

# Surveys as Organizing Tools

Surveys can serve several purposes:

- Gather information about people's opinions.
- Show people their opinion is valued.
- Test whether you have an effective network for distribution and discussion.
- Show a powerful opponent that you take the issues seriously and are conducting a campaign.
- Identify potential activists or leaders.
- Develop information that can be given to the news media.

## Designing the survey

**1. Involve people from the target audience in developing and testing the survey.** You might start with a committee meeting to discuss ideas for the survey. Then compile a draft for review and discussion by the group.

When you have a revised draft, have some people fill it out so you can see if any questions are confusing or poorly worded or if major concerns are not covered.

Preparing a survey through this process may take a little longer, but the survey will be more useful and the committee members will have a greater personal interest in making sure others fill it out.

**2. Consult an expert on survey design if you have a large group to survey and need to be able to compile the results by computer.**

The computer analysis should be planned before the survey is finalized. Otherwise, you may have answers that are too open-ended to be tabulated by computer.

For example, if you ask a "closed" question such as, "Rate each item in importance, with 1 being most important and 5 least," you can later determine what percentage of the members put 1 for each item, what percentage put 2, and so on.

If, on the other hand, you simply ask, "How important is each item to you?" the answers will be worded in a wide variety of ways and you won't be able to count percentages.

**3. Limit the survey to a few simple questions if the real purpose is to start conversations or if the target group will not complete anything more detailed.** While some surveys are designed to gather lots of information, others are mainly a tool to get people talking about an upcoming campaign.

**4. If you want meaningful answers, ask specific questions.** If you ask whether workers would like an improvement in pay, it won't tell you much that they all said yes. If you ask "Do you think an increase in pay should be done by a) percentage raise, b) flat increase, or c) flat increase plus special raises for the bottom two job titles?" you will learn something from the answers.

**5. Ask for priorities, not just a wish list.** If you say, "Would you like this, this, and this?" most people probably will say they want them all. If you say, "Of these three, which is the most important?" you will learn something about their priorities.

**6. Don't ask two questions in one.** If you ask, "Have you personally had breathing problems or skin rashes that could be related to chemicals you work with?" and someone answers "yes," you don't know which problem they have had.

**7. Ask for experiences as well as opinions.** Ask people about their direct experience with any of the problems or issues the survey deals with.

**8. Leave space for open-ended comments.** You won't be able to think of every question that should be asked, nor will you have room on the survey for every issue, so make sure people are encouraged to tell about problems that are not already covered by the questions.

**9. Consider how you will publicize the results when you design the questions.** While some questions will have no purpose but to give you confidential information about where people stand, you may want to generate some answers you can release back to the target group or to the news media. Phrase these questions so that the significance of the answers will be easy for members and others to understand.

For example, it would be easy for people to understand that "77 percent of nursing home workers said staffing levels must be improved in order to ensure quality care."

By contrast, you would not be able to get much communications advantage from answers to a question like, "Are you satisfied with your current level of pay?"

**10. Use the survey to educate.** A short introduction should make several points clear.

- We are doing this survey to get your input.
- Whether we accomplish the goals you care about depends on your involvement. (One way to emphasize this and to start gathering information on volunteers is to include as part of the survey a checklist about what that person is most interested in doing to help.)

The survey also should educate just by the way the questions are asked. By the choice of subjects and possible solutions, you can help people start focusing on certain key issues and potential improvement.

Make sure that questions and solutions are adequately explained. Some people may not be familiar with certain concepts or jargon.

**11. Decide whether to offer anonymity.** If the topics are controversial and you want broader participation, you may need to promise to keep each individual's responses secret. But it may also be important to be able to follow up with particular individuals. In addition, anonymity may send the wrong signal by not encouraging people to step forward and take a more active role.

**12. Print the survey in several languages** if needed so everyone can fill it out.

## **Distributing and collecting the survey**

**1. Distribute and collect the survey in person** if possible and not by mail or e-mail. This provides an opportunity to:

- Hear what people are thinking and educate them about their role in winning the goals they say are priorities.
- Update contact information
- Identify potential leaders and activists.
- Increase the number of people who will answer the survey.
- Test your system for reaching people to see where the holes are.
- Help anyone who needs assistance in completing the survey.

**2. Consider holding survey meetings** or parties. When a group fills out the surveys at the same time, it helps them focus on concerns they all share and on their mutual responsibility to take action to get results.

**3. Give the people distributing the survey a brief training session.** Some key points of that training should include:

- The surveyor's job is to listen, not to give personal opinions about priorities.
- If someone makes negative comments about the organization, the surveyor's job is not to argue but to find out more.
- The surveyor should emphasize that what we win depends on everyone's active involvement. Ask people to start thinking about how they are willing to help and give them examples of the volunteer efforts that will be needed. It is important not to let people workers think that someone else is going to deliver results for them.

**4. Create some spirit and visibility for the survey** by publicizing the period when it will be conducted.

**5. Combine the survey with a membership drive** if appropriate. One way to do that is to end the survey form with a membership application and ask volunteers to make a pitch to non-members to join. Another way is to distribute the survey only to members, and to talk with or write to non-members saying that you would like their participation too.