

Conducting a Community or Member Survey

Surveys are an important tool that every start-up co-op needs to ensure that they have accurate information about their members' and future customers' needs. They also serve as a way to make people in your community aware of your co-op organizing effort and the kinds of issues that are inherent in your mission. This document will provide answers to some of the most common questions that groups have about conducting an effective, meaningful survey.

1. Why are we doing a survey?

In the early stages of organizing your co-op you need to know how much interest your community has in a food co-op. How many people would become members? How many would shop? How much would they spend? What would they want to buy? Where are they located? Anecdotal information from friends and acquaintances can be misleading since most of us tend to associate with people who share our interests and concerns. Conducting a survey is also an effective way to let people know about your project. Other information that could be gained from a survey includes:

- identifying perceptions that can help shape your brand image
- measuring shopping habits and preferences
- identifying the influence and strength of competitors
- assessing customer reaction to specialty departments

2. What does a good survey look like?

A properly designed survey should not be too long. About 30 questions are usually enough. The questions should only address areas where the data is useful (do you really need to know if a customer would buy organic elk?) and to which you can actually respond (if people say they want the store to be open 24 hrs/day, will you?) To have a statistically meaningful analysis you will need up to 300 valid responses depending on the size of your market area; accuracy increases with more. There are several essential components in conducting a valid survey:

- Survey design Looking at the nature of the issues being studied and determining the most appropriate type of research vehicle for addressing those issues
- Questionnaire design Actually designing and testing the questionnaire to be used
- Questionnaire implementation Carrying out the interviews (or focus group moderation)
- Questionnaire tabulation Running a tabulation program that will enable not only a clear tabulation of survey results, but also the necessary analysis of the data to address specific issues
- Analysis of the results Extracting meaningful data including a summary report, live presentations and recommendations

3. What survey method (in-person, mail, internet, phone, etc.) is recommended?

For a comprehensive survey used to determine community interest in a co-op and its desired products and services, a telephone survey will usually provide the most reliable results and most representative cross-section of your market. Internet based surveys can provide useful information from a sub-section of your community, but are best suited to short surveys about specific questions to a known group of potential respondents.

4. Can we do it ourselves or do we have to hire a professional market research company?

Your results will be more meaningful, better analyzed and validated when the survey is conducted by professionals. Survey design requires careful wording and structure that is not easy for an inexperienced writer to replicate. Conducting the survey will necessitate many hours of calling and logging answers into a database. Professional survey providers use sophisticated software and data entry systems that provide detailed results and analysis.

5. How do we find the right company to do our survey?

Ask for references - from other co-ops, local chamber of commerce, local community bank, local non-profit, or other partner organization. Consider local firms who may be more familiar with your co-op and/or market conditions. Experience with the unique characteristics of retail co-ops is important.

Questions to Ask Potential Suppliers: May be included in a formal "Request for Proposal" (RFP) if co-op plans to issue one.

- Request references and contact information for past or present clients.
- Request samples of firm's work (i.e., executive summaries, reports, tables, recommendations, project timelines, etc.)
- List of people, including credentials, who will be involved in the research project. Always request one project lead, and a backup who will know the status of your project if you cannot contact the lead for some reason.
- What methods and systems will the company use to conduct and analyze the research? Describe their capabilities and limitations.
- Does the company plan to work with other vendors on the project (such as moderators or focus group facilities, etc.)? If yes, which ones? For what aspects of the project? Don't hesitate to get references for anyone involved in the project.
- Can they store and track data for comparison to data collected in the future? For how long?
- How will the company manage the project? What other projects is the company engaged in that may overlap or interfere with your project? This is particularly important if you have a tight timeline.

Some Suggested Items to Include in an RFP

- Purpose of RFP- outlines what you are looking for (i.e., solicit bids from qualified companies to develop, conduct and analyze results of primary research among member-owners/potential member-owners of our retail food cooperative)
- Co-op profile & any pertinent background information on the project (including budget parameters)
- Any guidelines for proposal submission and response requirements such as how proposals should be sent (postal mail, email, etc.)
- Information on how co-op will respond to proposals (i.e., what vendors can expect)
- Confidentiality requirement
- Information on how co-op will select a vendor (i.e., price? ability to meet timing? best overall? Do you reserve right to choose multiple vendors, reject all?, etc.)
- Timetable for submissions and selection
- Who to contact at your organization
- Items that must be included in the proposal, such as:
 - Company profile
 - Partner company profile, if applicable
 - Project team profiles
 - Proposed methodology
 - Proposed timeline
 - Proposed pricing (line item)
 - References
 - Samples
 - Methods & systems used
- Other items specific to your project and needs

6. How much will it cost?

Several factors will affect the total cost of having a professional survey conducted. These include the length of the survey, the number of responses needed, the method of conducting the survey, and how the data will be analyzed and presented. Generally speaking, you can expect to spend several thousand dollars (up to \$10,000 and possibly a lot more if you have special requirements.)

7. Where can I get more information?

- Marketing Research Association (MRA) - www.mra-net.org
 - MRA's Blue Book (list of providers) - www.bluebook.org
- International Market Research Information - www.imriresearch.com
 - IMRI's International Directory - www.imriresearch.com/?location=IDMRO
- American Marketing Association (AMA) - www.marketingpower.com
 - Directory of Marketing Research Services - www.marketingpower.com/content562088.php