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- Readership and marketing surveys prove effective — and cheap — when using local resources

# Student Media, know thyself (and your readers)

by Kay Colley

➔ **Say the word “survey” to journalists or aspiring journalists (or advisers for that matter) and watch the reaction. Confused looks often are followed by sweaty palms and the standard reply: “I’m not a math person.”**

Even surly editors, administrators, angry sources and uncooperative technology provide fewer hurdles than the world of statistics, which may be why readership surveys or marketing surveys have been mentioned on at least three occasions on the College Media Advisers listserv since December 2009. Despite the fear and confusion associated with survey research, many student media outlets employ marketing and/or readership surveys to help them reach college students as readers, viewers and consumers of advertising.

Student newspapers approach the readership and/or marketing survey from a variety of perspectives. Some organizations do it themselves, employing techniques that go from statistically valid random sampling to the haphazard administration that can result in a fun exercise in statistics with little valid data. Even the use of the term “readership survey” seems to cause some confusion.

While many people use the terms readership survey and marketing survey synonymously, the two survey types have two distinct goals.

“We conduct readership surveys every four or five years, budget permitting,” said Lloyd Goodman, director of student publications at the University of Texas at Arlington, in an e-mail

response to a query on the College Newspaper Business and Advertising Managers listserv. “In addition to what people are reading, we try to find out who is reading. In addition to questions about what people are reading and not reading, we list different kinds of articles and ask which ones would be more likely to entice them to read the paper or read it more often.”

Goodman said this type of readership survey allows UTA’s student newspaper, *The Shorthorn*, to target particular majors or locations on campus when marketing the student newspaper, including efforts such as staff members handing out copies of the newspaper as students go by. “Our last two surveys (2003, 2007), found very little that students said they didn’t like about *The Shorthorn*, which made it difficult to use the survey results as motivation to ‘fix’ things,” Goodman said.

This year, *The Shorthorn* administered a marketing survey, which is separate from the readership survey, and the results of the marketing survey are used to help sell advertising, providing *The Shorthorn* with student spending habits and use of advertising. In conjunction with the Division of Student Affairs, *The Shorthorn* used the company Student Voice, which works with student affairs divisions in colleges throughout the nation. In the past, the staff used a bid process for the marketing survey and settled on the company Newton and Associates, located in Norman, Okla. The University of Pittsburgh has used Morpace, in Farmington Hills, Mich., and in the past, Ohio State has used Saperstein and Associates in Columbus, Ohio. But the cost to hire a third-party vendor for a marketing survey can be prohibitive.

“When we did a survey with a third-party survey company, we put that out for bids every time we did it, every four years,” Goodman said. “They usually cost us \$8,000 to \$10,000. That was \$8,000 to \$10,000 we didn’t have this year, so if we weren’t doing it internally, we would not be able to do a survey.”

1. What best describes your status during the Spring 2010 semester?

- Freshman  Sophomore  Junior  Senior

2. How far do you drive to campus (one way)?

- 5 miles or less  6-10 miles  11-15 miles  20+ miles

This is the official form for all the students at this university.  
It is quick and easy, and your answers are protected by our privacy policy.

Boise State University also has done third-party surveys in the past, but *The Arbiter's* most recent marketing survey was done with help from the university in an online format.

"One of the things that we did is have somebody else write up the questions, and once we did that, we basically used those questions and have just modified them," said Brad Arendt, director of student media at Boise State. "We've been pretty successful at finding other people at the university, if we needed to change questions, to review the survey."

Arendt said that in modifying existing questions, he keeps the end results in mind and tries to keep bias out.

"You know you're doing the survey yourself, putting it up online and with the university," he said. "There are people who may look at it and say it's not independent, but nobody has ever come up and said, 'Well, you did that survey on your own, and so I'm not sure that's a valid survey.' You know, we've always tried our best to make it as unbiased as we could without influencing the survey, knowing that it's not as good as hiring an independent, outside firm and having them doing it."

In the past, Boise State also has used standard survey methods to gauge readership likes and dislikes. More recently, Arendt said Google Analytics has become the preferred tool, particularly when reviewing readership trends online.

"Before, the only way we had to review readership information was anecdotal preferences of friends and professors and classmates," Arendt said. "Whereas now, we're reading actual online readership data. We know it doesn't exactly hold true to the print side, but it gives the students a better real-time gauge, and they've been able to make adjustments a little bit quicker. That's been one thing that we're used to doing instead of the old survey method. Now, I'm not sure we would necessarily go back to that model."

While online statistics provide more real-time data, at institutions where print is still king, using online data to gauge readership or marketing information can be troublesome. At Appalachian State University, only 3 percent of the campus community gets its news at *The Appalachian Online*.

"In marketing, this whole question of online, as far as newspaper goes, is going to become more and more important," said David Freeman, director of student publications at Appalachian State since 1991. "Our problem right now is staying in front of the curve on how news is delivered. We need to build the numbers where the advertiser wants to be (online), so we need to figure out how to get our students there."

As far as gauging all readership, *The Appalachian* hasn't used third-party vendors, but Freeman has used a combination of

➔ **While using a class project to get a marketing and/or readership survey completed may seem like a cheap or free solution, the validity and usefulness of survey results from class projects can vary.**

unscientific intercept surveys (tables outside of the student union building, the library, etc.) and more scientific surveys through marketing classes.

"We've also, from time to time, gotten some of the marketing classes in the business school to do something for us in terms of just a class project," Freeman said. "We're doing one right now, but we haven't gotten the results back. We haven't done it in about six or seven years."

