editor's
WORKSHOP

Gill on measurement

The nuts and bolts of using surveys to measure the effectiveness of employee communication

"Numbers are the language of business. And a good number is worth a thousand pictures."
– Don Wilt, director of Internal Communications, Honeywell

The trick to conducting great employee communication measurement is to use a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods. Using these two techniques in conjunction is the only surefire way to truly unleash the power of employee communication research.

In the March issue of this newsletter, qualitative methods, such as interviews and focus groups, were discussed. This article focuses on the other research technique—quantitative measurement.

Quantitative vs. qualitative research

Some key differences exist between qualitative and quantitative research. These differences fit together so that one method's strengths fulfill the other method's weaknesses and vice versa.

Qualitative	**Quantitative**
❑ "Soft" data and information	❑ "Hard" data, statistics, trends
❑ Word driven	❑ Number driven
❑ Interviews, focus groups	❑ Surveys, questionnaires

Qualitative research is often conducted first to see "where things stand"—to spot issues, and then uncover what drives the issues—the details and reasons behind them. Qualitative data is descriptive by nature and will often be used to explain quantitative findings. For example, an apropos verbatim statement captured in a focus group or an interview can clarify, or give meaning to, a numeric finding in a survey.

Another reason it's critical to conduct qualitative research before doing quantitative is that it gives an idea of which questions to ask on the survey. What you find during the qualitative research will, in essence, build the survey questions. It will tell you not only "what" to ask on the survey, but also "how" to ask it by telling you the right language to use.

Focus group and interview data —Build→ Survey questions

On the flip side, quantitative research provides the hard evidence and statistics to support the qualitative data. It is only through the analysis of survey data that "statistical significance" can be found. "Significant findings," as determined by various statistical tests, such as analysis of variance (ANOVA), identify the most meaningful or noteworthy results and show differences among groups, such as geographic locations or departments. Quantitative data also allows you to track changes over time, examine trends and establish communication metrics for your organization.

Writing survey questions

So you've done your qualitative research and are ready to start writing your survey questions. The themes and issues that you uncovered during the focus groups and interviews should point you in the right direction of what to ask on the survey. While writing questions, it is also a good idea to work backward and ask yourself, "What type of data do I need?" and then write questions that will provide that data.

Write your questions using simple words and unambiguous terms. Don't forget to use familiar terms to employees, hopefully those gathered in focus groups and interviews, while avoiding corporate jargon (e.g. *corporate restructuring*). And when in doubt, define words on the survey, especially those that may have different meanings to different people. For example, *timely* can refer to a distribution issue (i.e., distributed on time) or current news (i.e., *timely*, current information). Be careful that you don't ask two questions in one, such as "My supervisor provides honest and useful feedback." How should one answer if the feedback is honest, but not always useful?

Demographic questions are best placed at the end of your survey. Ask only those demographic questions that you will use—those that identify the groups that you want to compare with each other or expect differences between, such as:

❑ Department, location, division
❑ Position/pay group
❑ How long with organization/Years of service
❑ Shift

Less useful demographics, such as age, gender, education, and race, should not be asked unless you plan to analyze that specific data (say, if you have a large generation x population working at your company that you specifically want more information about or plan to target in separate communications). Including unneeded demographics just adds unnecessary bulk to your survey and may make some respondents uncomfortable, thereby potentially reducing your return rate.

Keep in mind that survey questions do not have to be complicated. For a knowledge test:

Our company is currently being investigated by the…

❑ FBI
❑ FAA
❑ IRS

To find out where employees are getting their information from, ask a simple source question:

I heard about our new customer service motto FIRST through:

A. Company publication
B. My supervisor
C. CEO speech
D. My co-workers
E Outside of my company

Finally, ask questions that provide solutions whenever you can—questions should lead to answers. For example, take a look at the following two questions:

The BUZZ should be published biweekly.
A. Strongly Agree
B. Agree
C. Disagree
D. Strongly Disagree
E. Don't know/No opinion

The BUZZ should be published:
A. Once a week
B. Twice a month
C. Once a month
D. Every other month
E. Don't know/No opinion

For the first question, let's say 80 percent of respondents "disagree." Does this mean they want *The Buzz* to be published more frequently or less frequently? One can't be sure. The second question provides the answer and, therefore, is the better question to ask.

