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Using Surveys to Learn the Opinions of New Residents

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Household Surveys

Using Surveys to Learn the Opinions of New Residents

Understanding what new residents are looking for in a community can provide valuable information that your community can use to better market itself. An effective way to do this is by conducting a survey.

A survey can be used to gain the opinions of new residents in a cost-effective manner. The results can be generalized to all new residents in the community if care is taken in conducting it.

What Are the Steps to Conduct a Survey?

Step 1: Choose a survey method

Four different survey methods can be used: telephone interviews, mail surveys, face-to-face interviews, and online surveys. A combination of methods (mixed modes surveys) also can be used to realize the benefits of each. Online and mail surveys typically require the fewest resources. Since they are the most common types conducted by communities, we will focus on them.

Online surveys require that your respondents have access to a computer with Internet service. In addition, to give each respondent an equal chance of being selected and contacted to complete the survey, you need the email addresses of all new residents in your community. This may not be feasible. Conducting a mail survey only requires obtaining the mailing addresses for all new residents. However, a mail survey costs more to conduct than an online survey. You must evaluate the various methods and decide which will work best for you.

Step 2: Select your sample

A sample is a subset of respondents selected from a larger population. Using a sample is not always necessary when conducting a survey. If the population of interest is small, the efficiency of using a sample is diminished. In other words, if your community has only 100 new residents, it may make sense to survey all of them (conduct a census), rather than selecting a subset. The sample size needed depends on the level of sampling error you are comfortable with, the population size, and if you'd like to make generalizations about a smaller subgroup of your population (e.g., new residents under the age of 25).

In general, if your budget doesn't allow you to survey all the new residents in your community, you need to select a sample. Many sample size calculators are available online to help you determine how many completed surveys you need to make generalizations about the whole population. One such calculator can be found at *http://surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm.*

As a general rule, you enter a confidence level of 95 percent and a confidence interval of 4 or 5 into the calculator. You also need to indicate the number of new resident households in your community. The number that is calculated is the number of surveys that need to be completed. The confidence interval is also known as the margin of error, or the range of the true population answers. For example, if you use a confidence interval of 4, and 20 percent of your sample answered that they have lived in your community before, you can be sure that if you asked the question of the whole population, between 16 percent and 24 percent have lived in your community previously.

After you determine if you are surveying the whole population or a sample, you need to find a list of new residents in your community. Realtors, school systems and utility providers may have lists of new residents, but confidentiality issues may prohibit giving out this contact information.

You may be able to get around this by having new residents signing up for utilities also sign a form that allows their information to be shared with the local welcome wagon and also be used in conducting a local survey of new residents. In smaller communities, you may be able to compile a list by asking community leaders who may have personal knowledge of new residents.

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Another way to obtain a list is by purchasing one. Some mailing list companies sell lists of new residents. For example, Experian sells lists of people who have recently moved. These lists can be selected and purchased online and downloaded for immediate use.

Step 3: Design your questionnaire

Writing good questions is the key to getting usable information from your survey. When writing questions, be specific and use simple words. Open-ended questions should be used sparingly because they are difficult to code and are more demanding for respondents.

Oftentimes, survey questions used by other studies can be found online. Looking for questions that have been used before can get you started in formulating your questions. You may need to modify the questions to suit your needs, but sample questions can stimulate your thought process. If questions are used as is, the original study should be cited and given credit. The new resident survey that we used in our study can be found online at *http://cari.unl.edu/communitymarketing/documents/survey_for_web.pdf.*

At the beginning of this process, it is important to give some thought to what kind of data you need. To minimize the burden of the respondents, the questionnaire should be as short as possible. Thus, questions that provide information that is nice to know but won't yield useful information for your community should be avoided. Only include questions necessary to determine the information you are seeking.

When designing the questionnaire, make answering the questions as easy as possible for the respondents. The questionnaire should not be too long or cluttered. Directions should be clear. Printing the questionnaire in a professional-looking booklet is recommended.

