

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

BEFORE IMPLEMENTING YOUR
COMMUNICATION PROGRAMS,
SPEND SOME TIME ON RESEARCH

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: This template is the first part of a series of measurement templates. This one is intended to provide overall guidance for understanding the key steps involved in conducting a research project. This template will help you understand what you need to do when embarking on a research project. In addition, it outlines the key differences between quantitative and qualitative research.

Additional measurement templates will be developed that focus specifically on how to conduct survey research and focus group research.

Perhaps you've heard the carpenter's adage, "Measure twice and cut once." This saying certainly applies for organizational communications.

If you want your communications to be strategic, effective and to advance your company's mission, you need to conduct research to identify what's working and what's not working, what the critical issues and key drivers are for employees, and what roadblocks and challenges you face with respect to organizational communication.

Research gives you facts – not assumptions – that you need for effective strategic planning. It takes the hit-or-miss guesswork out of communication. Research gives you the tools you need to direct change. Done correctly, research can even give you a quantitative measure of the impact that communication has on organizational performance, the work environment and employee engagement.

Before Doing Research

Before doing any kind of research, there are some key points to consider:

- **Determine your purpose:** Whatever kind of research you conduct, you should first determine what you want that research to uncover. What's your purpose? Do you want to know what employees think about a given issue? Do you want to assess the overall effectiveness of your communications? Do you want to redesign a publication or find out how the company is perceived by employees, its customers or the community?
- **Involve others in the planning process:** To get the best buy-in, include people at all levels of the organization in your research planning. In particular, focus on gaining the support of senior management – their commitment and support will help ensure that employees participate in the research project.

- **Commit to feedback afterwards:** When you question people, they naturally want to know what answers you've been hearing. You set up an expectation when you survey people or conduct focus groups, so you owe it to people to satisfy that expectation. Tell people at the outset that you will communicate your findings by an announced date in an announced vehicle (a newsletter, a bulletin, e-mail, a video, face-to-face, etc.). Don't let too much time elapse before making your report, and be sure the report is accurate. Share both the positive and the negative findings.
- **Commit to using the information to make changes:** Employees become very cynical toward surveys if they feel their input isn't going to change anything. You have to act on the information you gather – by improving communications, changing a company policy or whatever else the research was geared toward. To drive home the value of the research, you should attribute the changes you make to your research, and be sure to communicate this to your audience.

These last two points are critical to the success of any research project. Failure to report the results and, more important, to take action on employee input, will result in lower credibility for you and decreased trust from employees.

Accurate research can be complex and time-consuming and is often not a place for beginners to tread. In many cases, it's best to work with a qualified communication research firm. There are numerous software programs and online sites that can help you conduct your research (most of these are geared toward survey research). Even if you use these resources, though, it is important to have a strong understanding of research methodologies and analysis techniques if you are to be successful in accomplishing your goals.

Using This Measurement Template

This measurement template is intended to provide you with the key steps involved in conducting a research project. In addition, it explains the differences between quantitative and qualitative research, helping you decide which type of research is best suited for your needs.

On the following pages, you'll find information about:

- 10 Reasons to Conduct Research
- Getting From A to Z: The Process for Conducting Research
- Surveys versus Focus Groups
- Advantages & Disadvantages of Surveys
- Advantages & Disadvantages of Focus Groups/Interviews

10 REASONS TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

You have a chest pain and rush to your doctor. “Doc, I need a heart transplant right away!” The doctor says, “What? How do you know? Let me examine you.” “No!” you insist, “just schedule the surgery!” Makes no sense, but many in the communications field make important decisions and take action without any examination (research) first.

Why should you do research?

