FIELD NOTES: TIPS ON CONDUCTING SURVEYS TO IMPROVE THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

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In today's highly competitive market-place it has become more important than ever for event managers, vendors and other stakeholders to gain an in-depth understanding of the visitor experience. Analyzing the visitor experience helps marketers and coordinators optimize customer satisfaction, while inviting greater loyalty and word-of mouth recommendations.

In order to achieve these goals— while also identifying key visitor segments for advertising efforts— savvy planners conduct survey research. For event producers, the survey can be an effective way to collect data and create dialogue with visitors that can help to improve the offering and, ultimately, drive sales growth.

Event surveys can be carried out by event staff or consultants working together with staff. Regardless of who does the data collection and analysis, there are a variety of issues to consider during planning. This article takes a holistic look at the event survey process and provides practical tips for those who are considering an onsite survey.

Clearly Define the Objectives of the Study Before Designing a Questionnaire

The ability to provide useful analysis begins with (1) clear objectives for the study and (2) a carefully designed questionnaire that directly addresses those objectives. Think about the exact wording of each survey question and how questions relate to one another. Will data collected from each question guide future decision-making and help marketers achieve their goals? If not, questions should probably be cut in order to save resources and avoid respondent fatigue.

Objectives may include a determination of preferred price points or timing, perceptions of vendors, entertainment or other attributes important to event success. Marketers may also want to conduct segmentation studies to identify key visitor groups and a marketing message that will resonate and drive attendance. In this case, one will need demographic, psychographic, behavioral (e.g., number of times attending or what was purchased at the event) and/or firmographic data appropriate for segmentation.

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In order to maximize the value of the survey, it is also important to consider how in-house databases are segmented. If prospect lists or databases of past attendees are segmented by income or geography, for instance, then questions should be included that allow the team to gather data that are directly comparable to extant data.

If a core objective is audience expansion then survey findings, such as a marketing message, can be laid over matching segments in a larger database. The end result is micro targeted messages customized for each prospect segment.

Some producers have subsidized the survey process by giving select vendors the option of sponsoring part of the survey in exchange for a report that details visitor perceptions of their booth, wares and employees. This can be a good option for producers with a limited budget.

Tools of the Trade

Once you have clarified your objectives and developed a questionnaire, you will need the right device and software to collect data. In some instances software is only compatible with certain devices such as an iPhone or iPad so it is important to determine what type of device will be used to collect data before turning to the question of software selection. There are currently several reasonably priced software options that may be used on Android or iOS enabled devices.

There are three critical components to consider when selecting a survey application: (1) Survey question types/capabilities; (2) whether the touch screen display needs to be consumer-friendly, and; (3) the data analytics and reporting capabilities of each package.

Several vendors now offer software that allows one to conduct surveys offline and upload responses after the event. This can be an enticing option for many producers who may be gathering data in areas that do not have WiFi. Before selecting software, be sure to understand its pricing model – often survey software is either a monthly subscription with unlimited respondents or is based on a license fee to access the software and an additional cost for each survey response.

Premium survey tools have multiple capabilities including a wide range of survey question types and control over the look and feel (e.g., big buttons that may be preferable in a kiosk set up). Premium tools include Qualtrics Mobile while HarvestYourData is a lower cost tool that has fewer features, though still adequate for most projects.

Consumer facing kiosks designed for a "passive" approach to data collection (explained below) may require software with visually appealing displays that have response sliders, big buttons and other features that make them very user-friendly. If you're conducting face-to-face intercepts, the tablet will be in the hands of your recruiters and a user-friendly survey layout with big buttons may be sacrificed in order to save money.

For kiosks where respondents fill out their surveys with minimal supervision, consider how you will lock down your device before making a purchase. Locks can be purchased from companies like Amazon or, in some cases, rented along with tablets. While large (e.g., 10 inch) tablets are often ideal for kiosks, a smaller device is generally preferred by recruiters who will actually carry the device in a face-to-face intercept.

If you have a limited budget and willing staff, you may be able to conduct the survey using their smartphones. This is the same process as conducting face-to-face intercepts with a tablet and, in some cases, can be a good way to save precious resources.

Coordination and Pre-Planning are Key

Given the nature of event surveys, project coordination and pre-planning are especially important. You only get one shot at data collection, so make it count. There are two primary methods to complete onsite work: (1) You may employ a team of researchers to conduct intercepts throughout the event or (2) managers may strategically place survey kiosks with one or dozens of individual devices in use for respondents to complete the questionnaire.

