

The Most Important Question to Ask When Writing Donor Surveys

The most important research question is the one you need to ask before writing your donor survey.

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Deciding what questions to ask in a donor survey can be a daunting task for any nonprofit organization. Development and marketing teams can approach the survey design process in any number of ways and often begin with a focus on practical considerations such as desired survey length and total question count.



To be sure, having a rough idea of what a donor survey should “look like” might provide team members with a general direction for the survey’s scope but this starting point is unlikely to invoke a hierarchy for the many questions donors could be asked.

But if you’re hoping to keep survey planning discussions on point AND you want to deliver a succinct survey that donors will complete, I recommend starting with the most important question: “What do you need to know?”

DEFINE “NEED-TO-KNOW” QUESTIONS

A “need-to-know” question is defined as one whose answer will produce an “actionable” result for your organization to help you improve the way you engage donors or the way you execute your mission.

A need-to-know question can also help you confirm an unchecked assumption about your donors’ awareness on any number of topics, including volunteer opportunities, the range of programs you provide, or available educational resources that underscore the importance of supporting the community you serve.



SEEK ACTIONABLE RESULTS

The process of defining your need-to-knows can be made even easier by imagining expected answers to the question and the impact that information would have for your organization in the future.

Set the stage for need-to-know thinking by positioning actionable outcomes within this statement:

“The answer to this question will help us [actionable result].”

Maybe the answer will help you change an organizational practice, alter your frequency of communications, or encourage you to highlight more statistics in your annual report.

Whatever the result, it needs to be one that will enable a greater level of strategic impact and forward progress.

BEWARE OF “NICE-TO-KNOWS”

One of the best ways to gut check your “need-to-know” questions is to differentiate them from “nice-to-knows.”

Nice-to-know questions may generate interesting feedback but won't necessarily inform future organizational strategies, regardless of what your donors tell you.

If, for example, you inquire about donor preferences for increased print communications, but you lack organizational budget to meet such a demand, your question is a nice-to-know.

USE “NEED-TO-KNOWS” FOR EFFICIENCY AND ALIGNMENT

Many teams I've worked with find “need-to-know” versus “nice-to-know” comparisons to be a helpful discussion guide for ensuring that internal stakeholders are strategically aligned when crafting a donor survey.

And by starting the survey writing process with need-to-know questions, team members save time by focusing on the questions that matter most by the time final editing rounds take place.

MORE TIPS TO IMPACT

- **Once you've achieved your working “need-to-know” list, conduct a survey question count.** Even if your draft survey is longer than you'd like, you'll be poised for an efficient editing discussion where natural groupings of the most important questions to ask donors are likely to surface. You can craft a succinct survey by isolating sets of questions for a future survey or even for a personal follow-up call with a specific donor segment.
- **What if you don't know what you need to know?** Step back and consider the biggest problems your organization is facing and whether donor feedback could provide actionable insights in addressing these issues. Alternatively, take stock of the organizational strategies you've been thinking about changing; would donor feedback facilitate the implementation of new practices you've hesitated to pursue?
- **“Standard” need-to-know questions can set the stage for a “benefits of giving” storyboard.** If the question wording remains the same, tracking response trends for annual surveys can help you craft a story that reinforces the importance of donor funding.



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