

How to Conduct Communication Research

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How many times do professional communicators plan and implement communication campaigns without understanding their target audience(s)? Our bosses say, “We don’t have money for a research firm,” or “I’m the CEO, I know what my customers want.” Companies spend a lot of money on television, radio, newspaper, magazine, and Web ads only to learn that their campaigns failed to reach their audiences, therefore failing to strengthen mutually beneficial relationships that strengthen the organization’s bottom line (reputation).

A professor I once had said that communication research is like a doctor using an x-ray. After all, if you were to break a bone in your body, wouldn’t you want the doctor to use an x-ray to diagnose the problem? That’s what research does for us in communication. It gives us the evidence to properly diagnose – and treat – the communication problem we are facing.

So, sticking to the medical analogy, how do we “take the pulse” of our audiences?

Conduct a Survey

It’s easy to learn what an audience is thinking by conducting a survey. Before you write a survey and conduct it, you must determine:

Your purpose. Is it measuring a target audience’s attitude, understanding or behavior toward your organization’s actions, image, policies, services, products?

Does the information you want already exist in another setting? Perhaps the data you need can be found through the Census Bureau or from a graduate student’s thesis or from another study your organization recently conducted.

What will you do with the results? Are you looking to find out why audiences don’t respond to your messages? Are you looking to generate publicity based on the findings?

How long will you take to complete the survey (and what’s the best time to conduct the survey)? In today’s 24-hour news cycle, your organization could have a positive reputation one minute and a crisis that jeopardizes that reputation the next. Timeliness is key.

How much money, time and staff members do you have to conduct the survey? The more of each that you have, the larger the sample you can use. This reduces sampling error and gives you a better idea of the population surveyed.

How will you tally the results? In my college days, we did everything by hand. In graduate school, we used software like SPSS. Today, you can use Web-based survey products that distribute your survey, tally your results and create eye-catching charts and graphs that explain your findings. Many of these Web-based services come with a price tag, but some of them are free (or offer limited time free trials). Two Web sites my students have found helpful over the years are www.freeonlinesurveys.com and www.surveymonkey.com. Google “Free Online Survey Tools” to find more survey providers.

How to Gather the Information

In my experiences teaching students at The College of New Jersey, the most functional ways to gather information have been through hand distributed paper surveys and Web-based surveys.

My students have found it easy to divvy up the number of responses needed so each group member distributes his or her fair share of paper surveys. Then all surveys are compiled on paper by hand, and are entered into SPSS or Microsoft Excel to produce illustrations of the results. One caution – this method can get expensive for students on limited budgets. Photocopies aren't cheap.

Many of my students have found true delight in using Web-based tools to distribute surveys. These Web services allow you to enter your questions and answer choices to create a Web-based survey people can take on their computers. Your population learns of the survey either by receiving an e-mail invitation with a link to the survey or by word-of-mouth. One tip: if you can afford it, offer an incentive to your population for responding. Perhaps it is a raffle or a small token gift. One caution: it may be tough to track who takes an online survey. One person completing several surveys instead of just one will skew your results, and make your entire study invalid.

Some Specifics About Sampling

What determines the sample size? It has nothing to do with the size of the population from which you are taking the sample. Math experts have developed the below table of sampling errors:

Population size	Sample size for the 95 percent confidence level					
	±3% sampling error		±5% sampling error		±10% sampling error	
	50/50 split	80/20 split	50/50 split	80/20 split	50/50 split	80/20 split
100	92	87	80	71	49	38
250	203	183	152	124	70	49
500	341	289	217	165	81	55
750	441	358	254	185	85	57
1,000	516	406	278	198	88	58
2,500	748	537	333	224	93	60
5,000	880	601	357	234	94	61
10,000	964	639	370	240	95	61
25,000	1,023	665	378	234	96	61
50,000	1,045	674	381	245	96	61
100,000	1,056	678	383	245	96	61
1,000,000	1,066	682	384	246	96	61
100,000,000	1,067	683	384	246	96	61

How to read this table: For a population with 250 members whom we expect to be about evenly split on the characteristic in which we are interested, we need a sample of 152 to make estimates with a sampling error of no more than ± 5 percent, at the 95 percent confidence level. A "50/50 split" means the population is relatively varied. An "80/20 split" means it is less varied; most people have a certain characteristic, a few do not. Unless we know the split ahead of time, it is best to be conservative and use 50/50.

Numbers in the table refer to completed, usable questionnaires needed for various levels of sampling error. Starting sample size should allow for ineligible and nonrespondents. Note that when the population is small, little is gained by sampling, especially if the need for precision is great.

Simply put, if you draw a sample of 384 from a population of 1,000, 100,000, or 1 million, the sampling error is always plus or minus 5 percent.

Example: If 75 percent of the respondents answer "yes" to a question, the true answer would lie between 70 and 80 percent.

