

The Value of Surveys in Generating Awareness and Leads

By *Bernie Thiel, Susan Buddenbaum and Sam Brown*

Surveys have become one of the most important items in a professional services marketer's toolkit. When done right, surveys can provide extremely valuable content for marketing programs that helps firms demonstrate their insights on important business topics and generate awareness of the firm overall. Yet many firms struggle to create surveys that provide sufficient return on investment. Some firms cannot get sufficient responses to their survey despite having the research in the field for several months. Others are able to generate volumes of survey data but have trouble finding anything compelling in the research. Still others believe their surveys provide interesting insights but are roundly ignored by the media and clients and prospects. What separates firms whose surveys are powerful lead and awareness generators and those whose surveys fall flat? In our experience, the answer lies in several key areas of survey design, execution, analysis and promotion.

Marketers, business developers and practice leaders at professional services firms face a familiar and increasingly difficult challenge: how to generate awareness of and demand for their services. Indeed, finding a way to cut through the marketplace clutter and convince potential clients of the superiority of one's expertise is one of the biggest keys to an organization's growth but an area in which many firms continue to struggle.

In our experience, surveys can be an excellent way to address the awareness and demand challenge. A well-designed and well-executed survey can provide not only the content for a variety of marketing activities showcasing professionals' knowledge and insights to prospective buyers, but also substantive grist for the media relations mill to entice influential reporters and bloggers to write about the organization conducting the research.

Many professional services organizations—including consulting, law, IT services and accounting firms—know the valuable role surveys can play in their overall mar-

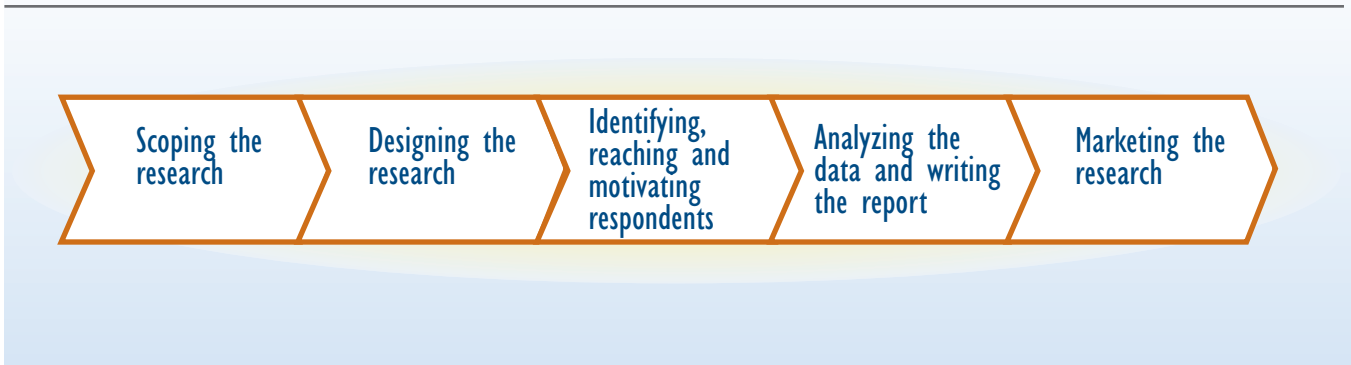
A well-designed and well-executed survey showcases professionals' knowledge and insights to prospective buyers, and provides grist for the media relations mill.

keting programs. In fact, the plethora of surveys currently produced by professional firms speaks to their popularity. However, quantity doesn't necessarily translate into quality. We have seen many examples of an organization investing months of time and significant sums of money in survey research, only to have it generate little interest in the marketplace. Sometimes, this disappointing outcome can be attributed to a single and rather obvious factor—such as simply not dedicating sufficient effort to marketing the results of the survey. However, in other cases, surveys fail to hit the mark because of a combination of more subtle shortcomings across the survey design, execution, analysis and promotion process.

In this paper, we draw upon our extensive work on surveys during the past 15 years to explore the common pitfalls in survey projects and how professional services organizations can avoid them to get the biggest return on their survey investment. In doing so, we review best practices in five key areas (see Figure 1)

Figure 1:

Keys to effective surveys across the survey development and execution process



that can help make the research process as efficient and effective as possible while enabling companies to get the biggest return on their survey investment:

- > Scoping the research
- > Designing the research
- > Identifying, reaching and motivating respondents
- > Analyzing the data and writing the report
- > Marketing the research

Scoping the research

The first step in any survey project is choosing a relevant topic to research and effectively scoping the study. The proliferation of surveys means firms must dig much deeper in their studies to capture audiences' attention. As a result, it's critical that a firm ultimately selects a research topic for its survey that is both important and highly relevant to its clients and prospects, as well as insufficiently covered by other surveys and research studies.

