

Seasoned planners are fully aware of the value of surveying to drive continuous improvement. As an event attendee, I've been witness to many an interesting event survey antic. Most events that I have attended collect survey information at a booth, often tied to a free giveaway. While this approach to collecting valuable demographic information from your guests might be tempting, is it necessarily the best approach for keeping your production fresh? The importance of collecting demographic information at the event is undoubtedly noted by any experienced planner as it will give your event the ability to attract more impactful sponsors. However, demographics (while much can be gleaned from them) are not always all that is needed to help tailor your event to your attendee. There are two types of surveys that you might find helpful in generating new ideas which may be often overlooked and underutilized.



SURVEY FOR YOUR THOUGHTS?

By Cassandra Delgado

Planning surveys help to identify event ideas and learn guest's expectations for their upcoming experience. *Pre-Event* surveys facilitate communication with your loyal attendees, those who have already registered to attend. One of the biggest mistakes that a planner can make (and perhaps one of the first lessons we've learned) is to approach a new event (even if annual) with the mindset that we know what our guests want, or what they expect to get when coming. This train of thought stifles creativity which in turn sets a "more of the same" tone with the staff working our events and can be the nail in the coffin when it comes to turnout. While we find value in keeping certain activities and/or experiences that our guests most enjoy, *planning* to simply reproduce them year after year can eventually become monotonous. Finding ways to excite ourselves, our guests and our staff becomes increasingly important in an economy with such high unemployment rates. Our attendees must continue to find value in our events.

Accessing idea information and finding a successful collection method can be difficult and requires creativity. The benefit of a simple booth demographic survey mid-event is that you have immediate access to people who are already at your event and so the opportunity to dangle an incentive in front of them for response. If you have been *planning* the same event(s) for some time you may feel as though you have a fairly good pulse on what it is that your audience wants to see. The key, we know, is attracting new audiences and/or even appealing to your guests in an innovative way that will make them eager to attend your next event.

Planning Surveys

An additional benefit to a *Planning* survey could be to gain a little more insight to your marketing campaign for the event. Asking potential guests about their impression of your event is a great way to identify potential shortfalls in your marketing strategy and learn how you might appeal to your untapped audience. *Planning* surveys, done properly before your event takes place, help to communicate your event message and define its purpose but also create excitement for it. These types of surveys are typically qualitative with open ended questions but should be kept short to maximize effectiveness.

It's easy to grumble about the chore of surveys. If approached from the perspective of a powerful marketing tool, you may be able to improve the attitude that your staff may already have towards them. For instance, offering free admission (for paid admission events) to those who complete a short survey. Coupons have been historically successful in the introduction of new

products for the very reason that people are more inclined to try something new if they believe they will gain something from the experience. In addition, the *Planning* survey may be your first opportunity to introduce your event sponsors to future guests which is an added bonus. So maybe you don't get the individual to attend your event, but you've taken the opportunity to promote your sponsors which can be a great benefit to you.

For those who already understand the value of this sort of marketing, consider this a gentle reminder of the potential of surveys. It's common sense that people love sharing their opinions (if they didn't, social networking websites such as Yelp! would not be so incredibly successful). In an industry so heavily dependent on interpersonal skills we know that our results are directly connected to our approach. So, how are you collecting information from your guests?

Pre-Event Surveys

Pre-Event surveys enable you to process what you have from your *Planning* survey and work on defining the more intricate details of your production. Guests, especially those who are loyal annual attendees, appreciate being included in your potential future activity plans and this also aids in building anticipation. These surveys tend to be more quantitative in nature, containing close end-answer options that help you to accommodate your attendee.

In computer science, data mining is a term used to describe extracting information and processing it through analysis into an understandable, useable structure. Eventually, predictive analysis can be accomplished if the information is processed correctly. The concept, no doubt is parallel to surveying in the event industry. So why mention it? In the Electronic Era, it's essential that planners are exposed to methods and terms for information processing. Many event planners use online surveys to gather data and then decide what to do with it. You are your own personal computer, deciding what to do with the knowledge you have gathered is not dependent on a pre-programmed system such as it is in computer science.

How to gather the information on a personal level and appeal to your guests requires creativity and tact, fortunately for you... those are your areas of expertise! For those who it is feasible to complete an on-grounds (or Mid-Event) survey of your guests, why are you only surveying by making people stop by a booth? In most cases, I would prefer to take a survey from someone over a computer. Additionally, I know I'm much more likely to take the survey if someone is asking me to complete it as it's harder to avoid! The

survey booth on a tablet collection method may be a good tactic for demographics if you are asking information that people may consider too personal in nature to answer directly to someone. Both the in-person and systems approaches provide value. Are you only using one? There are plenty of opportunities for downtime during your event to approach your guests and get information. Everyone uses restrooms and chances are they go to them with someone else. Someone is waiting. In addition, there is typically plenty of standing around to be had and approachable downtime for attendees while they are in line for food and drinks. Someone might want to talk.

Post-Event Surveys

Post-Event surveys are the hardest to attain but provide the most important feedback. If you only have the resources to do one type, this is it. We know that these produce the most relevant data and we recognize their importance but often we struggle with the approach. It can be a challenge to get your guests (unless they are completely unsatisfied) to give you any input on your event. Something as simple as a postcard or email with a link to an online survey can be an effective tool but of course offering something as an incentive is not always a possibility. In these cases, a simple yet potentially effective solution could be offering to put guests on cut-the-line lists or entrance into a VIP area for your next production.

The most common faux pas regarding event surveys that I have experienced is that nothing is done with the survey information from the perspective of the guest. It's great that you're collecting data but what are you doing with it? The last large festival that I attended had a demographic survey booth set up where I took part. Later I came to the realization that the information I had shared was sold to a travel company. Of course there was an incentive being offered for completing the survey and as I recall being harassed by a travel agency was not it. This sort of behavior as you can imagine will do nothing to improve your image to your attendee or community, and if you think that you can get away with selling guests information without them putting two and two together you are underestimating your guest's resourcefulness.

Are you putting your connections to use and sharing the results of your surveys with your guests? What are you doing with their ideas? Something as easy as identifying an activity at your next event with a sign that advertises it was a "guest idea" could be a great compliment to your attendees. The last, perhaps most crucial aspect of the survey process is data

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management and security. Who are you giving access to your event survey results?

As planners, we are effective organizers but naturally we may become so pre-occupied with thoughts of what could go better throughout the lifecycle of our event(s) that we don't manage our time (or our staff's time) to allow for surveying our guests. Of course, our teams will have opinions and offer great perspective on improvements which should not be discounted, but as a leader it's important to put emphasis on this aspect of our event management. Surveys are a valuable, though sometimes invisible, tool in our "box".

Whether corporate, social/ private, charitable or fundraising, the success of our events depends on the guests who attend them. The importance of proving value to our staff, attendees and our sponsors is just as great as appealing to new guests. Understanding the variety of survey types, continually educating

ourselves with the options and being dynamic in our approach to reach our customers will maximize our potential for invigorating the crowds. Creating excitement is what professionals in the events industry do; with this in mind take a fresh eye to your event survey strategy! Challenge your event staff to use surveys more as a marketing tool; it will only lead to great things.

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