10 Reasons to Do Research:

1. Research saves time, money and effort by giving you the direction you need for planning. It helps you be more effective by identifying the critical issues, audiences, needs, messages and media.
2. Research tells you what’s working and what’s not working, and whether your time, efforts and funds are well spent.
3. Research gives communicators credibility in a board room populated by numbers-driven business majors, accountants and MBA’s.
4. Use of research in your planning makes you part of the management team; it’s the link between your work and management planning and decision making.
5. Research results justify budget requests. Cost-conscious managers look for solid evidence of needs and of successes.
6. Everything changes all the time – information needs, problems – and only research can identify the changes.
7. Research gives employees a process for being engaged and involved in the work place. They have an opportunity to give their input without fear of reprisal.
8. With advances in software and online capabilities, research has become more feasible and more cost effective.
9. Your competitors (inside and outside the organization) are likely using research. Conducting research is a competitive necessity today.
10. In this information age, there’s greater emphasis on the importance of reliable information as the basis for planning and decision making.

So, if you have questions to answer before you make decisions or solve problems, research can help show you the way.

Get a physical before you order a heart transplant.

Getting from A to Z: THE PROCESS OF RESEARCH

Many people find the research process mystifying; they don't really understand where to begin or how to get to the final product. Whether you do your own research or rely on an outside source for part or all of it, an understanding of the research process is important.

The process of research is neither mystifying nor complex. It is logical and systematic, and can be explained by looking at seven major steps. These can serve as a check list to guide you through your research project.



1. Clearly define the reason for conducting the research.

What do you want to accomplish as a result of your research? You may want to make decisions about the future of your communications, and you need information about what's working and not working in order to be able to make those decisions. Or, you may perceive that there is a communication break-down occurring in the organization, and you need to confirm it and pinpoint the source of the break-down.

Picture yourself at the end of the project, reading the report: What kind of information do you need? How is it helping you make decisions about what to strengthen? What to change?

Research often begins with a problem that needs to be solved, something in the way of the organization doing what it wants to do. Research answers important questions so problems can be solved and intelligent decisions made.

Before you begin any research project, you must have a clear understanding of what you want to achieve. If you don't know what the target is, you won't hit it.

You should ask yourself the following questions:

- **What needs to be determined to solve our problem?**

- **What will we do with the information when we receive it?**

- **What important questions need answers?**

- **What information will answer those questions?**

- **How and where will we get this information?**

Sometimes it's useful to write down the following:

The purpose of this research (why am I doing this research?):

Research objectives (what do I hope to end up with?):



2. Develop a research methodology.

You need to have a research plan – a detailed “map” of how you’ll achieve your research objectives. Here you plan the details of your research effort, consider different options, select research methods, develop schedules, budgets, and research instruments. Here are some considerations:

Types of Research

- It is important to keep in mind the different types of research as you establish your methodology. Understanding what type of research you are conducting will help you in developing a research instrument (such as a questionnaire) that will help you accomplish your objectives. For example, will you do **Initial** research that establishes benchmarks for future efforts? Or, will you do some **Monitoring** that looks at programs in progress? You may wish to do **Evaluation** research that will let you know if you achieved your objectives.

Exploratory research may tell you whether there are problems within your organization.

Descriptive research tells you about your employees, their concerns and attitudes.

Explanatory research looks for the reasons behind things, while **Causal research** examines changes and effects.

What type of research will you conduct?

- You must select a research methodology that will enable you to gather the information you need. You have two main options here: **Quantitative and/or Qualitative research.**
 - **Quantitative research** (such as surveys) provide you with hard data – specific numbers about how many people in your audience think a certain way. It is usually statistically representative of the entire population. The survey is the most common type of quantitative research used in organizations. These are conducted via paper, online, telephone, or a combination of these.
 - **Qualitative research** (such as focus groups) provide you with more in-depth descriptions and interpretations of people’s opinions, attitudes and behaviors. Where quantitative research involves primarily numbers, qualitative research involves primarily words. (Note, however, that you can do some quantitative analysis with qualitative data. But it is not intended to be statistically representative of your population.) The most common forms of qualitative research are focus groups, interviews, and observations.
 - **Think of it this way: Quantitative research tells you *WHAT* people think about certain issues, and qualitative research tells you *WHY* people think the way they do.**

What methodology will you use to conduct the research? (Before you answer this, you might read the last three pages of this document about the differences between quantitative and qualitative research.)

NOTE: Future measurement templates for IABC will focus on how to conduct quantitative and qualitative research.