There are several ways of finding an issue that will win the attention of a firm's target audience. In some cases, no "process" is required: A firm that knows its clients' businesses well may be able to identify the top challenges those clients face based on their work and on informal conversations and hone in on an appropriate angle. However, most times a more rigorous approach is required. Such an approach typically encompasses two principal exercises.

The first exercise is exploring potential survey topics in a workshop with key firm subject-matter experts. The most successful research projects we've seen have benefited from early and strong participation from the head of the sponsoring practice or firm, appropriate subject-matter experts (who can provide

their insights on the issue drawn from their extensive client work), and account managers and business developers (who can provide their perspective on what they hear clients and prospects are looking for during sales conversations). During this session, the professionals should create a high-level list of potential topics to research under a single umbrella theme. For instance, for a supply chain consulting practice, an umbrella theme might be "supply chain improvement," under which myriad potential research topics could fall (such as supply chain process reengineering, hiring and retaining better supply chain talent, implementing new supply chain systems, etc.). After creating the larger list, the workshop team then should select one topic to pursue.

The second exercise is focusing the research through appropriate secondary research. After the workshop, the research team should conduct a comprehensive review of business and trade publications, relevant industry research reports, and publicly available materials published by other companies to identify research that already has been conducted on the broad research topic selected in the workshop. This step is necessary for two reasons: to hone in on an aspect of the topic that can be sufficiently covered in a survey; and to identify the "white space," which enables the organization to avoid duplicating what others already are talking about. Assume that, in the preceding example, the workshop team settled on the "implementing new supply chain systems" topic. Through its secondary research, the team may find that much has been written about the topic, but one important aspect had been insufficiently covered: the opportunity to use several emerging tools to design, develop and implement supply chain applications more quickly and cost-effectively. Such a topic would meet the dual

requirements of being the subject of a lot of hype and lacking in clarity, while being narrow enough to probe in a survey.

Before proceeding with research design, it's absolutely critical to appoint a program manager who can provide strong oversight of the initiative and serve as the point person for any questions about it. A survey can be a very ambitious and time-consuming process, with many opportunities for the initiative to go astray. Having someone—generally a marketing person—“riding herd” over the initiative can help ensure the project stays on plan and within budget.

Scoping the research

Key Success Factors

- > Choose a topic that is both highly relevant and insufficiently covered.
- > Be aware of what kind of research has been done on related topics to ensure that it is not duplicating a competitor's initiative or covering ground that's been well trod.
- > Get all key stakeholders involved early in the process, especially in the identification of the research topic and the design of the research.
- > Appoint a strong program manager.

Designing the research

With the research topic fully vetted and scoped, a firm then must address the challenging task of designing the research, which begins with developing a set of hypotheses about the topic.

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). It's important that each hypothesis is not too broad that it can't be covered adequately by a survey while, at the same time, is not so narrow that it makes it difficult for any new discovery to be made. For a typical survey, we've found five or six hypotheses per research topic to be sufficient.

The value of having strong hypotheses is evident in the experience of EXHIBITOR magazine, the leading publication covering the trade show exhibition market. In a quest to strengthen its leadership position on industry issues, the magazine wanted to develop the first survey on environmentally friendly—“green”—practices in the trade show industry. However, the topic clearly was extremely broad and, because there were no other comparable studies on the topic, the “white space” was enormous. Thus, it was critical for EXHIBITOR to hone in on exactly what aspect of the topic was the most important to research. Working with Alterra Group, EXHIBITOR ultimately developed a set of hypotheses that would help identify the business value of “green” exhibiting—including perspectives from both trade show exhibitors and providers of exhibit products and services. As a result of its upfront efforts on hypothesis development, EXHIBITOR was able to execute a well-focused survey that generated extremely compelling data on an topic that, to date, had not been probed. In the process, the magazine increased its exposure among advertisers and readers while reinforcing its reputation as the leading authority on issues facing the trade show industry.

The second step in research design is crafting the survey questionnaire. In doing so, a firm should strive to 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 should take no more than 20 minutes to complete and is presented clearly in a sequence that flows logically from one question to another.

