

# Effective Readership Surveys By Gwen Dunant

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 **hotsheets**



Readership and subscriber surveys are instrumental in providing publishers with the information they need to build their magazine; every department will have its own use for the data gathered. Circulators want to know if subscribers are going to renew, or how readers would respond to a cover price increase, while editors want to know if the magazine is still delivering an engaging product, and the sales reps want to know who their readers are, what they buy and how they use and relate to the magazine.

With the potential to yield so much information, and for so many uses, surveys can easily get out of hand if they try to please too many bosses. When this happens, the process of surveying readers can be frustrating and the information you gather may be compromised or rendered useless. In order to make the most of the time and effort you put into surveying your readership, it is important that you have a clear idea of the information you want and how you are going to use it — **before you begin!**

## Your first decision: who are you going to survey — readers or subscribers?

Subscribers are your dedicated readers. They pay in advance for the magazine because it speaks to them so strongly that they don't want to miss an issue or wait to get it on the newsstand. Because they love the magazine their feedback might be more useful to a sales person — "89% of our subscribers intend to renew their subscriptions; that's reader commitment!" — than to an editor or circulator. Those departments may be more interested in converting readers to subscribers, so feedback from readers on what they'd like to see in the magazine will be more instructive to them.

## Next, how are you going to survey your chosen audience?

Are you going to mail out a questionnaire? Put a questionnaire in a polybag along with the magazine? Use an online survey? The fact is that a questionnaire put into the hands of readers or subscribers is still the gold standard for surveying. But this takes time and costs money, making online surveys more attractive.

Online surveys are cheap and easy to do, but this doesn't mean that they are always the right choice. For many magazines, their online reader is not their print reader, so an online survey won't yield useful results. Similarly, if your readers aren't frequent web users, an online survey won't give you the information you need.

## The next step is to meet with a tabulator.

Unless your survey results are third-party tabulated, they will have no credibility in the marketplace — an important consideration if the data is going to be used to sell advertising. A tabulator, or statistician, can also help you frame your survey questions in such a way that you get useful data. For example, if you want to convince a bookstore to advertise in your magazine, your survey shouldn't ask your reader if he or she shops there. Instead, the question is: How much money do you spend on books each month? This way the data can be used for other bookstores, as well as to build a lifestyle picture for your advertisers.

And, when it comes to questions, remember that, while it's nice to know all kinds of things about who reads your magazine, you do want a survey that yields useful information. Only ask questions that you need the answer to. Long, meandering questions about how the reader felt about an article, for example, likely won't be answered by most respondents. Respect their time and ask only what you need to know in clear language. Poorly worded questions will yield murky results.

## Finally, beware of the offer you attach to answering the survey.

Contests get people responding because they want to win the contest, not necessarily because they want to help the magazine. The more dedicated your reader, the more likely that they'll respond to a survey accompanied by a request from the publisher and a modest magazine-related incentive such as free back issues.

To develop an effective readership or subscriber survey, take the time to think it through and determine what information you want, what you want it for and the best way to go about getting it. The results can be worth their weight in gold.