**Know objectives before you survey**

Surveys—like the best companies—need to have a clearly-defined goal.

by Judith Guido

I'm often asked by folks in the green industry, How do you develop a good survey?

I am also told by disappointed surveyors of the industry that surveys don't work. I answer the first question with a question of my own: "Why do you want to do a survey? After giving me a perplexed look, landscapers tell me that "all companies do surveys," and surveys are a mandatory part of doing business. Another popular response is, "We do it every year."

You survey customers whenever you want to know specific information that you plan to use to effect some change within your organization, not because surveys are "part of doing business."

Another important fact about surveys is that they aren't complete once they're sent out in the mail. They need to be collected, read, understood, analyzed and acted upon.

Most of the people who told me that surveys don't work, when questioned further, said they never followed through on any of these important steps.

**Certified mail boosts response rate**

Certified or express mail will increase the survey response rate and decrease response time. I recommend this method only when time is a major factor or an extremely high response rate is needed to validate your survey.

These kinds of mailings are more expensive with a larger sample. Wait about four weeks before sending out a reminder letter to those who have not replied. Generally, you can expect about 10 percent of the outstanding sample to respond after they receive "reminder cards."

Send a thank you card and perhaps a token of appreciation to all respondents. One year, Laflamme Services mailed a packet of herb seeds to survey respondents. It was a lightweight, inexpensive, industry-related gift.

**Analyse and take action**

Get all your employees together, and make sure that anyone who may be affected by the survey reads and understands it. Discuss responses, and set up a meeting for follow-up. Make a list of action plans to solve problems or duplicate (cross-company) the strengths that were identified. Assign these tasks and set deadlines.

Let the respondents know what you are going to do with the information. This lets your customers know you are not wasting their time.

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