

A Question of the Reader

The editor of an international journal wants to know more about who the readers of the journal are and what they think of its content and format. She therefore is thinking of doing a readership survey. What main advice do you have for this editor? What resources, if any, do you suggest that she consult?

Solutions

It is always a pleasure to assist editors in learning more about their readers. A variety of approaches can be used to conduct a readership survey. First is the traditional mail survey that would be sent to a statistically random sample of readers that would depend on the size of the journal's circulation. This type of research requires several months from project design to final report because followup mailings are needed to achieve sufficient response. Such a readership survey requires substantial funding to cover the cost of questionnaire development, production of the survey packet, postage (first class outbound for domestic and airmail for international, and a postage-paid reply envelope for domestic respondents), data entry and tabulation, and analysis and reporting of the findings. If the results will be used to sell advertising or for projection to the entire readership, this quantitative research approach is the technique of choice.

However, if the editor wants results more quickly or would be satisfied with nongeneralizable results based on qualitative research, a few other options can be considered. One option is a much shorter, one-side-of-one-page, self-mailer survey that can be inserted into an issue of the journal (as a perforated bind-in sheet or a "tip-in" sheet). This survey would not be statistically valid, inasmuch as the sample is self-selecting and such efforts usually receive a low response (less than 10%), but it would be faster and less expensive than a full-scale mail survey.

Another option is to canvass readers by e-mail or prompt them by e-mail to fill out a questionnaire at the journal's Web site. Using the Internet to poll readers is

still a new activity, but if quick and low-cost results that may be qualitative are needed, such an approach can yield useful information. It has been my experience that although the response rates might not be as high in electronic surveys as in standard mail surveys, respondents to e-mail or Web-based questionnaires submit longer and more in-depth responses when prompted. The fact that the reader does not have to write a response by hand is a big plus for open-ended questions or comment sections of your survey. As more work of this type is conducted, we will see improvement in response rates and degree of statistical validity.

If the editor is especially interested in electronic survey research, a number of fine examples are available—Harris Poll Online and Greenfield Online, to name just two. Checking out their Web sites and participating in their surveys will show how such surveys are conducted.

Don't hesitate to contact me for further information or discussion. Best of luck!

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[Joint Solution from *Physical Therapy*]

We do readership surveys every 2 to 3 years. I have just begun a third 5-year term as editor, and one condition of my committing to another term was funding for a strategic planning process. As part of that process, we will survey authors, educational institutions, and readers. In my experience, it is easier to talk about surveys than to do them, and you often regret not using follow-up questions.

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A journal's editor, editorial board, and staff first should have a good sense of the information that they need to collect. For instance, What are the characteristics of the readers? Is the content written at a level that is understandable to the readers? The key to conducting a successful readership survey, however, is to involve people who have expertise in survey research. Special skills are needed for developing survey questions, sampling the population of readers, sorting the data, analyzing survey data, and so forth. Journals that are published by professional associations might have statistical and research support available through their associations; journals that do not have such support might be able to obtain assistance through academic programs.

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New Question: Journal Impact Factors

A research investigator has just completed a manuscript on hepatitis B immune status for submission to a journal and wishes to find the most efficient way to select a journal within the scope of her topic for publication. She has heard about journal impact factors and asks the librarian at her medical research facility how these might play a role in her journal-selection decision. What resources might the librarian suggest for learning about the relevance and use of impact factors?

The situations described as New Questions in this column are not necessarily based on actual situations, and the ones that are may have been modified to focus the question. Send your responses to the new question to Della Mundy, Kaiser Foundation Research Institute, Department of Medical Editing, 1800 Harrison Street 16th Floor, Oakland CA 94712-3429. Telephone 510-987-3573; fax 510-873-5131; e-mail della.mundy@kp.org.

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