

# Know Thy Audience: How Audience Research Can Focus Your Organization's Voice And Vision

An organization cannot be successful without involvement from its members. So when a new campaign is launched or a website redesigned, how can you be sure your audience – which includes both current and prospective members – is being targeted effectively? The answer is simple: talk to them. Ask them how their involvement with your organization makes them feel, how they would like to be involved in the future, and what gets them excited about your work. In other words, conduct audience research.

The voice of your organization should clearly express the issues you care about and move people toward a greater level of involvement with you. But those who comprise your audience each hold a unique perspective defined by their

personal and professional histories, political opinions, interests, and environments. These all influence how they receive your message. So before redesigning a website, creating a viral flash movie, engaging in social media, or launching a new advocacy campaign, it is crucial to gain a concrete sense of the people you are addressing.

## What Do You Research?

In general, our audience research questions fall into the following categories:

- **Baseline Demographics.** Most organizations believe they know just who their members are. Surveying for demographic information is a good way to compare an organization's perceptions of their members to their actual membership pool, as reality often departs from expectations.

Demographics questions are most helpful when they probe information such as: *age; gender; education level; career; income; family status; location; and number of years affiliated with the organization.*

- **Membership Involvement.** These questions address the reasons why your members are your members. For example, many organizations build their contact lists through advocacy petitions. By signing petitions during these campaigns, members are essentially allowing the organization to speak on their behalf because they feel their concern is aligned with that of the organization. However, this can result in a membership pool that is not necessarily attached to the organization's community – they are only attached to the issue being addressed in the petition. Therefore, attempting to build a community with these particular members – such as through a social networking site or community blog – will require additional groundwork.

Membership involvement questions can probe information such as: *how your members first heard about your organization; what motivated them to join; what organizational activities they currently participate in; how they feel about the issues your organization addresses; and what they hope to gain from their membership.*

- **Brand Association.** These questions are designed to determine how well your members recognize and understand who you are. In order to increase membership involvement and reach out to new people, your organization needs to articulate its mission, vision, and values in a way that is clear to the public and differentiated from peer organizations. Brand association questions uncover the effectiveness of your branding.

Brand association questions can probe information such as: *how your members describe your mission; whether your members can differentiate between you and other peer organizations; what your members know about your organization's activities, programs, and initiatives; and whether your members know how they can participate in your organization's activities and/or what their roles are.*

- **Technology Comfort and Online Behavior.** Technology comfort and online behavior questions are designed to help your organization interact more effectively with its members through web-based content. For

example, many organizations want to integrate social media tools such as blogs, social networking profiles, or smartphone applications into their digital communications. However, few organizations know about patterns of social media use among their members and many doubt their human resource capacity to maintain social media sites and fan the embers of conversations there. By understanding how your members behave, you can better prioritize your online and/or mobile efforts. For some, research might reveal that it's better to focus on improving a core website. For others, it might reveal a ripe opportunity to garner greater support by launching a blog, social networking site, or other new media tool.

Technology comfort and online behavior questions can probe information such as: *comfort level with various online and mobile activities; what other websites members visit regularly; what new media tools members rely on; and what kind of media members are consuming both on and offline. Research can also probe what prompts members to adopt something new. For example, members with regular cell phones may plan to purchase a smart phone in the near future based on a number of reasons.*

- **Website Content and Architecture.** In web design, there are a myriad of ways to display content and organize the architecture of a website. **Every organization must decide on the best** visual look and feel, navigation schema, and tools provided by the website. Understanding why your visitors come to your website and what tasks they seek to complete will help you work according to their needs, interests, and expectations. If you survey your own staff as part of the audience research process, you can also garner valuable information about ways the website can bring greater efficiency to day-to-day tasks and responsibilities.

Website content and architecture questions can probe information such as: *why visitors go to the website; what visitors feel is successful on the current website; and what features or content visitors want to see on a new website. For staff, questions can address what new content they would like to see on the website or what new technologies could make their job more efficient.*

- **Aesthetic Preferences.** The visual branding of your website is what ties it to your organization, and the aesthetic impact of your site's design and structure will serve as a direct reflection of the organization itself. Effective use of simple elements such as color, photos, and graphics can convey a sense of cohesion that viewers will recognize. And the best way to understand your viewers' aesthetic preferences is to ask them, and then use the results as a foundation for your design.

