

APME National Credibility Roundtables

Reader Interactive Project

HOW TO BUILD A READER ADVISORY NETWORK

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Step 6

Getting started

When to start -- Once you've built your database and begin collecting names, when do you start using it? Before you launch into your first reader interaction, you must reach critical mass -- that is, having enough people in your database to make it useful. That number depends on the size of your market and how you plan to use the database. It could be as small as 50, or as large as 1,000 or more. What's the right number for you? It's difficult to imagine all of the possible scenarios here, but try to guess how many responses you might publish. Six? Sixty? Then, try to imagine how many responses it will take to get six or 60 publishable ones. Then, consider that many of your readers will not respond.

Let's say, for the sake of argument, that it takes 20 responses to get six good ones. And only 20 percent of your readers respond in a timely manner. That means you'd have to send e-mail to 100 readers. (These are just rough estimates. Every market and every question will receive different results.)

Start small or with a bang? -- It might be tempting to start with a subject that is relatively benign. (With the reasoning that a low-profile subject is low-risk.) I will argue, though, that the higher profile the better. After all, you want to draw attention to the Reader Advisory Network so that more people sign up. And a higher-profile subject should elicit a higher percentage of reader reaction. It's also important within the newsroom culture to show how well this tool works.

Beware of marketing questions -- One newspaper editor said she was thinking about asking readers to comment on changes to a section of the newspaper. That's what I call a "marketing" question. These kinds of questions can be valuable, and certainly are one way to use your reader database. But I would recommend strongly against making a marketing question the first interaction with your readers. (Unless, of course, it's a comics poll...everyone will respond to that!) Instead, make it a credibility question, or solicit commentary on a news or enterprise story. Readers recognize the importance of credibility issues and appreciate being "in the loop" on a news story.

Credibility – Some of you have participated in the Credibility Roundtables, so you're familiar with the credibility issues in your communities. We're all familiar with the concept. Pick a big, fat, juicy topic, and tell the readers that their responses matter and that some will be published (in print or on the Web).

News story -- This is pretty easy, too. What are people talking about? How should the state Legislature cope with huge budget shortfalls? (Every state has one, right?) Or, specifically, which services should be cut, or which taxes should be raised? But truly local stories are a good place to begin. This could be a city-wide issue, or even a neighborhood issue. It's critical, though, that the readers' voices are a natural part of the story. Not every story lends itself to this kind of reader interaction. But... how to pay to fix city streets? Yes. Whether to allow coyote traps within city limits? Yes. Whether to close a failing inter-city school? Yes.

Coming next – Some frequently asked questions.