

February 4, 2010

For Immediate Release

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New Alterra Group White Paper Highlights the Key Practices That Can Substantially Increase the ROI of Professional Services Thought Leadership Surveys

Although professional services organizations largely understand the valuable role surveys can play in their overall marketing programs, many such research efforts fall short of delivering the intended value because they do not incorporate the practices that are critical to producing surveys that generate superior return on investment, according to a new white paper from thought leadership marketing firm Alterra Group.

In “The Value of Surveys in Generating Awareness and Leads,” Alterra Group consultants Bernie Thiel, Susan Buddenbaum and Sam Brown explore a number of important practices that firms should follow across the survey design, execution, analysis and promotion process. Ten of these are the most important to creating surveys that are powerful lead and awareness generators:

1. **Get all key stakeholders involved early in the process—especially in the identification of the research topic and design of the research.** The most successful research projects have strong participation from the head of the sponsoring practice or firm, appropriate subject-matter experts, account managers and business developers throughout design, analysis and marketing of the findings. Such efforts also benefit from the early appointment of a program manager who can provide strong oversight of the initiative.
2. **Conduct comprehensive secondary research on the broad research topic before designing the research.** Before designing the research, the research team should conduct a comprehensive review of published literature to both identify material already published on the topic (and, thus, differentiate its research) as well as pinpoint aspects of the topic that have not been adequately covered by other organizations (and, thus, provide fresh new insights the firm’s clients and prospects will value).
3. **Always use hypotheses to ensure the research generates useful data.** Hypotheses serve as formal guideposts to help ensure the research activities remain focused, and they force the research team to think about the logic of the research by presenting a preliminary story about the topic the team believes to be true (with the veracity of the story eventually supported or refuted by the research).

4. **In crafting the survey questionnaire, devise four or five questions to probe each hypothesis.** If a hypothesis needs more than five questions to probe it, it is probably too broad and should be narrowed in scope. When crafting the questionnaire, a firm should ensure the end result takes no more than 20 minutes to complete, is presented clearly in a sequence that flows logically from one question to another, contains predominantly closed-end questions, avoids using questions that require a significant amount of thinking or calculation, and has questions that can be answered by the target participant.
5. **Avoid the “C-level trap.”** At the most basic level, the “right” target is a person who is inherently interested in the research topic, is qualified to answer the questions, and can provide the insights at the desired level of detail. It is not necessarily the most senior executives, but rather, professionals at the manager, director or vice president level—those who are intimately involved with addressing the issue on a day-to-day basis and, thus, can provide the most accurate insights.
6. **Create incentives for participation that provide both business and personal value.** Topical incentives such as early access to research findings can be paired with items such as drawings for iPods or gift certificates to most effectively drive participation. Beyond such incentives, several other factors heavily influence participation, including identifying the right source of prospective participants, using the right vehicle to administer the survey, and potentially teaming up with a partner such as a magazine or professional association.
7. **Don’t simply report interesting answers to questions.** Take sufficient time in analysis (and use the hypotheses as a guide) to determine the most compelling “story” the data is telling and use that storyline as the basis of the research report. Many companies spend considerable time and money collecting data, but then skimp on analysis—which can compromise the strength of the findings and squander the investments made in data collection.
8. **Sufficiently train all relevant personnel on the findings and methodology to help ensure that the research findings are consistently communicated externally.** This includes marketing and media relations professionals, as well as any client-facing professionals, in addition to the few “official” appointed spokespeople. These employees should understand and be able to communicate the linkage between the research findings, the implications for clients and the services the firm offers.
9. **Create and execute a full marketing plan around the findings.** Within this plan, maximize the marketing opportunity the survey provides by releasing different sections of the results (such as specific industry or functional findings) in addition to marketing the overall findings. Consider online channels and discussion groups as mechanisms to continue the dialog on the research topic and further engage clients and prospects. And offer to prepare and deliver tailored presentations on the survey findings to the management teams of each of the companies that participated in the research and to target accounts.
10. **If possible, “institutionalize” the research.** Firms that have maximized their investments in surveys typically have made the research an annual, semi-annual or quarterly initiative. In doing so, these organizations have created anticipation for the research among target

executives and enabled them to provide year-over-year comparisons that executives, not to mention the media, find very valuable.

“Survey research should play a central role in any professional services company’s marketing strategy,” said Bernie Thiel, a partner with Alterra Group. “Executed well, surveys enable firms to generate interesting and useful content that attracts executive attention while demonstrating that the firm understands the challenges these executives face. A simple, yet rigorous approach to survey research, incorporating these preceding best practices, can increase the odds that a firm’s survey makes an impact in its chosen market by providing a platform from which a firm can demonstrate its expertise and a basis for meaningful discussions between a firm’s client-facing professionals and their most important contacts.”

To download the full version of the white paper, visit <http://alterra-group.com/alterra-group-insights/TheValueofSurveys.shtm>.

About Alterra Group

Alterra Group helps professional services organizations raise awareness of and create demand for their services among key target audiences. We do this via three principal services: research, writing, and communications. We have applied our approach to thought leadership marketing in a diverse group of professional services firms, including leading global outsourcing and systems integration companies, influential trade associations, midsize consulting and strategic advisory firms, boutique consultancies, and independent consultants and authors.

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