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Employee research aids productivity and boosts morale

by Margaret Roller

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Employees are the key ingredient to a successful marketing program, yet the importance of employee research is often overlooked.

I'm talking about pure employee research, in which employees' opinions are an end in themselves and not an adjunct to consumer work.

Whether the employee base is large or small, the reason for conducting employee research is the same: to monitor attitudes about communication, their jobs, and the company to maintain high morale, minimal turnover, and top-quality production.

A company that understands the importance of employee research is rewarded by that which is nearest and dearest to its heart: a profitable bottom line and a growing return on investment.

To be good at employee research you have to understand that you are interfering in other people's lives. Asking consumers to confess their brand preference is one thing; asking employees to reveal their opinions about their jobs—their life source—is a risky business.

This requires a great deal of sensitivity. It's critical to understand that most employees don't grasp the notion of confidentiality in the research process, and will

be convinced the research is aimed at identifying naysayers and weeding out bad seeds from the company's ranks.

The degree of skepticism often is directly related to the size of the company. Larger firms have more "corporate politics" and more mistrust.

Gaining employees' trust is paramount. Once it's achieved, the researcher can give the client the necessary tools not only to enrich the corporate coffers, but also affect human life.

Whether the research is quantitative or qualitative, it requires unique logistics.

First, the researcher always works from lists. An important consideration is whether you intend to call employees at home or on the job. Usually, the research is done at home. Obtaining the lists can be time-consuming because company data-processing departments may not be geared to generating the types of lists you need.

Second, employees need prior notification of the research, unlike consumer research. This can be done in numerous ways—bulletin boards, electronic mail, employee publications—and is mandatory to the process.

Prior notification dispels doubts and cynicism, and without it, refusal rates will be high.

Recruiting employees for focus groups differs from recruiting consumers in seven areas:

□ **Level of cooperation:** Even with prior notification, cooperation may be low, especially among nonmanagement employees.



Margaret Roller says employee research can lead to better profits and a growing return on investment.

□ **Number of recruiters:** Ideally, only one recruiter should interact with employees.

□ **Recruiter qualifications:** A professional, yet sensitive, recruiter is needed, one who exudes politeness and extreme tact. Any aggravation caused by the recruiter can come back to haunt you, through the client.

□ **Employee feedback:** It is not uncommon for employees to raise Cain with management after being called at home for a focus group. To help circumvent this problem, the recruiter should give employees a name of someone at the company and number to call to verify the research program.

□ **Number of employees recruited:** Do not recruit more than you can actually accommodate in a group. Unlike consumer groups, every employee who shows up is permitted to stay for the discussion.

Sending employees home, even after paying them, is bad PR.

□ **Association between discussants:** Although an attempt usually is made to recruit employees from different areas of the company, it is rare that some of the employees don't know one other.

□ **Experience of the discussants:** "Virgin" respondents still exist; you'll find lots of them when doing employee research.

Employee groups also differ in where and how they're conducted. It's important to remove employees from the corporate campus to a neutral environment, even if it's a local motel or hotel ballroom.

Furthermore, unlike consumer groups, clients are *not* invited to attend these sessions. Having clients present to watch employees pour out their hearts is insensitive at best; at worst, it is a time bomb waiting to explode.

The moderator needs to be exceedingly empathetic when relating to employees and pace the discussion accordingly. This means allowing the discussion to stray from the prepared guide and permitting employees to express highly vocal, negative attitudes if needed be—even encouraging employees to "get it off your chest."

Reporting and follow-through require special attention. It's not enough to submit a written report and hope someone will take action. Employees demand more than that.

They demand that their heartfelt suggestions for improving the company be considered seriously. They want to know the status of research results and expect to be notified of any changes in company policy because of the research.

Clients should communicate research findings through an employee newsletter or other vehicle.

Including employees in the aftermath of research assures them that their contribution is important, that their trust is warranted, that the company really does care what they think, and that it's to their advantage to participate in future research. ■