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Community Surveys: Working with Results

Congratulations! Your department has conducted its first community survey and, as a result, you've been able to identify excellent feedback in some areas and define a few key areas of improvement. Now what? Before asking your PIO to write up a news release lauding the good news, think carefully how best to utilize this valuable information.

Sure, it feels good to release positive information about your department's good relationship with the community… but is there a better use for the numbers that, in the long run, will be more strategically beneficial? Absolutely.

I strongly believe survey results are nothing to brag about. They are, quite simply, an invaluable tool for improving your service, gauging positive or negative changes in community perceptions, and providing solid evidence for key messaging.

The only time you should consider releasing survey results is if they yielded positive responses to counter negative perceptions the media and/or citizens have about your department or police officers. If, for example, there was recent press accusing your department of racial profiling, publicizing survey results indicating 98% of respondents reported being treated fairly by police would seem beneficial. However, releasing this information could be a double-edged sword because typically you would then be asked to provide statistical data of the survey demographics - and if a good number of respondents were not visible minorities, your 'positive story' takes a nosedive.

Instead, consider using survey results as a supporting foundation for your strategic planning process. This information can be extremely useful in helping make and support decisions regarding allocation of resources, budget increases and additional hires. Elected officials understand, and more importantly respect, survey numbers. The stats can also be used in your communication to staff about why management has made decisions to implement, alter or remove certain programs. Being able to provide police officers with "hard evidence" of why changes are made helps employees better understand organizational change.

But perhaps the most important way survey feedback can be used is in providing rational, reality-based fact to support key messaging. For example, Halifax Regional Police (HRP) conducts town hall meetings each year in its three jurisdictional areas. Year after year, the issue of police visibility comes up and citizens are always asking for a higher police presence in their neighborhoods. In 2001, HRP conducted its bi-annual community survey two months before the town hall meetings in order to define specific issues management would most likely be queried on during the open meetings. One question was prepared specifically to address the issue of visibility. The survey asked, "How many police officers do you believe are on patrol in the HRP jurisdiction at any given time?" Response varied from 25 to 100 officers, with a full 65% of respondents citing the number was upwards of 50. In truth, about 28 uniform officers were at work at any given time.

With these facts in hand, management was able to convey the message that the department must indeed be providing a high-level of visible service to its citizens, since more than half the people of the region felt there were many more officers on patrol than there actually were. It gave citizens pause for a reality-check, and an opportunity for management to dig deeper into the real and perceived needs of the community.

The stats also provided an opportunity to dispense some well-deserved praise for often-beleaguered officers for being 'out there' and visible in the community, as well as a strong base from which to work when municipal councilors approached staff about providing increased patrols in their regions.

Finally, once a baseline survey is conducted, it provides an excellent measure of improvements (or deterioration) in customer service and quality control. In today's fiscal environment of activity-based costing analyses, and "show me proof" budget allocations, providing solid, independently corroborated evidence of customer satisfaction goes a long way in helping a department win buy-in for its strategic business planning process and funding requirements.

One final note, last month's column generated a number of questions from readers about the value of web-based surveys. Any opportunity a community has to interact with its police agency is a positive thing. However, it is wise not to place a lot of confidence in results from this type of questionnaire. The likelihood of demographic skew of respondents is enormous and the old adage about the "squeaky wheel" applies to on-line surveys. You'll get a lot more people complaining about your service, than comments from satisfied customers; if your department is doing its job … it's an expected quality of service, not often worthy of positive comment.

About the Author
Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.