Define Your Audience

• **Who is your research audience?**

If you're conducting organizational research, is your audience all employees, or certain groups of employees? This can be an important decision for organizations with employees in many different countries and business units. You may find that your target audience may not be all employees.

- You may need a **Sampling Plan** if your audience is very large. A sample is a small group that is representative of a larger group, and sampling is done to conserve time, money and effort. As part of the sampling plan, you need to determine the **Sample Population** (are you interested in all of your audience or only those in locations A, B, and C?). Who will be listed in the **Sample Frame** (personnel files, directory, etc.)? What will be the **Sampling Unit** (individual employees, work teams, departments)? What will be the **Sample Size** (how many persons will be included)? Finally, you need to determine a **Sampling Procedure** (simple random, systematic, stratified or cluster sampling). Each method has its strengths and weaknesses.

Logistics

- An important part of your plan is **administration, logistics and scheduling**. There can be many elements to the logistics of a research methodology, and they vary from one type of research to another. To get you started, here are some useful questions to ask:

What is your research timeline? _____

By when do you need to have the final report completed? _____

What is your budget? _____

For surveys:

How will you distribute the surveys (online/paper/both)? _____

How will you encourage your respondents to participate in the survey? _____

How will you receive completed surveys? _____

How will you tabulate and manage the data (this can be a large task)? _____

For focus groups:

Who will conduct the focus groups (your staff or an outside firm)?

How will you select participants?

What locations or demographic groups will you include?

How many sessions do you need to conduct?

Will you just take notes, or will you record the sessions? (*Certain audiences are reluctant to open up on certain topics if they are being recorded.*)

How will you analyze and report the results?

With what tasks will you need assistance?

Develop the Instrument

- Of course, once you select a research methodology, you need to **develop the instruments for conducting the research**. If you're conducting a survey, it is critical to write the survey questions in a scientifically valid manner. Poorly written survey questions will only result in poor data (there's actually a term for this – "garbage in/garbage out"). If you're conducting focus groups or interviews, it's important to carefully develop the list of questions and a script for the facilitator/interviewer. There are different types of focus groups and interviews, depending on your objectives and information needs. It is important to create the questions in a manner that will obtain the information you truly need.

Pilot Test

- **Try it before you buy it.** It is important to conduct a pilot test of your research instrument, whether it's a survey or a focus group script. Test it with members of your target audience. Inevitably, they will find something that can be rephrased to be more clear or concise.

How will you pilot test your instrument?

Who will be your audience for the pilot test group? How will you select them?



3. Conduct the research.

The third step is to **carry out the plan** you made, distribute surveys, conduct interviews, whatever you need to do to collect the information.



4. Analyze the collected data.

Examine the data to see if your research questions were answered. Make sense of the numbers. Analysis. Interpretation. Bring it all together. There have been wonderful advances in the ability to analyze data – both quantitative and qualitative – that move research analysis beyond the traditional methods of “Strengths and Weaknesses.”

Quantitative analysis processes include **analysis of variance, correlation analysis, regression analysis and structural equation modeling**, and more. Check with the person analyzing your survey data to see if he/she is using any of these forms of analysis.

New forms of analysis enable researchers to:

- Measure the impact of internal programs on the work environment and organizational performance.
- Identify patterns and trends in the data that are not immediately apparent from the overall numbers.
- Specify which groups of respondents have significantly different opinions – you may want to implement initiatives targeted specifically for these groups.

There are also many ways to analyze qualitative data that enable researchers to identify common themes, patterns or trends in the data.



5. Communicate the findings of the research.

Share the overall results *immediately* following the research. Don't wait until you have analyzed all the data and have developed a strategic plan – that can take months! If you conduct a survey, send out a report of the overall responses within two weeks of the end-date for the survey. Provide a summary of key themes after you conduct focus group sessions. This builds credibility for the research process, lets people know that their input was received, and shows people that the company has heard their input and will (hopefully) take action.

After you have analyzed the research findings, then you can produce a more formal report of results for employees that summarizes the key themes and outlines management's plan for taking action.

How will you report the preliminary findings of your research?

When will you report the preliminary findings?

How and when will you report the complete findings (after the analysis is complete)?