To encourage respondents to answer all the questions in the survey, a firm should ensure that questions are predominantly of the closed-end variety (although a few open-ended queries are acceptable if they are easily answered). In addition, a firm should avoid using questions that require a significant amount of thinking or calculation on the part of the survey respondent

(for example, “What is the average return on your IT investment for X product line?”). Similarly, a firm must ensure all questions can be answered by the target participant. Respondents who can’t answer a question or have to turn to others to gather the relevant information will likely abandon the effort. And, if a firm is conducting the survey across multiple countries, it must make the questionnaire available in the appropriate native languages.

To enhance the chance the media will cover the survey, a firm should embed a key question or two in the questionnaire that will provide irresistible fodder for media outlets—such as those that will lead to a counter-intuitive finding or touch on a particularly timely topic. To this end, we have found it very helpful for a firm to involve its media relations professional in the questionnaire review process to help ensure there are questions that will be especially intriguing to relevant media and, thus, enhance the chances for the firm to have reporters and bloggers mention the findings in their stories.

Designing the research

Key Success Factors

- > Always use hypotheses to ensure the research generates useful data. Hypotheses should not be so broad that they can’t be covered adequately by a survey and not so narrow that new discoveries are difficult.
- > Devise four or five survey 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.
- > Make sure all questions can be answered easily by the target participant.

Identifying, reaching and motivating respondents

Regardless of the topic being covered, all companies face a common challenge: getting enough of the right people to take the survey. This is especially true today, as surveys have become pervasive and business professionals and consumers alike often suffer from survey fatigue. As a result, selecting the right target respondents and motivating them to participate with the right incentives are more critical than ever.

What is the “right” target? At the most basic level, it’s 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. In our experience, the right target for a business survey is not necessarily the most senior executives. We see many professional firms falling into the “C-level trap”: trying (and often failing) to target an organization’s top executives in the misguided belief that the perspectives of chief executives are always the most valued by the media and their own clients. In fact, most of the time, surveys on business or management topics often are best taken by 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. Beyond these advantages, such professionals typically are easier to reach than C-level executives.

As important as determining the type of person to target for the survey is identifying the source of prospective participants—a firm’s own customer or prospect lists; a rented list from a business or trade publication or relevant association; a list sourced by a research partner; or some combination of these. Each source has its pros and cons. A firm’s own list likely would have targets most predisposed to participate because they already have some relationship with the firm. However, few firms’ lists are large enough to generate sufficient results on their own. On the other hand, rented lists can provide an ample supply of names, but the titles can be suspect and the people on those lists may not be as receptive to a survey invitation because they don’t have an existing relationship with the firm.

Increasingly, we find business networking websites—such as LinkedIn and Plaxo—can be useful sources of prospective participants, particularly if there is an existing “special interest group” on these sites geared toward the target audience. For example, in conducting our own surveys, Alterra Group extensively uses LinkedIn groups joined by legal, consulting and accounting firm marketers to generate survey partici-

pation. Not only are such groups typically free to join and access, they also are highly targeted, thus making it more likely our survey topics are relevant to group members.

Finding the right source of potential respondents is only half the battle. The other half is getting people to participate in the survey—especially today, when most executives have little time to devote to responding to surveys. Therefore, an incentive is generally required to encourage participation. We have found a combination of personal appeal and business relevance tends to elicit the strongest response. In other words, offering participants a chance to win an item such as a new iPod or gift certificate to Amazon.com (the personal appeal) and providing participants with an early opportunity to access the survey findings or giving them a personalized report benchmarking their responses against the overall sample (the business relevance) is an effective way to drive participation.

Identifying, reaching and motivating respondents

Key Success Factors

- > Avoid the “C-level trap”: Trying and failing to target top executives. Target those individuals with the most intimate knowledge of the topic at hand.
- > Engage employees to invite their personal business networks to complete the survey. Business knowledge websites such as LinkedIn and Plaxo can be especially good sources of participants.
- > Create incentives for participation that provide both business and personal value.
- > Make sure to use the survey method—phone, online or in-person—that is most appropriate to the survey and the prospective participant.
- > Consider using a complementary partner such as a trade publication or association to drive survey responses.

The success in getting executives to respond is further influenced by the vehicle used to conduct the survey: telephone, mail or the Web. The best method depends on the type and length of the questionnaire, the target participants, and the research project’s budget. For instance, the most senior executives typically do not fill out paper-based or online surveys and will need to be reached by phone, while in Japan, it’s customary for all surveys to be conducted in person with the participating executives. Online surveys are the least expensive to conduct, but come with a number of possible tradeoffs—such as difficulty reaching intended recipients due to spam filters and ensuring the intended person actually completes the survey.