Sample size

If you have the capability and the budget, it is always best to do a "census" and survey all of the employees in your organization. This method allows everyone to have an opportunity to respond to the survey. It's especially useful statistically if some groups (that you plan to compare with other groups) within your organization are small.

Most of the time, however, employee communication surveys are distributed to a "random sample" of employees within an organization. This means that every "nth" person receives a survey. The total population in your organization and how big you want your sample size to be determines the "n." For example, if you had a total employee population of 1,000 and wanted to survey 100 employees, you would select every 10th employee to receive a survey.

But how big should my sample be, you ask. The answer to this important question is that it depends on how precise you want your results to be. Two factors affect preciseness: confidence level and margin of error. Confidence level refers to the degree of certainty one has that the "results found are truly the results." The confidence level for employee research is almost always set at 95 percent. Margin of error is directly related to sample size—the bigger the sample, the smaller the margin of error and the more precise the results. See the chart below for an example:

Total population	**Sample size needed for each margin of error (95% confidence level)**			
	+/-1	**+/-2**	**+/-3**	**+/-4**
15,000	5,855	2,070	996	577
40,000	7,745	2,265	1,039	591

Most employee communication researchers consider a margin of error between +/-1 and +/-2 to be valid. To determine what size sample size you'd need for your desired margin of error (or what the margin of error is for a desired sample), visit the sample size calculator at: http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm.

Administrative methods

There are two ways to administer your survey. The "captive" method is when the survey is administered in small-group meetings during which respondents complete it right then and there. The advantages of this method are that it has a better response rate and you have more control. On the other hand, this method takes more planning and preparation (e.g., scheduling rooms, people to administer the survey) and, more important, may impact the validity of the results. This is mainly due to the fact that the captive method “forces” respondents to do the survey. Some respondents may resent this and complete the survey with random answers just to be done with it.

To make sure that the data collected is indeed valid, the “noncaptive” method is often used in employee research. The noncaptive method distributes the survey to the sample using the mail (through work mail or mailed to home), Internet, intranet, e-mail, face-to-face, telephone, or fax.

Each of these noncaptive distribution methods has its strengths and weaknesses. When deciding which method to use, the environment and culture of your individual organization has to be the main consideration. For example, mailing the survey to employees’ home addresses gives them the opportunity to complete it at their leisure and really take time with, and give thought to, their responses. On the other hand, some employees might resent receiving “work stuff” at home and may just toss it in the trash. Also, be sure to find out how often your company updates its employee home address list—you might be surprised!

Distributing the survey through interoffice mail may work for some organizations—at least you know it gets to them! But what if it gets lost or buried on employees’ desks at work? And some employees may be too busy or feel uncomfortable being candid while they’re completing the survey at work. Whether you mail to the home or at work, paper surveys can be as short as a few questions on a postcard or as long as 12 pages—although longer surveys often receive a lower response rate.

Online surveys (e-mail, Internet and intranet) have increased in popularity lately, mainly due to their convenience. One big advantage to online surveys is that they remove the data entry step in the research process—the database is often automatically built as people submit their responses (no manual error!). When deciding to do an online survey, keep in mind that it needs to be short (no more than 30 questions) and that not everyone likes doing surveys online—keep it user-friendly. Also, don’t forget to make sure everyone in your sample has online access! If not, you’ll have a biased sample.

The telephone and fax are often used for efficient, hard-hitting surveys—when there are just a few important questions that you want answered quickly. Most employees will not want to be on the phone for more than 5-10 minutes. Telephone surveys, as well as face-to-face, allow you to ask additional questions and obtain more detail in the moment, especially when responses are unexpected, confusing or unclear. However, telephone and face-to-face surveys are often not confidential, so it’s best to use these methods when the subject matter is not sensitive.

Response rate

A response rate of 30 percent, meaning that 30 percent of the employees you sent a survey to completed and returned it, is considered a “good” response rate in employee research. A return rate of 40 percent or higher is widely considered “excellent.” A return rate below 20 percent may be considered invalid due to a self-selection bias and nonrepresentative sampling (e.g., you’re only hearing from a select few of the employees you sent the survey to—their responses may not be generalized to the majority who did not respond).