6. Take action on the research results.

Based on your findings, develop a strategic plan and take action – don't let research results sit on a shelf gathering dust. Furthermore, be sure to attribute your actions to the research results. For example, "In our employee survey this year, only 55% of employees said they have a good understanding of our key business goals. Based on this, we are introducing a quarterly business report that . . ."

Failure to take action will reduce your credibility and contribute to a break-down in trust within the organization. You wouldn't want to be the cause of a break-down in trust, would you? It's amazing how many times people tell us, "We've told the company this before, and they didn't do anything about it. Why should it be any different this time around?" **If you're not going to do anything with employees' input, then don't conduct the research in the first place!**



7. Measure performance against the plan.

Within two years, conduct follow-up research to benchmark your progress. When you develop your strategic plan of action, identify some measurable goals for improvement, and use follow-up research to monitor your progress.

Research is a continuing process; it doesn't end with a one-shot project. Research may generate new questions about things you weren't aware of. If research prompts changes in your communications, you'll need some evaluation to see the results.

Looking back over this document, steps 1 and 2 – defining the purpose and developing a plan – had the most words. That makes sense. That's where you should expend the most effort, whether you do your own research or hire a research firm.

You must have a clear understanding of why you're doing the research and what you hope to achieve, as well as how you'll go about getting the information you need.

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH VERSUS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Surveys or focus groups? Or both? Once you've determined your reason for conducting research and you know what you hope to do with the results you obtain, one of your next questions should be: Do I want a survey or focus groups? Or both? The answer's simple: It depends.

It depends on what type of information you need. Do you need hard statistical data, the kind that says, "Ten percent of our employees believe that..."? If so, a survey is what you're looking for.

Or do you need softer information, something that tells you not how many people believe something, but rather *why* they believe it? If you want depth, feelings and emotions, then you need a focus group. It's a way of obtaining information verbally from a small group of people – eight to 12 participants per group is usually best – who are randomly selected from your total population.

There are advantages and disadvantages to each type of research. But it doesn't have to be an either/or situation. Surveys and focus groups often work best in conjunction with each other – surveys for the data, focus groups for the reasons.

When to conduct focus groups? There are several opportune times for conducting focus groups:

- **Before conducting a survey:** This method will give you a chance to test the questionnaire before you send it to a larger group.
- **After conducting a survey:** You can use the focus group to find out why people said what they did on the survey, and to clarify areas in the survey results that seem to be "disconnects." For example, the survey may show that 80% of people enjoy working here, but only 45% say there is a good level of trust between employees and management. You can use the focus group to ask why people enjoy working here, given that the trust is so low.

Conducting a focus group at this time will also give you a clearer picture of the overall situation because the focus group participants can explain the attitudes and emotional nuances behind the numbers in the survey report. They'll give you a depth of information that the statistics alone can't provide.

- **As a stand-alone:** When you don't need the statistics of a survey, focus groups can give you quick feedback on employee attitudes and opinions. They can give yield wonderful information about very specific subjects.
- **For external audiences:** Employees aren't the only people who can participate in focus groups. Sometimes you want to question external audiences – customers, the community, etc. Such external focus groups can help you assess customer satisfaction, identify public reaction to your company or specific community relations programs, or identify levels of concern that different constituent groups have toward your company, programs or practices.

The following pages outline the advantages and disadvantages of surveys and focus groups.

SURVEYS

The Advantages

Accurate:

You can't beat statistics. Business executives – especially senior managers – respect numbers.

Statistical Analysis Capabilities:

There are many ways to analyze survey data with advanced statistical processes. Multiple regression and structural equation modeling enable you to quantify the impact that communication has on the organization. Analysis of variance identifies meaningful differences between demographic groups. Through statistical analysis, you can really make the data tell a story.

Reach:

You can reach thousands of people simultaneously, and you don't have to be there to do it. It's the only way to reach a representative sample of a large population.

Anonymity:

Survey respondents can be anonymous, enabling them to be completely candid with their input.

Questions May Be Broad-Based:

Asking the same questions of hundreds of people gives you a broad-based overview of the big picture.

