

Community Surveys: Doing them Right

Most police agencies in Canada have adopted a community-based style of policing that puts the public's needs first and makes proactive, problem-solving policing a priority.

In attempting to connect with the community, many departments are turning to an age-old marketing tool - the survey. For an agency that has never done one before, or attempted to do one itself, it can be a formidable process.

There are a couple of very basic things to consider before embarking on this kind of research, including whether or not to undertake the job internally. From personal experience, it's something I don't recommend for a number of reasons - the most compelling being the fact that few departments have adequate staffing capabilities to conduct and analyze a survey. Hiring an outside agency to do the work also avoids a risk of community misperception that results may be manipulated internally.

Sample Size

Once you've decided to move ahead with the initiative, you must first determine how many people you need to survey to get credible feedback data, or in marketing terms, what your "sample size" will be. For a mid-size department, a sample of 500 is usually adequate. However, be aware of the fact that the smaller the sample size, the lower the survey's accuracy will be. You also have to determine the type of survey that will be most effective for you, including considering the pros and cons of doing a phone or mail survey. Any survey is worthless if not sufficiently representative of your community.

Mail vs. Phone

To obtain a sample of 500 households, you will have to mail out anywhere between 3,000 and 10,000 surveys. Response to average marketing surveys range from 3 to 21%. If you are in a smaller community and policing is a high-profile issue, you may have a higher return, but not likely more than 33%.

The biggest consideration for mail surveys is your sample demographic. If you mail your survey out with the water bill, for example, you will only reach homeowners. Apartment dwellers, renters, people who have wells, etc., would all be left out. Depending on your region, this may seriously skew the demographic results, i.e., you would get response from average to higher income homeowners, between the ages of 25-65. If you decide to do a mail survey, your best bet is to do a mail drop in each of your postal code areas - ensuring you cover urban, suburban and rural areas, including homes, apartments, low-income housing complexes, etc.

Language is another issue to consider. In some cities, like Vancouver or Toronto, surveys must be produced in a number of different languages to ensure a wide range of ethnic citizenry is represented. Then, of course, there's the problem of people not bothering to check their mail carefully, fill out the survey and find a mailbox to send it back.

When it comes to phone surveys, the biggest drawback is cost. Be prepared to spend between \$10,000 and \$20,000 on a survey. However, the advantage of a phone survey, reliable and controllable collection of data, is well worth it.

First, surveyors have the opportunity to screen respondents to ensure an accurate proportion of all your identified demographics are represented - by geographic area, income level, language spoken or age. Once an appropriate number of respondents have answered the survey from one demographic group, that group can be screened out from further calls so that you can hear from others. (Of course, there is a marginal demographic skew in that your survey would only reach people with phones.)

Best of all, instead of waiting for surveys to be delivered, and hoping people mail them back; your wait-time for results is much shorter. In most cases, a survey will take less than a week to conduct, and results should be back to your department within two to three weeks after that.

Question Development

It's up to your department to formulate the basis of the questions being asked. Is there a specific issue you need feedback on? Are you trying to establish a baseline satisfaction index from which to work? Are you trying to determine if your department's goals and objectives are in line with your community's priorities for safety?

Once a baseline study is done, it's only valuable if follow-up surveys are conducted on a regular basis to monitor positive or negative change. It's a good idea to include a number of questions that will be repeated each time. Establish a "Police Satisfaction Index" with five to ten basic questions that can be repeated on each survey your department commissions. This allows you to effectively illustrate improvements in customer service over time.

It's also smart to conduct internal communications audits around the same time your external survey is being done. It's an opportune time to find out if your officers' goals are in keeping with the expectations of the community they serve. For the most part, people want three things: to be safe in their home, to be safe on the streets and for their children to be safe in school. That means good customer service, high visibility, proactive crime prevention programming, and excellent traffic enforcement - extremely valuable information when budget time rolls around!

About the Author

Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.