Some tips to improve your response rate include:

- ❑ Include a letter from a high-level executive or influential person (e.g., union leader in organized settings)
- ❑ Always share the results—if you don’t, employees won’t bother to take the time to fill out future surveys
- ❑ Assure confidentiality—whether it’s a paper or an online survey, have the completed surveys sent directly to a third-party data-processing firm if possible
- ❑ Include clear instructions and objectives with a due date—10-14 days is all that’s usually needed
- ❑ Be careful with humor
- ❑ Try to only ask questions that you’ll take action on, and assess only what can really change
- ❑ Offer department or location incentive, such as a free lunch or happy hour to the department/location with the highest return rate
- ❑ Recruit ambassadors at each location to promote the survey

Analyzing and reporting results

When conducting employee research, many communicators find that this step in the process—analyzing the results—is the most useful to outsource. Statisticians can often analyze your data and tell you the meaningful results in no time at all—this is what they do for a living! Whether or not you choose to outsource, while analyzing the data you’ll want to identify strengths (numbers that are high), weaknesses (numbers that are low) and gaps. Nail down differences between work groups, departments, levels, and other demographics by comparing groups with each other and to the total population. If you can, compare a before and after group, pilot and control groups, or the actual vs. the ideal. “Statistically significant” findings will help you identify the most meaningful results.

As with all employee communication research and measurement, it is imperative to report the results of your survey. Avoid the “black-hole syndrome!” If your results are not reported, employees will stop doing your surveys. And if nothing is ever done with the results and nothing changes, why bother doing research at all!

In your company publication and at least one other communication vehicle (e.g., intranet), report to the whole organization what you found in your research and what you plan to do about it. It can be useful to put the results in a booklet format or insert that outlines each focus area assessed in the survey (examples of focus areas might be “Communication with leadership” or “Understanding the future of our company”). Then, for each focus area, define what it is, tell what’s working (the strengths, what received high scores) and what’s not (the weaknesses, what received low scores). Include the detailed, blow-by-blow results—even if they’re bad! Finally, outline what’s going to be done with the results—the steps that are going to be taken to improve the negative findings and show accountability. Do this by outlining each action, who will be responsible for it, and the dates/deadlines for the action steps (of course, this is simpler said then done! Obviously this strategy is the outcome of several action planning meetings with the key people involved).

Last but not least, continue to do research on a regular basis to measure your success!

But if you can't do a full-blown survey...

Sometimes, it's just not feasible to conduct a survey—due to financial, time or other constraints. If this is the case for you within your organization, another employee communication research method, aptly named a "Nielsen family," might be something to try.

"Nielsen family" or focus panel

Creating a "Nielsen family" of employees is a great, efficient way to gather quick data about the state of employee communication at your organization. The idea stems from this: A communicator in a small company can easily keep a pulse on employee communication just by walking the halls/common areas and talking with employees. But, as companies grow (with many different departments, geographic locations, etc.) this ability can easily be lost. This is where a "Nielsen family" becomes very useful. The employees in your "family" become your eyes and ears out amongst the employees that you can't get to on a regular basis. They let you know how things are going. An additional bonus is that these employees often become employee communication "ambassadors."

Data is usually collected through telephone conversations with each individual member of your family. These calls can be very structured in which you ask each family member the same type of questions, or a less structured format in which you just discuss the current "communication climate." Another great use is to beta test ideas with your "Nielsen family" or have them comment on timely, pertinent communication issues (e.g., "What have you been hearing about the new benefits page on the Intranet?").

The length of the telephone calls varies depending on the topic and how often you do them. Most of the time they are 10-15 minutes in length and occur about once a month (with additional calls scheduled if pressing issues come up in the meantime).

The size of your "Nielsen family" is entirely up to you and your needs—you can always add more members. Questions to ask yourself when planning the size of your family include:

- ❑ How many people can I manage and talk to on a regular basis?
- ❑ How often will I talk to them?
- ❑ How many locations/departments are in my organization?

Usually, "Nielsen family" participants are given a limited engagement upfront—say, six months or one year. It is best to randomly select your members using HR lists—this prevents you from getting the outspoken individuals or the cheerleaders/naysayers (who you probably hear from anyway) and provides a good mix of employees (in job level, title, deptartment, etc.). Then, a phone call to explain the process is all that's often needed to gain their commitment. Sometimes, communicators may meet face-to-face with their "Nielsen family" at the beginning of the members' tenure, perhaps after a companywide meeting or event. This is a good time to start a new rotation of a "Nielsen family."

Keep in mind that "Nielsen families" are an informal way to do research. They provide a quick pulse or temperature check on communication issues. They are best used as supplements to employee communication surveys, interviews, and focus groups.