

COMMUNITY FARM

Surveying Community



By William Willging, Ph.D

Part One: Tell Me You Love Me

You want to keep them happy, every one of them. They are your members. They need you. You need them. And yet, they're all so different. Different tastes, different appetites. They have their own quirky schedules. How can you possibly keep them all happy? What to do? Aha, a *survey*! Just ask them what they want and then give it to them, right? Not so fast. If you're not careful you can actually make them *unhappy*. It pays to have a little savvy about doing a survey – knowing what to ask, what not to ask and why. Here are some general rules to help make your surveys good for you *and* for your members.

Rule 1: Don't ask if you can't handle the answer - If they like what you're doing, great. But if they want something different, you have to do something different. If you are unable or unwilling to change something about your operation, don't ask if they like it or not. Just asking them what they want can raise the expectation that they will get it. When they don't, they're disappointed and wonder why you even bothered to ask them in the first place.

Rule 2: One question per question - It's easy to do by mistake, but it is meaningless to you and them to ask them to answer two or more questions with a single answer. If you ask your child if she brushed her teeth and washed her face, and she says, "No," what does that mean? She did her face but not her teeth? Her teeth, but not her face? Neither? (Hint: look at questions with "and" or "or" in them to see if you have more than one question per question).

Rule 3: Make sure you, and they, understand what you're asking - I know what I thought I meant, but did you? Do a pilot test by having two or three of your members read the questions and answer them out loud to you. This will flush out questions that are confusing, or that need to be reworded.

Rule 4: Keep it short - People don't like long surveys. Keep it to the fewest number of questions you can ask and still get good information. The shorter the survey, the more likely it is they will fill it out. Ask everything you want to know in one survey if you are planning your overall approach to next season. If you are simply considering a couple of mid-season changes – a question or two – you can put them on a postcard and include it in their veggie box.

Rule 5: Keep it relevant - Never ask a question just in case you might find the answer useful down the road. It can throw a curve to the respondent who can't figure out why you're asking such a question and can cause them to be suspicious of your motives (It's hard to fool skeptics and paranoiacs!) It also makes the survey longer, breaking Rule 4.

Rule 6: Be careful with open-ended questions - They'll often give you open-ended answers! You may get information that really isn't getting at what you were after. Sometimes it's appropriate, like "What new veggies would you like to see us grow?" But be careful. What if they list veggies you are unable or unwilling to grow? You just broke Rule 1! Better to be as specific as possible and let them select from options you are willing to consider.

Rule 7: Give them a range when you can - People generally don't have "Yes / No" opinions. If it's just a matter of factual information, use the "either-or" type of format. Usually you are better off asking them to rate something on a scale of one to five, or one to ten. There are a couple of sub rules to this one:

7-a: More is better. The higher the number in the scale, the more positive the response. ("If 3 is good, then 4 must be better!") This fits how most people think, and is much easier to understand when you analyze the results.

7-b: Anchor the ends. Write on the scale what a low number means (e.g., "Disagree") and what the top number means (e.g., "Agree"). You're generally okay just labeling the ends and not all the numbers in between. They've all used rating scales before and they know how to use them. If you do label all the numbers on the scale, make sure they are "balanced" so you don't have more positives than negatives, or vice versa, in the scale. No fair stacking the deck in your favor! I heard recently of a restaurant questionnaire that only offered the options of rating their service as GOOD, EXCELLENT or OUTSTANDING. Why bother asking?

Rule 8: Mind your manners - Make sure you put in a nice, heart-felt thank you for taking the time to complete the survey, and for giving you their opinions. It's also a good idea to tell them what they can expect next – an announcement of changes you are going to make once you analyze the results, or a summary of what people were saying on the average.

You now have some general ideas about creating a good survey. The next challenge is looking at the responses and trying to make sense of it all.

What Did You Say? Surveying Community, Part two

Oh boy, the surveys are coming back from your members and you are just minutes away from knowing how they like your farm and everything about it. But wait a minute, what's this? They're dissatisfied with some things. That hurts a little, but bless them for being candid because you need to know. But you still don't know *why* they aren't completely happy or what would make it better. What to do?

Many surveys ask members to rate their satisfaction with various things. Questions like these are real common:

1. Circle the number that best corresponds to your satisfaction level:					
	<i>Always unsatisfied</i>		<i>Varies</i>		<i>Always satisfied</i>
A. Quantity of vegetables	1	2	3	4	5
B. Weekly variety	1	2	3	4	5
C. Weekly newsletter	1	2	3	4	5

All is well when they give you a 5: just keep on doing what you're doing. But what if they give you a low score? Let's take quantity for example. Are they getting too much or too little? Or variety. Too varied or not varied enough? You just don't know because you have asked them how they *feel* ("Are you satisfied?"), not what they *want* ("What would make you happy?").

What Do They Want? If you know what they want then you automatically know how to make them happy. Instead of asking if they feel satisfied, ask them what changes they want, if any. Remember not to ask about things that you are unwilling or unable to change.

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|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Would you like fewer, the same, or more cucumbers next season?2. Of the veggies listed are there any you would like us to add or omit (use a "+" or a "-")3. Write any suggestions you may have for us about the newsletter. |
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See the trend? You simply ask them to tell you what they want. If they are satisfied already, they'll just leave the question blank. Easy, no? And look at how much richer the information is for your purposes.

Numerical Scales Scales can be very effective for finding out about your members' values, beliefs, philosophies, reasons for belonging to your farm and so on. These questions give you good marketing information and feedback about how closely their heads and hearts match your farm's mission and goals.

So what do you do with numerical scores? Let's say you have gotten answers using a five-point scale. You could average them. This is useful for judging overall trends and whether opinions are tending to shift over time. But that won't tell all. For example, if all of the respondents mark a "3" for an item, the average score is a "3." If half give it a "1" and the other half give it a "5," then the average is also a "3." If the scores are evenly spread across all five numbers, the average is still a "3." All three examples have the same average score, but describe very different situations! So you need to pay attention to how the answers are distributed on the scale.

Why? Well, if the scores are pretty well clustered together, then whatever changes you make will probably please everybody. But if the scores are split into two widely separated clusters, it could be due to one group of members being quite a bit older than another, or one having children while the other doesn't, or one is a full share and one is half, or one is closer to other sources of produce than the other. Changes you make in this case may not affect both groups the same way. You need to talk to them and look at their demographics to discover how to improve things for one group without making it worse for the other.

If the answers are all over the scale, well...as my daddy used to say, "what you got there is a woolie-booger!" There is no majority vote here. Any change you make will only please a few and honk off the rest. You could ask for more detailed information on a subsequent survey, or talk directly to a good cross-section of your members. Do they really have widely different opinions, or are they just interpreting the question differently? You'll need to know.

Some Final Advice You want your members to be honest and candid with you. Tell them that your feelings are less important than your being able to serve them better. Ensuring their anonymity helps keep them comfortable, especially if they are fond of you personally. That means not asking for names, addresses, or other personal and perhaps even intrusive information from them.

Finally, a fabulous source of feedback about your farm is the people who don't renew. If you ask them politely, respectfully and in a true spirit of learning, they can provide you a wealth of information about what they didn't get out of the experience that you might not even have *thought* to ask about on a survey.

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