responses from your targeted sample.

#### ***Consider the following methods:***

Online Surveys are an option if you know that nearly all your target population have Internet access. Internet surveying is the most efficient method. Conducting a survey online gives respondent the benefit of responding at his/her leisure, and it gives you the benefit of getting the data back quickly. However, although online surveys are cost effective, they tend to produce lower response rates than other methods.



Telephone interviews are the best and most reliable approach but obviously require that you have phone numbers of your target population, Telephone interviewing is also more expensive than Internet surveys, because it involves labor fees and in some cases phone usage charges. Also the validity of the sample rests upon having extensive coverage of all the telephone numbers in your population (listed and unlisted numbers) and a random selection process.

Telephone surveys must be conducted in a very systematic fashion. You can't simply hand your interviewers a list of phone numbers and ask them to dial away. You must instruct them about how to go through the list randomly and keep a log of all calls attempted; e.g., busy, no answer, not at home, refusal, call-back, language barrier, etc. This disciplined approach assures integrity of the data, and prevents duplication and poor management of data collection.

Paper/pencil questionnaires are the least attractive of all survey methods and should be avoided if possible. Response rates are typically very low, even with a token incentive. They take a long time to implement, receive back, code, and analyze. Although fairly inexpensive to conduct, paper questionnaires involve postage costs for mailing and receiving forms. Additional costs include sending a reminder post-card or re-sending the survey after a couple of weeks.

Personal face-to-face interviews are the most expensive and can be the most time-consuming survey technique. Although it is generally not recommended, this method is most effective if you are surveying a small population—probably less than 50 or if you are doing formative research as part of a focus group.

### *Create a Workable Design*

Let's assume that all in your target population have Internet access and you have email addresses, so you propose conducting an online survey among Brokers. Each person in your sample (randomly selected if population is large enough) receives an email letter inviting him to take the survey. Without revealing the actual objective (so as not to bias them) let participants know that their input is important to understand their views on RPAC participation. Then give them instructions and a link to the survey. Repeat the instructions at the survey site.

It is important that both the email letter and the survey provide a contact person (with email/telephone) in case the respondent has any questions.

### *Questionnaire Design*

This is the most important part of the process. A poorly designed questionnaire will yield poor results—a perfect example of “garbage in, garbage out.” With every question, ask yourself: how does this help achieve the study's objectives?

Make sure that questions are balanced and unbiased. For example: do not ask, “Do you approve of the way George Bush is handling his job as president?” Instead, ask, “Do you approve OR



disapprove of the way George Bush is handling his job as president.” Be sure that all questions are balanced.

Avoid jargon or language that your target population may not understand. If they don't know what you mean, the question is a waste.

If you have a question with scales—e.g., 1 for excellent, 5 for poor -- balance them and don't make the scale too long. Usually a 5, 7, or 11-point scale works best.

Avoid questions that ask if people agree or disagree. These answers tend to lead to biased responses.

Think carefully about the questions you want to ask and write them in a straightforward, unambiguous fashion. Add a short demographic section (classification of respondent) allowing you to analyze based on the type of respondent—age, gender, education (if relevant), race (if relevant), years in the field, occupation, etc. You should have no more than 8-10 demographic questions.

***The following are some examples of good sample questions:***

*In the past month, how many residents have filed a formal complaint about maintenance problems in the building?*

*How would you rate the way HUD has handled the process of applying for homeownership grants? Please use a 5-point scale, where 5 means excellent and 1 means poor. Of course you may use any number in between.*

Avoid double-barreled questions—a single question with more than one possible answer or double negatives. Speak in a language that your entire population can understand. Don't be colloquial or parochial.

***An example of a double-barreled question:***

Do you approve or disapprove of the way the president and Congress are handling the war in Iraq?

Avoid language that incites or leads the respondent in a particular direction:

***DON'T DO THIS:*** Do you think the uninformed Realtors have been pushing harmful bills in the state legislature that would benefit only them?

***INSTEAD, DO THIS:*** Which of the following comes closest to your view: Realtors have been supporting bills in the legislature that would benefit them and hurt homeowners. OR Realtors have been supporting bills that benefit both homeowners and Realtors.



## *Survey Implementation*

MAR uses Zoomerang surveys as an online survey tool. It is simple, provides fast and clear summaries of answers and allows for multiple choice and fill in answers. The MAR Zoomerang account is available free of charge to all local boards, subject only to scheduling queues. If you want to MAR's Zoomerang survey, contact Susan Mitchell at [susan.mitchell@mdrealtor.org](mailto:susan.mitchell@mdrealtor.org).

## *Use the Right Reporting Techniques*

How to use results? If the results are for internal use only such as to decide strategy within the organization then the data you collected does not have to be release.

However, if the survey results will be released externally to demonstrate a point about supporting a particular political position, then you will have to release all the information you have gathered. If you do not release the data, then your survey will have no credibility. Plan on a lot of phone calls and follow-up with the media, members and legislators.

If you plan to release the survey results, it is important that your report is accurate and complete. Your findings or reports must be presented fully, understandably and fairly. Any sampling errors or omissions should be taken into account and revealed.

It is also important to disclose all survey methods. The following are some of the things to include as part of the survey report:

- *Who sponsored the survey and who conducted it?*
- *The purpose of the survey, including specific goals and objectives.*
- *Who was surveyed?*
- *How the survey was conducted – internet, telephone and/or paper?*
- *Include margin of sampling error if it is going to be released.*

For your survey to have legitimacy legislators, public officials, the press and other audiences, it is important to keep in mind practices that professional pollsters caution must be avoided. Some survey *don'ts* as reported by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR):

- ***Never** require monetary payments or solicit monetary contributions from members of the public as part of the survey process. This amounts to nothing more than fundraising!*
- ***Never** offer products or services for sale or use participant contacts as a means of generating sales leads or increasing membership.*



- ***Never** reveal the identity of individual respondents to a survey*
- ***Never** use political telemarketing techniques like a “push-poll,” which is the practice of phoning potential voters and feeding them false or misleading information to “push” a respondent away from one candidate or issue and towards an opposing candidate or issue. The intent of this practice is not to gauge public opinion but rather to disseminate campaign propaganda.*

The following ***Best Practices*** from AAPOR’s website ([www.aapor.org](http://www.aapor.org)) are very helpful:

- 1) Have specific goals for the survey.
- 2) Consider alternatives to using a survey to collect information.
- 3) Select samples that well represent the population to be studied.
- 4) Use designs that balance costs with errors.
- 5) Take great care in matching question wording to the concepts being measured and the population studied.
- 6) Pretest questionnaires and procedures to identify problems prior to the survey.
- 7) Train interviewers carefully on interviewing techniques and the subject matter of the survey.
- 8) Construct quality checks for each stage of the survey.
- 9) Maximize cooperation or response rates within the limits of ethical treatment of human subjects.
- 10) Use statistical analytic and reporting techniques appropriate to the data collected.
- 11) Carefully develop and fulfill pledges of confidentiality given to respondents.
- 12) Disclose all methods of the survey to permit evaluation and replication.

***The following books are also valuable information sources:***

Payne, Stanley L. *The Art of Asking Questions*. Princeton University Press, 1951.

Dillman, Don A. *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method*. Wiley, 1978.