Firms also can boost participation by teaming with a complementary partner—for example, a trade magazine or association that serves the industry being surveyed or is involved in the issue being researched. Such partners bring to the research a large subscriber or membership base of people with whom the magazine or association already has a strong connection. Thus, these individuals typically are more predisposed to participate in the survey. Additional benefits of such collaboration include added credibility (the partner enhances the perception in the marketplace that the firm is not conducting the survey for self-serving purposes) and visibility for the firm and its research among an audience of potential buyers of its services (the magazine or association typically distributes the research report to its subscribers or members as an added benefit).

One example of this sort of teaming involves Computer Sciences Corporation (CSC) and *RIS News*, a trade publication targeting heads of information technology at retailers in the United States. CSC was seeking heightened visibility for its retail consulting practice, while *RIS News* sought high-quality editorial it could promote to its subscribers and sell to its advertisers. The two organizations struck an agreement in which CSC would be responsible for designing and executing the survey, analyzing the results and writing the research report, and *RIS News* would promote participation in the survey and distribute the final research report to its subscribers. The arrangement, which resulted in the annual Retail Technology Study, proved to be mutually beneficial for the two organizations for more than a decade. During this time, CSC was able to gain a thought leadership position among retail chief information officers and *RIS News* created and grew a new stream of advertising revenue.

Analyzing the data and writing the report

After closing the survey, a firm should use the initial hypotheses as a guide to analyzing the survey findings, relying on the appropriate number and types of cross-tabulations to determine whether the hypotheses have been supported or refuted and identify the strongest storylines emerging from the data.

We can't stress enough how important analysis is to the strength of the ultimate report. There are many instances in which firms have spent considerable time, money and effort designing the research and conducting the survey, only to become impatient and too eager to rush the findings to market. In doing so, they compromised the analysis process and, thus, their ability to find the most compelling storylines in the data. In our experience, a firm should dedicate an equal amount of time on analysis as it does on research design and data collection. Three iterations of analysis are typical.

The first round of analysis should be done with the simple goal of presenting top-line data: the aggregate

responses to each major survey question. Once this has been done, the firm moves on to the second level of analysis, which involves conducting various cross-tabs to probe the data further to find potentially interesting threads to pursue or storylines that may not have been considered during research design. For instance, in a survey of business respondents there may be interesting discrepancies between large and small companies, different industries, or companies that are determined to be leaders in a particular practice and those that are deemed laggards.

The final stage of analysis typically is done in a workshop setting, in which the findings of the second level of analysis are reviewed with the firm's subject-matter experts to get their insights on the findings—i.e., the “why” behind the numbers. In particular, this is the time to tease out the implications of the findings for clients and prospects and identify any opportunities for further analysis.

At the end of the three rounds of analysis, the firm reaches consensus on the main storyline emerging from the findings and, building on this storyline, develops a detailed outline and ultimately the prose draft of the final research report that explores the firm's findings and point of view in detail. The format and length of the report can vary based on a number of factors. However, typically, the more in-depth and substantive the report, the more content the firm has to fuel subsequent marketing activities that help communicate the firm's expertise and insights on the research topic.

Analyzing the data and writing the report

Key Success Factors

- > Don't simply report interesting answers to questions: Take the time in analysis (and use the hypotheses as a guide) to determine “the story” that the set of key findings is telling.
- > Dedicate an equal amount of time on analysis as you do on research design and data collection.
- > Develop a detailed outline that fully explores the survey findings and story before beginning to write the research report.
- > Make sure the report is rich enough to serve as the basis for multiple marketing programs in the succeeding six to 12 months.

Marketing the research

A research initiative is only as valuable as the attention it generates for the firm in the marketplace. As such, once the final report has been written, a firm should aggressively bring the research findings and its resulting point of view to market via a set of integrated, tightly synchronized activities.

At the outset, it's critical to appoint a few spokespeople for the research and provide these people with the appropriate training on the findings. Such training helps prepare the spokespeople to discuss the research with the media as well as with clients and prospects, and should include documents that outline the key research findings, communicate the firm's “take” on the findings, and cover the basic details of the survey (such as methodology, who was surveyed, how many participated, why the firm conducted the survey, and the like).

To help ensure that the research findings are consistently communicated externally, firms also should educate all relevant personnel—not just the “official”

spokespeople—on the initiative. Make sure these employees understand and can communicate the linkage between the research findings, the implications for clients and the services the firm offers. Doing so not only increases the opportunity for the research to make an impact on a firm’s business-development activities, it also helps minimize the chance a professional is embarrassed when a client or prospect asks him a question about the research that he can’t answer.

