

ANGELA SINICKAS: Conducting research with hard-to-reach employees

Hard-to-reach audiences are not only a difficult communication challenge – but they also present a tricky challenge when it comes to conducting research. Angela Sinickas, president, Sinickas Communications, Inc., offers some advice for dealing with very different types of remote workers – sales people who are constantly on the road or with customers, manufacturing staff whose time is 100 percent committed to line operations, and people who work in geographically remote areas such as gas pipelines or oil drilling rigs.

Participants need a place to complete the survey

Sinickas begins by giving some practical advice for use in a process setting where it's often difficult to find the space or time to complete a survey. "If you're doing survey research in a manufacturing environment, what you have to realize is that not only do participants need a paper survey – but they also need a place in which to complete the survey," she reminds communicators. In many such environments staff will not have their own personal space, as they might in an office-based role. "Most manufacturing areas do not have desk space on which to put a piece of paper down. If you don't ever spend time there this wouldn't occur to you – so just giving them the paper survey isn't enough – you've got to make sure they have a place with a table, whether it's a cafeteria or the human resources department. Even getting a survey to randomly selected employees can be a challenge since manufacturing areas rarely have individual mailboxes."

Take advantage of manufacturing shut-downs and down-time

But it isn't only providing the space. Time can be an important obstacle to completing a survey, when each employee's time is fully committed to undertaking specific hands-on tasks. "Most companies won't want to pay people overtime to stay longer at the end of their shift to complete a survey," explains Sinickas. "But if you look at the different environments in a manufacturing setting, most will have an occasional shut-down." Some of these will be for scheduled maintenance work but most manufacturing environments experience unexpected shut-downs – unexpected in the sense that they're not pre-scheduled. But plant managers and supervisors know they will have to allow for a short shut-down from time to time for minor maintenance tasks.

For example, if the machinery isn't running smoothly the supervisor will need to stop the line, perhaps to oil the equipment, change a part, recalibrate and so on. "The supervisor might have 15, 20 or 30 minutes when only a few people are doing something and yet everyone is still being paid," says Sinickas. "If that's the environment that you know you have to survey, what you need to do is to work with the management in that plant." Sinickas advises approaching plant management to seek their cooperation by saying, "If next time there's any reason to shut down the line, this would be when we'd like you to have the supervisors take employees into the cafeteria who aren't needed for the fix. While they're off the line we'd like the supervisors to ask employees to fill in a survey." As a result Sinickas says, "You'll get a pretty good response rate and it's better than people standing around doing nothing."

Conduct the survey at a regular face-to-face event

Sinickas says that sometimes it's possible to piggy-back a survey on a regular face-to-face event. "Another thing I've seen work is in staff meetings – perhaps a plant meeting where they might have a weekly production get-together. People are already sitting around the conference table, and not standing on the line, so that part of the meeting time could be spent completing a survey."

Establish administrative processes that enhance feelings of anonymity

"There are lots of different opportunities," Sinickas says but adds that communicators need to pay attention to survey management in manufacturing environments. "You need to be careful in a group administration setting," she cautions. "When employees finish their surveys, they need to be able to put them into a sealed envelope and then have that sealed envelope put into a pile or package. This way they don't feel the

supervisor is going to say 'Oh, that's Joe's survey'." Communicators need to advise supervisors very clearly about this aspect of survey management if the supervisor is the one who will be administering the survey.

Choose the right mode of delivery for your audience

Sinickas turns her attention to people who are remote workers in the field. "Some of those employees are sales people who work out of their home," she says. "They typically do have online access – access to the internet, company intranet and e-mail. But the danger with those people is that we assume that they'd be happy to fill out a survey online." Communicators must recognize that sales staff do not typically have online access during the work day, or perhaps have only a limited screen display via a hand-held device. Sales people are usually out seeing clients, working from their cars or a cafeteria, sitting in waiting rooms before a meeting and so on. For these reasons they're far more likely to complete a paper survey while they're waiting to meet a customer. It isn't realistic for a researcher to expect sales staff to come home at the end of a long day, log in and spend another 15 to 20 minutes completing a survey online.

Some people who are working remotely may have online access, but this may not be the best way to get a good response rate, while others have no online access for work purposes. Such a group might include telephone line engineers, cable TV technicians, or people operating in a geographically remote area such as gas pipeline workers. Like sales personnel, these people will also need to receive a paper survey, but communicators should expect a somewhat lower response rate. For this reason Sinickas suggests that, if conducting a random sample of the whole company, communicators should invite a larger proportion of remote workers to participate because fewer of them will ultimately respond.

