

APME National Credibility Roundtables

Reader Interactive Project

HOW TO BUILD A READER ADVISORY NETWORK

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Step 5

Tips on phrasing e-mail questions

Talking about how to ask a question might seem pretty unnecessary, especially because we're all in the news business and are professional questioners. But there are some peculiarities involved in this kind of mass e-mail questioning.

Managing the replies -- The first order of business is anticipating what you're going to do with the replies you get. And the main concern is that the replies come to the most appropriate person. So if a reporter is doing a story, the replies ideally would go to the reporter. If you're using the replies as letters to the editor, the replies should go to the letters staff. Why this is important is that you should have that person send the e-mail, because almost everyone will simply reply to the message, and you don't want to spend your time forwarding mail.

Choosing the right number -- This is important, but something you're going to have to discover through trial and error. Depending on how you compile your data base, you might get responses from 10 percent of the people you query, or 20 percent, or even more. You don't want to get so overwhelmed with responses that you throw away most of them. So try to imagine how many responses you might include in a story -- perhaps five or six. Or try to envision the space you'd give to a sidebar of comments -- perhaps 10 to 15 column inches. Then estimate how many people to send the e-mail to -- perhaps 50 or 100? Maybe 200? A "needle-in-the-haystack" question might get only one response from 300 readers, while a more general question might get 20 responses from 50 readers. (Keep in mind that you can compile all of the responses and post them on your Web site.)

Your name and subject line -- The first thing a person will see is that they've received new mail in their inbox. You have only one chance to convince them that your message is not junk mail. Many people automatically delete without opening any mail from an unknown person. Chances are good that yours is not a household name in your readership area. So unless you can manage to install an e-mail identity such as "Spokesman-Review Editor" you're stuck with your own name. That leaves the subject line -- most people will at least look at that before deleting the mail. You need to clearly identify the name of your paper (hopefully in shorthand like S-R) and that you're contacting them about news

and not trying to sell them advertising or a subscription. If possible, include some hint about the subject of the message, such as: "S-R reader survey about Iraq war" or "S-R question about Valley incorporation" or "S-R researching story on grass burning." Good subject line writing is an art, like good headline writing, and it serves the same purpose. You're trying to sell the reader on the idea of reading what you have to say.

Blind carbon copy -- This is so important that it has to be repeated. Do not, under any circumstances, send out mass e-mail in the "To:" or "Cc:" lines on your e-mail header. Use ONLY the "Bcc:" line, which stands for blind carbon copy, so that when the recipient opens up the message, they see only "undisclosed recipients" instead of the e-mail addresses of everyone else receiving the mail. I made this mistake once inadvertently seven years ago and will never do that again... If you don't have a Bcc line on your e-mail header, have someone show you how to do it. In Outlook, create a new piece of mail, then go to the View pulldown and click on Bcc. In Express, create a new message, then go to the View pulldown and check "Show all headers." Do that on one piece of mail and it should be there from then on. (Other e-mail programs should have something similar.)

Introduction -- Some people like to introduce themselves first: "Hi. My name is Adam Lynn, and I'm the police reporter for The News Tribune." I prefer getting straight to the point: "The Spokesman-Review is working on a story about potholes and we want to hear from readers who've had their cars damaged in some way by a pothole on a city street." Reader attention span is short. You want the entire message contained on one screen. If readers see that this message is so long they have to scroll, they might not read it. And because you're going to sign your name at the end anyway, don't take up the space in the beginning just saying who you are.

The question itself -- You should be as specific as possible about what you're doing and what you're asking the readers to do. And you have to be very objective and very brief. Got that? Again, there's an art to writing these questions. You have to be specific, yet brief. (I'll attach a few examples to this document.) And objectivity is paramount. If readers get even the slightest whiff of bias, they'll call you on it. (I once had a reader challenge me on why my question implied that racial and ethnic diversity was a *good* thing.)

The details -- Tell readers to "simply reply to this message" rather than give them someone else's e-mail address. (That's probably what they'll do anyway.) Remind them to include their name (for verification purposes) and to include a phone number where they can be reached for possible further interviews. Remind them of what you're going to do with their comments: "We may include excerpts from your comments in a story we're working on, or use your comments as a letter to the editor. So make sure to include your name and to limit your comments to 250 words." (Some people might assume that their communication is merely an e-mail exchange with you, so you have to be crystal clear that what they're writing is for publication.)

Signature -- Make sure to include your name, title, e-mail address and phone number.

Opt-out -- This is fairly important (and possibly even a guard against potential anti-junk-mail legal action). Even if everyone has signed up for your list voluntarily, always include the option to be removed from the list. And try not to use words like "database." No one wants to be in any company's "database." Instead, describe it in some way similar to this, after your signature: (P.S.: We occasionally ask readers for their input by e-mail. If you'd rather not hear from us, let me know.) It sounds more personal to "let me know..." as in, "if you let me know, I'll take care of it personally."

The follow up -- This is important, too. Keep track of the e-mail responses you get back. Make sure to send each of them a follow-up message thanking them for their response, reminding them again that their comments may be published (and ask them again for their name if they left it off the first time). If possible, tell them definitively whether their comments will be included in the story or whether "a representative sampling of the comments we received" will be published. If possible, tell them that all of the responses, including theirs, will be published on your Web site, and give them a link.

Next Step – Getting started.