The most interesting questions and those most closely related to the survey topic should be at the beginning of the questionnaire. The least important questions should be at the end. All other questions should be grouped by subject and in a logical order. It is also important to design your survey so that

the data entry can be done efficiently. This can include numbering the responses to questions when entering the data into a computer software program.

If you are conducting an online survey, use an online tool such as Survey Monkey *(www.surveymonkey.com)* or Qualtrics *(www.qualtrics.com)*. These sites allow you to create a customized survey.

Step 4: Test your questionnaire

The questionnaire should be tested by sending or distributing it to a sample of respondents similar to your study population. Testing can help spot any potential problems before the survey is conducted. People who test your survey should be debriefed afterwards so they can give you information about any problems or confusion they experienced.

Step 5: Conduct your survey

Once your questionnaire is tested and ready, it can be sent. To obtain a higher response rate, several steps are suggested for mail surveys.

Send a prenotification letter to let the respondents know they have been selected for the survey and their participation in the study is requested.

About one week later, mail the questionnaire with a personalized cover letter that gives more details about the study. Include a stamped return envelope or a business reply envelope for returning the survey.

Send a reminder postcard about a week after the questionnaire. This postcard thanks those who have already responded and encourages those who have not yet responded to do so.

A week later, send another questionnaire to those who have not responded. Modify the personalized cover letter to remind respondents to complete the survey. Again, include a stamped return envelope or business reply envelope in this last mailing. Studies have shown that higher numbers of contacts increase the response rate.

This process can be modified if there are time or budget constraints. For example, the prenotification letter can be omitted, if needed, especially if advance marketing is done prior to the survey mailing. This marketing can be done through news releases in the community to let potential respondents know the survey is coming.

If you are conducting an online survey, the same procedures outlined for a mail survey still apply. However, instead of mailing your materials, email them to the respondents. The email should include information that would be included in a cover letter — the purpose of the study and the importance of responding. It also should include a link to the online survey. Several contacts are suggested to increase your response rate.

Step 6: Enter and analyze the data

If your survey is very short, you can, perhaps, tabulate the results by hand. However, most likely you will need to enter the data using a computer and a software program. If your survey is designed well, the data is already coded. That is, you will have numbered your response categories so that only those numbers need to be entered into the software program.

Go through your completed surveys to look for obvious errors and ensure that skip patterns and directions were followed correctly. If errors are detected, they should be omitted from your data.

Missing answers should be coded so you can distinguish them from other responses. Often, a 9 or 99 is used to denote missing data (e.g., questions that were skipped by the respondent).

Various software programs can be used to enter survey data. A spreadsheet program such as Microsoft Excel®, a database program such as Microsoft Access®, or a special data entry software program all can be used, depending on what you have available and what you are comfortable using.

Typically, the survey data is entered into a series of rows and columns. The rows represent the responses from each questionnaire. The columns are the individual questions from your survey. Care should be taken during data entry to ensure the correct information is entered.

Once all your data has been entered into your software program, you can begin analyzing it. A spreadsheet program, such as Microsoft Excel®, can be used to gain basic statistics of your data. It also can be used to make charts or graphs.

If more sophisticated analyses are needed, a statistical program such as SPSS or SAS can be used. If you are not comfortable doing the analysis of the survey data yourself, your local college or university can probably provide assistance with this step.

If you are conducting an online survey, the two online tools mentioned previously can give you basic statistics for your survey. You also can export the data into statistical programs if you require more advanced analyses.

Using the Information in Community Development

By surveying new residents, your community can learn who they are, what brought them to your community, and how satisfied they are with their move. This information can be incorporated into a variety of community improvement efforts, such as community marketing campaigns and new-resident retention efforts.

Attracting new residents is important to growing the workforce in a community. Conducting surveys of current new residents can help a community better understand what potential new residents are looking for as they contemplate moving to a new community.

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Resources

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