You can say the results from your sample represent the thinking of the entire population only if the sample is drawn properly.

One way to properly draw a sample is to use systematic random sampling. This gives every member of the population the chance to be surveyed.

First, you'll need your population's list of names.

Next, divide the number of surveys you wish to have completed, for example 384 for a 5 percent error, into the approximate number of people on your list. So, if our population is the TCNJ student body (and we have 6,000 students), then we'd divide 6,000 by 384 to get 15.625. Let's round up to 16 to make this easy. Now, our interval is 16.

Third, select a starting number by chance from one to whatever your interval is (in our case, 16). So, let's say we pick nine. The ninth person on our list would be the first person who gets a survey. Then, we survey every 16th person from that starting number – 25, 41, 57, 73, etc.

Now you have a representative sample. The thinking of those respondents represents the thinking of the larger population.

Writing the Questions

You have a choice of open-ended questions with no answers to circle or close-ended questions, which force the respondents to select an answer. For example: What is the single most important issue facing students at The College of New Jersey today?

Keep open-ended questions to a minimum. They are difficult to tabulate.

Close-ended question:

Are you a member of any clubs, groups, or organizations on TCNJ campus?

- a. Yes b. No

Close-ended questions are used widely and are easy to tabulate.

Questionnaire Guidelines:

Decide what kinds of information are needed and in what detail. Only ask questions that you need in order to get the information that you need.

Decide which group will receive the questionnaire.

Decide on the sample size. Most of the time it will be 384.

State the purpose of the survey and guarantee anonymity.

Use close-ended questions as much as possible. Respondents find it easier and less time-consuming to check answers than compose them in an open-ended essay.

Design the questionnaire in such a way that answers can be easily coded for statistical analysis.

Keep the questionnaire short. No more than 25 questions. Long questionnaires put people off and reduce the number of responses, particularly in print questionnaires where it is easy to see how long the survey will take to complete.

Use categories when asking questions about education, age and income. People are more willing to answer when a category or range is used. For example, what category best describes your age? (a) Under 25 (b) 26 to 40, and so on.

Use simple, familiar words. Readability should be appropriate for the group being sampled. At the same time, don't talk down to your respondents.

Make questions as concise as possible. Avoid long introductory conditional clauses. They may confuse respondents.

Design the questions to provide you with the exact information you need, not the answers desired. For example, "How long have you lived here?" may give you answers like, "A long time," "Not too long," and "A while." In such a question, provide specific answers your respondents can choose from, such as:

- (a) less than one year
- (b) one to five years
- (c) six to 10 years
- (d) 10 or more years.

Avoid two-part questions like, "Do you work full- or part-time? Yes _____ No _____" If respondents work full-time and not part-time, how do they respond?

Avoid danger words with emotional connotations if they have little relevance to the purpose of the survey. Examples: abortion, gun control, and socialism.

Avoid ambiguous words and phrases that may confuse your respondents. The question, "Don't you think health care should be universal?" is impossible to tabulate. What does a "yes" answer mean? "Yes, I don't think..." or "Yes, I do think..."

Edit out leading questions that suggest a specific response or bias an answer. Example: "Aren't you against this unconstitutional attempt to create three classes of citizens?" Remember context and placement of questions. One question close to another can influence responses to the later questions.

Provide space at the end of the questionnaire for respondents' comments and observations. This allows them to provide additional information or elaboration that may not have been covered in the main body of the questionnaire.

Pre-test your survey for understanding, typos and possible bias. At least five representatives of the proposed sampling group should read the questionnaire and make comments for improvement. Make sure you observe the pre-test. The five people who pre-tested your survey should not be asked to take the revised survey that you distribute to your sample.

Conducting a Face-to-Face Interview

When interviewing people as part of an initial client interview or intercept study:

Be neutral. Avoid influencing the answers.

Dress in a fashion that won't alienate the respondents. Students interviewing real world clients should dress in business attire. Students interviewing other students should dress like students.

Become thoroughly familiar with your questions. No need to memorize, but a respondent may give a response that sparks another question you didn't think of initially.

Record the answers to open-ended question exactly as given.

Be friendly and show a genuine interest in the respondent.

Using Focus Groups

Another way to conduct communication research is to use focus groups. Focus groups provide qualitative information. To conduct them, assemble a group of six to 12 people who mirror the audience you are trying to reach.

Ask them questions about your client's publications, community relations program, services, products, special events, etc. Use them to get target audience opinion about advertising campaigns, logos and persuasive copy.

Focus groups aren't scientific, but they can provide valuable information. Videotape focus groups to study verbal and non-verbal messages. In addition, it is better to have an independent third party conduct a focus group, as respondents may tell you what you WANT to hear, not what you NEED to hear. Remember, always compensate focus group participants. Feed them prior to the session, and give them a gift or a monetary stipend for taking time to participate.