



## DO YOU MAKE THESE MISTAKES IN YOUR VOLUNTEER SATISFACTION SURVEYS?

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**1) Not identifying why the survey is needed** – Before writing a single question, it's *extremely* important to define the purpose for the survey. In the case of volunteer satisfaction surveys, the purpose should be something more than simply tracking general volunteer satisfaction trends or "because we always survey our volunteers at the end of the year." If you don't take time to understand what specific wisdom you are seeking, chances are you won't end up with the answers you need. Before writing, ask yourself, "What three things do we *really* want to know about our volunteers?" This will be the foundation of all of your communications about the survey going forward.

**2) Not explaining to others why the survey is needed** – Even though *you* know why the survey is needed, *others* may not get it. If your volunteers don't know *why* the survey is needed, how the information you gather will be used, and what will change for the better because of their participation, it's likely you won't get very robust responses. Don't assume the importance of the survey is obvious. Include a short list of survey goals in your survey instructions *and* send out a fact sheet about the survey *before* it is distributed.

**3) Not reassuring volunteers their anonymity will be protected** – Volunteers may tell you that they don't mind it if everyone hears their feelings, but you can't assume that's true for everyone. Encourage volunteers to give you honest and candid feedback by setting up systems to ensure that individual survey results cannot be identified. If you use software, make sure the results are not associated with their individual emails or IP addresses. If you're using paper surveys, have someone who does not know the volunteers' handwriting do the data entry for you. Be sure to restate that the surveys are *anonymous* in the survey invitation.

**4) Not allowing for general comments in the survey questionnaire** – Open-ended survey responses are more difficult to analyze, so it's best to keep these at a minimum. Unless you have a lot of data analysis time on your hands, surveys should not be made up entirely of open-ended comment boxes. By the same token, it's important to include *at least one* open-ended question that allows respondents to put whatever they'd like in it. I usually ask something like "Is there anything else we should know?" or, "Is there anything else you'd like to share?" You might be pleasantly surprised what you learn.

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**5) Not following up with survey respondents** – If you don't report out the survey results and what you plan to do about the feedback, *in a timely manner*, you'll leave volunteers feeling disempowered and unenthusiastic about taking the survey next time. If you have morale issues, it may even make things worse. *Within a few weeks* of the survey's close, make a point to tell volunteers what you learned, what you plan to research further, and what next steps you plan to take. You may not have a full action plan right away, but you can at least report to volunteers some of the key insights and any preliminary action items.

**6) Not connecting future change to the survey** – Don't assume that the changes you make because of volunteer satisfaction survey comments are obvious to volunteers. Sometimes changes happen months after a survey is administered and *people just plain forget* what they said. So, when you're instituting a change related to volunteer feedback, preface it with "Your responses to the volunteer satisfaction survey taught us that (or helped us better understand that) [insert your key learning]. For this reason, we have decided to make the following change — [insert change]. We hope you'll continue to provide us feedback about how it's going and how we can continue to be responsive to your needs."

### **The bottom line**

It's important to communicate with volunteers *before, during, and after* you distribute a volunteer satisfaction survey. The more volunteers believe their words have power, the more they'll be willing to share well-reasoned suggestions and the better off your program will be for it.