People Are Used to Questionnaires:

We fill out forms all our lives, from contest entries to income taxes. We're used to them.

Nonthreatening:

A piece of paper with questions on it is neutral and nonthreatening to people who may be uncomfortable expressing their opinions in-person to someone else.

The Disadvantages

Could Have a Poor Response:

There's no guarantee that everyone who receives a survey will participate.

Hard to Get In-depth Information:

Survey questions usually call for answers on a scale or boxes to check off. This gives you accurate results, but it doesn't always tell you the reason behind people's responses. (This can be done but is more complex in a survey.)

Complex Analysis:

You have to know how to analyze the numbers to get the information you need. There is more to analyzing the data than just tabulating the raw numbers.

Hard to Probe:

Written surveys give you numerical data, but not the "why" and the emotion behind the numbers. Because a survey isn't a conversation, you can't effectively key follow-up questions to responses.

Questions May Be Biased:

There's an art to wording questions so they don't steer respondents to predetermined answers. Faulty questions give you unreliable results.

FOCUS GROUPS/INTERVIEWS

The Advantages

With Trained Facilitators, You Can Get In-depth Information:

An experienced interviewer can get focus group participants to open up, explaining the depth and detail of their feelings.

You Can Probe for More Detail:

You can ask people to explain their ideas, to give examples, to cite their own experiences.

Misunderstanding Can Be Clarified:

If you don't understand something someone says, you can ask for an explanation.

Can Penetrate Into Emotional and Feeling Issues:

Face-to-face conversations allow you to hear people's tone of voice, read their facial expressions and observe their body language. You can ask them why they feel the way they do.

People Talk Better in Groups:

We're social by nature. People respond to each other, producing feedback that a survey might miss.

The Disadvantages

Requires Trained Facilitators:

There's an art to drawing people out without injecting your own opinions. You can't expect just anyone to be a facilitator and do the job without adequate training.

Time-Consuming:

A facilitator can do only one group at a time, preferably five to 12 people in 60-90 minutes. In that same time period, a survey could question an unlimited number of people.

Can Be Costly:

You have to pull people away from their jobs for 60-90 minutes. And unless you conference (which has its drawbacks), you may have to travel to conduct the groups.

Hard to Analyze Results:

When the groups are over, your notes will be a collection of quotes. It takes a skillful researcher to find the underlying themes woven throughout those quotes and to prepare a thoughtful, accurate and concise report.

— John Williams is president of Joe Williams Communications, Inc., a 19-year-old communication research, training and consulting firm. He holds an MBA from Indiana University and a BA from Cornell University. Joe Williams Communications has conducted communication surveys and focus groups for more than 100 companies, and has a database that represents over 400,000 employees worldwide. In 2001, John received a Gold Quill Award of Excellence for a research project that quantified the impact that a client's communication programs have on its work environment. You may reach John by e-mail at John.Williams@JWCom.com, 918.336.2267, or visit the web site at www.JWCom.com.

Additional Resources

A quick search of Amazon.com revealed thousands of books and materials that cover the subject of organizational research. In my work, I have found a couple of books to be useful in learning more about research:

Survey Research:

- “The Survey Research Handbook,” by Pamela Alreck and Robert Settle
- “Designing and Conducting Survey Research: A Comprehensive Guide,” by Louis Rea and Richard Parker

Focus Groups:

- “The Focus Group Kit, Volumes 1-6” (a box set), by David Morgan and Richard Krueger
- “Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research,” by Richard Krueger and Mary Anne Casey

IABC Resources:

In addition to the above titles, IABC offers a variety of resources related to research. You can find these resources at <http://store.yahoo.com/iabcstore/meas.html>.

- “Communication Research Primer,” by Joey Reagan, Ph.D.
- “Measuring Organizational Trust,” by Pamela Shockley-Zalabak, Ph.D., Kathleen Ellis, Ph.D., Ruggero Cesaria
- “How to Measure Your Communication Programs,” by Angela Sinickas, ABC
- “Getting Started: Communication Measurement,” by Angela Sinickas, ABC
- “Communication Research, Measurement and Evaluation,” by Lou Williams