

Getting the most out of research results

Part 2: Tips for getting management to pay attention to your data

All too often companies conduct a survey and do nothing with the results. This problem can be avoided by making sure that management is committed to acting on the findings before you even conduct the research (the topic of this month's column) and developing highly actionable research tools (covered last month).

Here are some ideas for making sure that your senior leadership makes good use of your research results.

Get management buy-in up front

One client called to say her organization was ready to conduct communication focus groups – a full year after we had submitted a proposal. During that year – while she was assigned part-time to her current government agency and part-time to another one – she had built a business case for the cost of not communicating well with employees in her regular interactions with the leadership team.

By the time we arrived to plan the focus groups the Executive Council was eager to gather the information they now knew they needed. They ended up doubling the number of focus groups to be conducted to make sure no pocket of the organization was missed. They also took the findings completely to heart and began making changes immediately, including providing more resources to my client to help her implement the recommendations.

Focus on the right subjects

Before conducting research with employees or customers on the topics you want to learn about, interview your key executives. Ask them about the business plans they are responsible for achieving in the coming year. Probe for the types of research findings that would help them achieve their goals. When you design your research instruments, be sure to gather information that your executives can use, as well as what you need to know. Then it won't just be "your" survey or focus groups

you'll eventually report on. Your leadership team will be eager to see the results they are waiting for, and they will be more likely to pay attention to the other findings as well.

As an example, we were developing a change-readiness survey for one client who had recently reorganized. During our discussions our client shared with us the new CEO's 13 strategic initiatives he was planning to roll out by videotape in a few weeks. We had some serious concerns about the number of the strategies, their wording and the appropriateness of the communication process the client had selected. We proposed doing a day of focus groups in each of the three geographies to pretest employee and supervisor reactions to the strategies and increase their eventual buy-in.

The findings showed that the strategies needed to be consolidated and rolled out in a more interactive way than videotapes. Employees reacted very negatively to the wording of three of the original strategies. The CEO and his team immediately incorporated the employee feedback into their plans, and so greatly increased employee understanding of (and support for) what the company was trying to achieve.

Probe for outcomes as well as process

Be sure to conduct research not only on the process of communication but also on its outcomes – which is what your leadership team will care about most. For example, if you're conducting a readership survey on the content and format of an employee publication, also ask questions about how your employees use the information in the publication. Do they discuss those topics with customers more positively or with greater confidence? Have they changed how they do their jobs because of what they've read?

If your organization conducts regular customer research, then tie your employee research findings to

customer satisfaction results, which are a good indicator of customer retention and, therefore, revenue.

Conduct credible research

If you're doing a survey, make sure the process is conducted in such a way that no statistically-minded executive could fault it.

If you're surveying a sample of your audience then make sure the sampling plan has been developed by a statistician and that your response rate is high enough (both overall and for each major demographic group). Unless your process is nearly perfect, executives who don't like some of your findings will try to poke holes in their validity so they can comfortably ignore them.

Make your reports look like their reports

As communicators, we tend to write reports with a lot of words. You can focus managers' attention on key findings by presenting them as graphically as possible, matching the financial reports they are used to seeing. For instance, use bar charts, line graphs and pie charts for survey results.

Even when your research is qualitative rather than quantitative, arrange your findings in the form of grids. For example, show how strongly different subgroups felt (your grid's column headings) about the answers they gave on a particular question (the grid's row headings).

However, be sure not to use numbers for qualitative research results; instead use colors or check marks to show variations among groups. This is because using percentages is misleading and gives the appearance of accuracy or projectability to the entire audience when you've conducted soft research with a non-random, too-small sample.

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