Aesthetic preferences questions can probe information such as: *color palettes that most immediately signify your organization; specific photos and imagery that appeal to viewers; and preferences regarding the simplicity versus detail of the site's text.*

**When Do You Research?** Just as your organization grows and changes over time, so does your audience. Therefore, every nonprofit should commit to regularly conducting audience research over time. With that said, here are specific times when research can really help:

- **Prior to a Website Redesign.** Usually, audience research is conducted prior to building your new website. Participant feedback shapes your approach to design, language and messaging and is a crucial tool for prioritizing content and space during the planning and design phases. Findings shape the real estate, look and feel, and language of your site.
- **During or After Website Redesign.** Audience research can also be conducted alongside or after the redesign of you site, allowing you to test design and usability and incorporate user feedback into a future round of design edits or navigation changes. Today, **content management systems (CMS)** allow nonprofits to immediately implement many research findings such as rewriting copy, adding new pages, or swapping out images. Post-design audience research is especially useful when your organization is introducing a useful new web tool, like mobile accessibility, or asking members to participate in something new.

**How Do You Research?** In general, audience research always follows these steps:

1. **Planning**
  - a. Define your research goal(s).
  - b. Determine the audience(s) you need to survey.
  - c. Outline questions you need to ask of each audience group.
  - d. After completing steps b & c, determine the best research method(s) (see below).
  - e. Formulate a-d into a research plan.
2. **Prepping**
  - a. Determine how you will reach your audiences. Through an email listserv? Through a community partner? Through a professional research firm?
  - b. Write and edit your online survey and/or discussion scripts.
  - c. Test your surveys for length, readability, and question flow.
3. **Administer Surveys & Collect the Data**
  - a. Send out links to online surveys. Watch the results come in!
  - b. Schedule one-on-one phone calls, in person interviews and/or focus groups.
  - c. Start conducting the interviews. Note: it's a good idea to tweak scripts after first interviews.
4. **Analyze and Report**
  - a. During offline research, take copious notes and/or record your conversations. Pause after each interview or focus group to note key findings.
  - b. Once all the surveys are in or the interviews are complete, review your findings. Re-read your research goal. Then interpret the findings with this in mind.
5. **Implement Findings**
  - a. Make changes to your communications strategy and website based on findings.
6. **Rinse and Repeat!**
  - a. Make sure this isn't the last time you conduct audience research!

With regard to conducting research, there are several specific methods used regularly. Choosing which methodology (or mix of methodologies) to use depends both on your organization's resources and the goals of your research.

- **Online Surveys.** The wide reach of the Internet makes online surveys a highly affordable (often free), fast, and efficient way to gather input from a large sample covering a wide geographical area. Online surveys allow participants to take their time and provide the option to cover a wide range of topics. Because online surveys are necessarily computerized, you can observe quantitative results and trends at-a-glance. SurveyMonkey.com is an excellent tool for the administration and analysis of online surveys.
- **One-on-One Phone Interviews.** Phone interviews allow you to adjust your questions mid-interview in response to the participant's specific feedback, resulting in a more productive, in-depth conversation. More importantly, hearing a participant's verbal nuances helps you gauge the actual strength of an answer, in a way a survey can't. This is why it's often a good idea to combine an online survey with follow-up phone interviews. This gives you a chance to clarify your questions and address trends and results in both quantitative and qualitative data.
- **In-Person One-on-One Interviews.** Interviewing in person provides you with in-depth qualitative answers to your questions and allows your conversation to become closely personal, as well as affording you the benefits of observing body language. Your results will be highly specific to that particular participant, and as with phone interviews, you can yield more productive results by adjusting your questions in response to the participant's specific feedback. Because you will use your members (stakeholders, donors, volunteers) as your sample, approaching them for an interview makes them feel more included in the process of improving your organization, and can also help you identify your organization's most enthusiastic and motivated members.

- **Focus Groups.** Focus groups, which are open-ended interviews involving a group of multiple participants, are the most fluid and dynamic type of research. During a focus group session, one question can launch an evolving discussion amongst the participants that uncovers new ideas, factors of influence and issues that may not have been anticipated. Additionally, group dynamics enable participants to provide more candid responses, chiming in when they agree with others. Being in-person will provide similar benefits to one-on-one interviews, such as observing body language, shedding light on quantitative data, and including your organization's members in the conversation. Not surprisingly, the success of focus groups lies largely with the moderator who has the job of making sure that all participants are heard and that one individual does not dominate the discussion.

**For More Information:** To learn more about Free Range's audience research services, contact Susan Sobel Finkelppearl, Online Strategy Director at [susan@freerange.com](mailto:susan@freerange.com).

**For Further Reading:** To learn more about how audience research fits into the process of creating or re-launching a website, check out our paper, [A Process for Website Success](#).

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