

# APME National Credibility Roundtables

Reader Interactive Project

## HOW TO BUILD A READER ADVISORY NETWORK

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### Step 3

#### Which reader information to include in a database

Whether you decide to start a simple list of e-mail contacts in your e-mail program, or build a more sophisticated Access-like data base, you'll need to gather some basic information from the readers. The more sophisticated the database, the more potential *fields* in the database. But what you ask the readers to provide should be fairly similar. Many of the details below are intended for those of you who build more sophisticated databases.

First, a philosophical decision must be made: whether to identify people by areas of interest. My feeling is that in *most* cases, you should not try to pigeon-hole people. That is, just because someone has previously written about defense, or education or local government doesn't mean that they might not also be interested in food or fashion or business. Essentially, if you think the subject matter is important enough to write about (for a general interest publication such as a newspaper), then you would expect all of your readers to potentially care about commenting.

A couple of caveats:

--Diversity of sources is important, so you might consider gathering some demographic information (such as age, gender, race). Then, for instance, you might survey 200 people at random, then also survey smaller groups of youth or the elderly to make sure that their perspectives are represented. This is important if you have a part of your readership that is under-represented (don't we all?). Keep in mind, though, that the more information you ask from readers, the fewer people will respond. (If you set up a Web page to have people input their own information, you could have some optional demographic fields that they could leave blank.)

--Certain kinds of topics -- such as whether the Seattle Seahawks should fire their coach - appeal only to football fans. Even though the sports section is part of a general interest publication, non-sports fans generally don't give a hoot about sports and don't necessarily want to be asked sports questions. So identifying *some* interest areas might be of value.

Again, there is no "one-size-fits-all" list of fields for your database, but here are some ideas. If you have other good ideas to share with the group, let me know...

**Writer ID:** If you build a database in Access or Excel or something similar, this is simply a number assigned at random to each record in the data base. It might come in handy later.

**Names:** One field each for First, Middle and Last names.

**Address:** One field each for street address; city; county (optional); state; ZIP code.

**Phone numbers:** Set aside two, or even three fields, for home, business and/or cell numbers.

**E-mail address:** Many people have two e-mail addresses, at home and at work, but you want ONLY ONE field for this. Let them choose which one they want to receive e-mail. In the notes field you can put the other address, in case the one listed ever gets changed.

**Notes:** This is where you might list a second e-mail address, or note that the spouse or child also uses the same e-mail address.

**Send (check box):** Depending on how sophisticated the database, you might want to simply choose who receives e-mail by scrolling through the database and checking the box of everyone you want to receive mail, then sorting by this check box.

**Do not send (check box):** This one is important. If, for example, you use the writers of letters to the editor as your database, you will occasionally, have people who ask not to receive e-mail from you. Don't simply delete them from the database, because the next time they write, they'll just get added again, and they'll have to complain again to be taken out. Instead, leave them in the database, but check the Do Not Send box in that field. Make sure that every sort you do checks this field.

**Last sent:** This also is important. You want to make sure that people don't receive e-mail more than once a week (at the most). And you want to make sure that you rotate through the entire list, rather than send the same people e-mail over and over again. So you need to have a field that's filled in automatically with the date whenever e-mail is sent.

**Optional fields:** Areas of interest; or more detailed demographic information. It's up to you to decide whether to include this. (Keep in mind that you can always build a database with these fields and then decide not to use them. It's tougher to decide later that you wanted them and try to retrofit the database.)

**Photographs:** Some brave souls might want to emulate the 2 Cents project at the San Francisco Chronicle, which not only catalogs participants by email address, but also takes their photographs. That way, there's always a mug shot available to go with their comments in the print edition. This can be a pretty massive undertaking, if you attempt to photograph everyone. One possibility is to collect photos over time from people and not worry about trying to get everyone. Another possibility is to give people the option of sending in an electronic photo of themselves. (Bear in mind this could be hazardous, and you'd need to ensure some way of verifying who's actually in the photo.) You'll have to determine whether getting photographs at all is worth the effort. (Also bear in mind that

photos represent a snapshot in time, and peoples' appearances change, so photos probably will be out of date in a few years.)

**Sorting:** Once you have enough readers in your database, and you want to begin sending e-mail, you have to figure out how to sort the fields. Let's say you want to send e-mail to 200 of my neighbors in the 99203 ZIP code. First you want to select all of the names from the ZIP code; then, make sure that the Do Not Send field is not marked; then, sort the Last Sent field by date to: 1) make sure no one has received e-mail in the past week (or whatever number of days you choose); and 2) select the 200 names that have gone the longest time without hearing from you. (When a person is added to the list initially, their Last Sent field will be blank. When you sort that field, those names should be the first to receive e-mail, followed by the ones who received mail in the most distant past.) You need to recognize that sometimes you won't get 200 people from such a sort.

**Next Step** -- What kinds of questions, and how to ask them.