

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 fur-



Guido: If you don't know why you're taking the survey, you'll just be wasting time and money.

ther, 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.

Analyze 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. □

The author is director of marketing and business development for Laflamme Services/Grass Roots, Bridgeport, Ct.

Common-sense survey tips

1. Consider your budget and staff skill. Make sure someone in your company knows how to design and analyze the data.
2. Know your audience. Include age, gender, education, professional status and attention span. Consider how much time will be needed for them to complete the survey.
3. Determine the sample size. You can survey everyone in your small customer base, but a larger customer base requires you to be selective: which customers do you most want to hear from—building owners as opposed to facility managers? Women instead of men?
4. Determine the method. Self-administered surveys include mail and other written surveys. Interviewer-administered surveys are done by phone and in-person contact.
5. Balance the length and information. Shorter surveys should bring a higher response rate, but will provide less information. But, you can always do another. Remember: you have to *act* on this information!
6. Ask one question at a time. Don't ask: Do your workers show up on time *and* are they dressed in their uniforms? You may get one 'yes' and not know which question they have answered.
7. Keep questions short, 25 words or less.
8. Avoid loaded questions, which discredit your results.
9. Pretest your survey with friends and employees to see if they find it user-friendly and easy to understand.
10. Explain the survey to customers, in a one page cover letter. Tell them why you need to know their opinions.

J.G.