While spokespeople are being prepared, the firm should craft a news release on the overall survey findings (as well as separate news releases tailored by industry sector and geography if sufficient data is available) to get the word out about the survey to the appropriate media outlets. In addition, a firm should develop bylined articles based on the most interesting slices of the survey findings and pitch these articles to relevant media outlets for prospective publication.

Firms that have maximized their investments in surveys typically have “institutionalized” the research—that is, they have made the research an annual, semi-annual or quarterly initiative.

Beyond these PR activities, the firm should promote survey results directly to clients and prospects using the full range of marketing tools at their disposal. Many firms use survey research to secure speaking opportunities at conferences and to develop and hold their own webinars. Many also use direct marketing campaigns to disseminate the findings to clients and prospects via email or physical mail, and by featuring it in existing firm publications such as newsletters or magazines. A standard presentation on the

research findings and implications for executives that can be delivered by any account executive to his or her contacts can help generate even more awareness for the firm among key target companies.

One of the best ways to leverage the research findings is to prepare and deliver tailored presentations on the survey to the management teams of select companies that participated in the research (i.e., ones that are particularly attractive to the firm from a business development standpoint), provided these companies were not guaranteed anonymity to secure their participation. Such presentations often are viewed by executives as providing added value and “free insights,” and they give the firm’s professionals the chance to have meaningful conversations with prospects on a business issue important to them.

A firm’s website should play a major role in promoting the study. In fact, a number of firms we’ve worked with have created dedicated microsites to house the research and ancillary content such as related case studies and service offerings. The most effective microsites are not simply an electronic repository for a PDF version of the report, but instead provide ways for visitors to interact with the firm—for example, by hosting a version of the original questionnaire used in the survey that visitors can take themselves. This approach not only engages people and gives them a reason to visit the site, it also provides ongoing, fresh data the firm can use to update its findings.

Finally, firms that have maximized their investments in surveys typically have “institutionalized” the research—that is, they 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 find valuable.

Marketing the research

Key Success Factors

- > Sufficiently train all relevant personnel on the findings and methodology. Make sure these employees understand and can communicate the linkage between the research findings, the implications for clients and the services the company can offer to help.
- > Create and execute a full marketing plan around the findings, including delivering tailored presentations on the survey findings to the management teams of key accounts.
- > “Institutionalize” the research—make it an annual, semi-annual or quarterly initiative.

Conclusion

Survey research should play a central role in any professional services company's marketing strategy. 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. Many of the world's leading professional services companies have several surveys in the field at once, and many of those surveys recur year after year, with a loyal and engaged audience looking forward to both participating in and learning from the research.

A simple, yet rigorous approach to survey research 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. ▲

About the Authors

Bernie Thiel and Susan Buddenbaum are founding partners with Alterra Group. Sam Brown is consultant with Alterra Group (www.alterra-group.com).

The Survey Process in Action

A project Alterra Group completed with the human-performance consulting practice of a major professional services company provides a concrete example of the process outlined in this paper.

Working closely with the practice's marketing team and subject matter experts, we first created the study's "research guide." This guide included a set of hypotheses that laid out the key issues the project was studying, as well as questionnaires to be used both in a global survey and in case study interviews.

While the survey was in the field, Alterra Group conducted a series of case study interviews with more than 20 companies on their human capital management practices, and we conducted comprehensive secondary research to fully explore the issues identified by the hypotheses.

After several months of data gathering, Alterra Group—in concert with the practice's marketing team and subject matter experts—conducted intensive analyses of the data to pinpoint the major challenges companies faced in building and sustaining a high-performance workforce, as well as best practices.

Alterra Group also helped the company develop a number of pieces that leveraged the company's investment in the study and generated broad interest in the research:

- > PowerPoint presentations to enable the company's business development professionals to discuss the study's findings with clients and prospects.
- > A news release on the study's findings that was disseminated by the company's public relations firm to major media around the world.
- > Bylined articles and white papers that explored specific aspects of the study findings in depth for more narrowly targeted audiences.

The content emanating from the research project has been extremely well received by a variety of audiences. From a media perspective, dozens of mentions of the study in top-tier publications illustrated the study's value to readers. And hundreds of requests for copies of the study from the practice's target buyers indicated the study struck a chord with executives responsible for improving workforce performance in their organizations.



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: developing unique points of view, articulating those points of view in a variety of publications, and building powerful marketing campaigns around the content in those publications to get points of view in the hands of current and prospective clients. 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.

Alterra Group
PO Box 201355
Cleveland, OH 44120

216.539.9710 phone
216.539.1433 fax

www.alterra-group.com

© Copyright 2009 by Alterra Group, LLC. All rights reserved.