Survey response data needs to be correctly weighted

Once the survey responses have been collated, Sinickas advises communicators to review the proportions of the returns if the results are not to be skewed. "Did you get the right proportion of people in your survey response? Did it match the proportion of those remote workers in the workforce? If it doesn't, then you need to weight the results; otherwise, you will come up with a company average that is weighted too strongly in favor of the office people," Sinickas suggests. Unweighted results will provide an inaccurate picture that will not reflect the reality for so many of those remote workers.

Circulate results to those who participated

"You want to make sure that you get as good a response rate as you can – but then you have to acknowledge that it will be lower than in the office group," Sinickas says. Once the responses come in the communicator has to fix the imbalance by providing the correct weighting at this point – the back end of the survey process. But the communicator's job doesn't end there. "Remember to get the results back out to the people who have participated," says Sinickas. This means going beyond simply posting the results electronically on the company intranet and hoping everyone will log in.

"This is true of all communication," she says. "You have to make sure that your communication system has a way of summarizing critical information that's online, in print if necessary, for those remote people. You can't assume that supervisors will pass that information on. They simply don't. You can expect it, but it doesn't happen."

Plan focus groups to dovetail with large regional and global employee meetings

Sinickas acknowledges the difficulty of bringing these hard-to-reach groups together for a face-to-face focus group session – but it depends on which people the communicator is trying to collect in one place. For example, it's very hard to get sales people to attend a focus group because the sales team might only have one person in a particular town, with the next person 60 miles away and the next one 300 miles further on. However, some of these sales teams meet in person once, twice or three times a year at least at a regional sales meeting, if not at a national or global level. "So what you need to do is to find out the schedule for those types of meeting and get on their agenda. Then you can run focus groups for people while they're together," suggests Sinickas.

Telephone interviews offer opportunities for more probing research

One-to-one telephone interviews are another possibility for person-to-person research. “That way you can probe more deeply during the interviews than just receiving the responses to be read in a written form,” says Sinickas. One-on-one interviews can sometimes take less time because in a focus group you’re waiting for five or six people to respond, whereas in an interview each person is just answering each question once. On the other hand, if you were to do several one-to-one interviews, these might take longer than a small focus group. Communicators need to balance the in-depth quality of what they will get from a telephone interview versus the time that they will need to put into gathering the responses.

Focus groups have hidden costs and benefits

Remote blue-collar workers are much harder to bring into a focus group, Sinickas says – but it can still be done. “It just takes a lot of commitment from the company,” she says. “We’re proposing to do some focus groups for a company that has people working on a pipeline in a very remote place. The company has regional offices where the HR people work, so there are some conference rooms,” she says. “But we know that the company is going to have to pay people, not only for being in the focus group but also for their driving time and their expenses.”

Sinickas explains that the effort of bringing remote workers to a focus group session often has other side benefits. Those people tend to be so grateful that their opinions are being heard that the process has a positive halo effect long afterwards. Remote workers attending a focus group might typically say, “Hey, you wouldn’t believe it – management actually called me in for my opinion. And they really listened.” Word will usually spread well beyond the people who are actually participating in the focus group, suggesting to these employees that management is really committed to seeking their views.

Sinickas gives another example. “I ran a focus group for an oil company where we needed to talk to people who worked on an oil platform. They were clearly in a place – an oil platform – but because of the safety risk, and helicopter flight, it would be rare for them to take someone like me onto the platform to conduct some focus groups.” Sinickas discovered that the staff worked two weeks on the platform and then they had two weeks off. “What we had to do in that case was to get them after they came off from the platform – and the company paid them overtime to attend the focus group then,” she explains.

Understand each specific hard-to-reach audience

Researching these hard-to-reach employees will continue to be a challenge for communicators as management want to develop a better understanding of the different motivations all their employee groups have – even those that might make up a small proportion of the total number of employees. Sinickas says that, in response, communicators need to become much more creative in their research approaches to reach these employees. She advises communicators to better understand each specific hard-to-reach group so that they can improve their appreciation of the nature of the work these people are doing. Only in this way will communicators begin to see what is possible in terms of the research process – its preparation, administration, management and communication. “You need to do some research with the managers who work with these people because they will have better ideas than you could come up with on your own,” she says.

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