

COMMUNITY SURVEYS

Why Poll?

Polls offer a way of listening to voters. It's really that simple.

School boards are often reluctant to conduct the district's first poll because they fear bad news. While a community survey might reveal unknown problems or negative attitudes, learning of the problems allows you to take action before the problem grows into an issue across the district.

My experience is that survey results usually bring good news. Surveys confirm that the board is on the right track, provide support for difficult decisions, and demonstrate due diligence and the application of sound business judgment. The information collected during a survey is intended to help make decisions, set priorities, and identify issues.

Survey results take the pulse of the community *at one point in time*. Therefore, conducting surveys should be a regular—every two or three years—activity. Conducting surveys periodically demonstrates to voters the value you place on their views. Residents feel valued when an organization expresses an interest in what they have to say. Board decisions will be more acceptable to residents who had an opportunity to state their preferences or voice their opinions. In fact, responding to surveys may be the only feedback some voters will ever offer, except at the ballot box.

Who Pays for the Survey?

Because community surveys are a legitimate part of a district's communication efforts, in most cases the cost of a survey can be covered by a district's operating funds. Remember though, all results are public record.

The exception to the use of public funds is when a survey is designed specifically to help formulate a campaign strategy. If the questionnaire asks respondents how they would cast their vote on a particular issue, it usually indicates that campaign dollars should be used. One advantage of a privately financed survey is that the results are not public record. This is important when there is organized opposition in your area. When a questionnaire is designed to inform a strategic campaign, you don't want to be required to release your findings to the opposition!

When a campaign needs private financing it is appropriate to approach major vendors with the request.

Timing of a Poll:

1. Pre-engagement Phase

Information collected at the very beginning of any planning process will let you know if your community is aware of the need you want to address. If you're pursuing a new facility, does the public know what the problems are with the current buildings? For example, do they know the buildings are overcrowded or in poor condition?

This is also a good time to collect some benchmark data. Is the public satisfied with the academics, fiscal stewardship, and general management in your district? It can be difficult to gain support for additional funding, unless the public supports the district in these important areas. Changes in these benchmark scores will keep you abreast of any shift in support.

If you conduct a survey before any discussion of going on the ballot you will have the benchmark information. Then, when you poll as part of planning or developing campaign strategy, you'll be alerted to any shifts in attitudes that could cause problems.

2. Facility Planning/Feasibility

If you are beginning or in the process of establishing a facility plan, surveys can help to establish parameters for that plan. Will voters support only basic classroom construction? Are they looking for broader school/community collaboration? Do they understand the reasons a particular site has been selected? Are they satisfied with the location?

3. Community Engagement Phase

This is a key opportunity to determine if the public accurately understands the plan. This is a good time to discover any misconceptions that may have developed, a fact that is particularly helpful if there are any vocal opponents in the community.

These surveys should be focused to learn exactly what voters want to know about the project. Often we want to tell them more than they want to know, or ignore features that may seem unimportant but which the public greatly values. This is the opportunity to identify key benefits from the voter's perspective. For example, is the public concerned that a new facility will afford greater student security? Do they want to be sure that new science labs will adequately prepare students for college? Each community seems to have its own set of priorities. This is the time to discover those priorities so that they are adequately addressed during the campaign.

4. Campaign

Surveys directly linked to a campaign can test message and talking points. It is possible to determine what will positively influence undecided voters and confirm a "yes" vote from supporters. It can also help to develop messages for narrowcasting.

A poll shouldn't be done just to see if you're going to win or not. It's a temptation some clients feel, but a poll should be conducted far enough from Election Day to allow the collected information to influence campaign decisions.

How to Survey:

1. Mail: Personally, I think mail surveys serve only as a public relations effort and not as a legitimate means of statistically reliable data collection.

2. Web Based: The internet is a great way to capture information from populations when you are able to control the process. I strongly support them for surveys with parents who have passwords to access information about their children. In that instance you have some confidence that the person who you want to interview is actually the person who completes the survey, and you can control for multiple responses from a single household.

I often suggest that some questions from a community phone survey be set up on the web so that everyone who wants to have input on the issues has that opportunity. The data from the web survey is tallied but not used as a decision making tool since it is not statistically valid. However, it can provide very valuable information.

Cost: The cost varies a great deal. Often the survey can be set up as a link to the district's own website and internal tech folks can manage. It is also possible to have the survey hosted on a research company's site. Again, the cost varies greatly, but usually \$ 500 to \$3,000.

3. Phone: This is still the most reliable method of data collection, from my perspective.

Cost: Again, it varies widely depending primarily on the number of questions on the questionnaire and the number of surveys to be completed. Assuming that a sample of no fewer than 300 would be used, the cost can range from \$8,000 to \$15,000.

Writing the Questionnaire:

To develop a strong questionnaire, start at the end and work backwards.

The most important influence on the construction of an effective survey is to know exactly what information you need and how the data will be used. Once you can clearly identify the needed information, most of your work is done. A professional pollster will then develop questions that will collect the needed information. A good test for a questionnaire is to look at each question and ask how the collected information will be used. If you don't know its use, the question should be cut.

If you're working with a polling firm, let them advise you about the length of the survey. For the most part, the length should be ten to twelve minutes. This allows for thirty to thirty-five questions. If volunteers must be used to complete the interviewing process, keep the questionnaire to fewer than ten or fifteen questions.

What to Look for in a Polling Firm:

1. Experience with public opinion polls

There is a significant difference in conducting a community opinion poll and a market research survey to determine consumer buying preferences. The skills necessary to do well with one don't usually transfer to the other.

2. Centralized call center

It is important that interviewing be conducted by trained, experienced interviewers from a central facility and under the direct supervision of a research professional.

It is important that interviewing be done from a central facility to ensure that all interviewers read the questions exactly as written, in the order presented. If the question wording is altered in any way, it can significantly influence the reliability of results.

Don't try to use volunteers! Some research companies will work with you to develop and analyze the collected data but expect you to find volunteers to complete the surveys. This can become a nightmare very quickly. The time necessary to manage a force of volunteers and maintain any kind of quality control is much greater than may be anticipated. My experience has been that people will volunteer to complete ten surveys, but quit after one or two.

3. The pollster should remain available to you for 12 to 18 months after the completion of the study to answer any questions about the survey data. This is particularly important when the survey is being completed with an eye toward a future ballot issue or referenda.

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