When planning the survey and thinking about data collection goals, think realistically about how many surveys can be completed per device per hour. If one survey takes five minutes then it's possible to complete 8 to 10 surveys per hour /per device. The remaining time is needed to recruit potential respondents. Recruiting survey respondents is a skill that interviewers and survey managers often develop over time. It should also be emphasized that incentives are often needed in order to persuade large numbers of visitors to take the survey. Response rates can vary greatly, based on the visitor base, incentives and the approach being used to recruit respondents.

In general, the survey should be no longer than three to five minutes. The shorter the better. If you are conducting intercepts in which interviewers administer the questionnaire to each respondent pilot testing is a good idea as this provides a fairly precise estimate of time-to-survey-completion. Administer the survey with a few co-workers or friends to estimate length. Typically it takes longer to read the survey out loud than it takes to read it silently. In the field respondents are often distracted by family, friends and other event happenings. A 90 second pilot in a sterile office should be considered at least a 2 minute survey in the field. It's better to estimate time conservatively and collect more responses than expected than it is to come up short.

Each device that is used to capture data should have a number or name associated with it. That identifier should be linked to each survey response. You will then have power to drill down to the device level if you see oddities in your data. A device identifier will also help you monitor your interviewers and determine which devices are optimally positioned to capture the greatest number of responses.

In some cases, survey software is configured to link a device to data automat-

ically. If this is not the case, simply add a question where the survey attendant can write in the device name or number. This will give the analyst the ability to filter survey results by device.

Make Sure Survey Staff are Embedded

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If you are using a kiosk, banners with the event logo help the audience identify the kiosk as "official." Staff manning the kiosk should follow the guidelines of an intercept team and wear staff shirts, caps, etc.

Staff should always understand the nature of the event before they start surveying attendees. Make sure they understand the questionnaire and key objectives of the study. Is it an event launch? A playoff game? What are the show start times? This helps to ensure interviewers are effective and that respondents are satisfied with the survey experience.

To Intercept or Not to Intercept

While the "passive method" of allowing patrons to fill out a survey at an event booth can be useful and is generally less costly than traditional intercepts, using trained interviewers is often necessary when seeking in-depth quotes. Trained interviewers can probe around survey items and can also help to produce important context and qualitative insights.

If conducting intercepts, you can hold brief exit interviews with each survey interviewer. When the event ends no one will have a better sense of the attendee experience than the survey interviewers. Their insights may lend valuable subtext to the hard data.

Kiosks are often a lower cost option since they require less labor. The anonymity of the touch-screen devices may help respondents to answer honestly as opposed to responding in a way they think will please the interviewer.

Provide incentives to encourage participation

Patrons at concerts, festivals, consumer shows and other events are often offered incentives to get their attention and help ensure that they provide carefully considered responses. Incentives are especially important when seeking qualitative data such as quotes and are essential for maximizing response rates.

If using the kiosk or "passive" approach to data collection, signage will be needed to attract attention. If possible, consider prizes related to the event. Discounts at the concession stand, free rides or event T-shirts can help promote the event and can also be enticing to prospective respondents. A drawing for cash prizes, vacation packages or other big ticket items can also help to drive up the response rate and help ensure the team achieves the relatively large sample size that is often necessary for reliable statistical analysis.

Make Reports Actionable to Maximize Impact

Many clients initially seek general feedback about the guest experience but are not sure exactly how to use the data to drive sales and achieve other critical goals such as optimizing guest satisfaction. Researchers should work together with stakeholders to create survey measures that are a direct extension of the key objectives of the study. This positions the team to produce actionable insight and recommendations that improve the bottom line. If the study's objectives were clearly defined in the beginning of the process and questions were based on those objectives, then it is often relatively easy to see how the data are relevant to the team's business goals and how findings should be applied to help guide decision-making.

Powerful, yet low cost survey tools may have a limited analytics package so look for the capability to export a CSV file that can be imported elsewhere. An exported data file may pair well with inexpensive analytics tools that offer monthly subscriptions. To improve analytics and provide a visually appealing report consider online tools like Statwing and Tableau Public. Given that such tools often have a substantial learning curve, however, those that have no training in statistical analysis may want to consider hiring a professional research analyst to help them prepare the final report.

Conclusion

Given the fact that today's event visitors have more options than ever before, it has become critical that event producers do everything they can to optimize visitor satisfaction and develop messaging that resonates with prospects. Survey research can be used to achieve these key business goals, and others, and thus is an invaluable tool to managers of all types of events.

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