While using a class project to get a marketing and/or readership survey completed may seem like a cheap or free solution, the validity and usefulness of survey results from class projects can vary. UTA's Goodman has used classes for surveys in the past with mixed results. One class was made up of undergraduate students, and the other was a graduate research class.

"The graduate research class, we really had high hopes for," Goodman said. "They contract out to businesses and things like that. They had never done anything vaguely media-related before, so it threw them for a loop."

Goodman remains optimistic about using a class project to gather marketing or readership data for student media.

"I love the idea of giving students the chance to get this experience," he said. "It's the same thing we do here — we give students the chance to get experience in media."

While working with students in a class project can be challenging, the biggest problem at Appalachian State has been demand.

"There's such a demand for it because it's a free thing that we can't get it done every year," Freeman said. "We just have to get in line for when your year comes up every four or five years, and so that's the whole hindrance for us. In terms of professors overseeing—making sure the students are asking the right questions or that we've asked them to ask the right questions - they're pretty good at that. That's why we have to work with the professor and the students, to make sure that they come up with questions that are appropriate for us instead of just ques-

**3. How many times per week do you read the campus newspaper?**

- 5  4  3  2  1  Never

**4. How many times per week do you visit the newspaper's website?**

- 5  4  3  2  1  Never

→ **“Coming here from the private sector, I cannot believe the amount of resources that are available.”**

tions that seem to come out of a textbook. Some years we’ve had some really good experience, and some years it’s been not so good. That’s kind of how that works.”

As someone new to student media advising, John Milliken, general manager for *The Lantern* for more than a year, has taken advantage of much of what Ohio State University has to offer in terms of integrating research into class projects.

“Coming here from the private sector, I cannot believe the amount of resources that are available,” Milliken said. “I did three studies last year — one with a communication class, where we actually went out and looked at distribution at 50 locations at (9 a.m.), then at noon and at (4 p.m.) so I could see when I was running out of papers at locations and how to get a better sense of what was actually happening with the distribution.

“I did another survey that was statistically valid,” he said. “We did focus groups, then we did a statistically valid survey of readership of the publication that was with another communication class.

“Then there was a separate marketing class that actually put together a study and made groups of students where they had to present it. There were actually eight different marketing proposals.”

When he was looking to redesign *The Lantern*, Milliken looked no further than the industrial design department, finding six options created by students as a class project. The new design was rolled out in fall 2009.

“This year, we’re in the process of finishing off, this quarter, another research study with a communication class,” Milliken said. “It’s specifically trying to look at who actually reads the publication online. We’ve done a lot and will continue to do that.”

Student advertising managers also have sought faculty members to work with in marketing and readership surveys. At Wichita State University, Michael McCann, a senior marketing and management major and advertising manager for *The Sunflower News*, saw a market research survey as a must for fall 2009.

During the summer, he contacted Dr. Dean Headley, an associate professor who teaches marketing research classes at Wichita State. His discussions with Headley resulted in all marketing research classes undertaking *The Sunflower’s* project in the fall.

“This was the first time ever it was done this way,” McCann said. “I went to Dean Headley during the summer, and the more we met, the more he said, ‘We teach market research. This would

be a great project for our class.’ We worked with him, and we worked with the class to get exactly what we wanted to know.”

McCann’s status as a marketing student and upcoming member of the class may have helped to convince Headley of *The Sunflower News’s* project, but it was McCann who made the most of the situation.

“When I originally started with Dean Headley, it was asking, ‘Which questions should I ask,’” McCann said. “And then it was, ‘What do you really want to know?’ That’s how this evolved. The whole business school was kind of in on it, because he teaches four classes, and all four of the classes were doing this. Pretty much the entire business school was either involved in it or knew about it, which really kind of got people talking about the paper in general. So it kind of snowballed into more than I ever thought it would be.”

From the marketing research survey, McCann developed a marketing campaign, working to improve the return rate on the survey. The marketing campaign mushroomed into a promotional campaign and a push to get *The Sunflower News* into the community.

“This has really become more than we ever thought it would do here,” McCann said. “We had become completely complacent. I expected more, so I kind of came at it from the standpoint of I’m going to use this as tool (marketing research survey) to expand my revenue and expand the whole. It was almost like rebranding the paper in the whole city. I was going to Borders and Barnes and Noble and asking, ‘Can I have my paper here, and by the way do you want to advertise?’ I used it as a whole awareness of the paper. We are tailoring our advertising now.”

While the market research survey was more sales focused, the survey also focused on editorial issues such as quality and content. And the marketing of the marketing survey itself created buzz on campus and, McCann says, increased readership. But the proof of the survey’s value as a revenue-generating tool is in the numbers.

“Last I checked, we’re up 16 percent overall in revenue over the past year’s,” McCann said. “In this economy, I’m dancing on the tables. What we’ve picked up is actually university and locals, who have seen the paper (as) more active, and people are more aware of the paper now.”

Following the marketing campaign and the marketing research survey online, McCann said *The Sunflower News* will begin to create an overall marketing campaign to promote the newspaper, using the data collected by students in a class project.

“Now that we have the survey results, we have a game plan, and we’re attacking it more,” he said.



This is the official form for all the students at this university.  
It is quick and easy, and your answers are protected by our privacy policy.

## Tips on How to Conduct a Readership or Marketing Survey

Three good reasons exist to conduct readership or marketing surveys, according to Arlene Fink and Jacqueline Kosecoff in their book, *How to Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide*:

- “A policy needs to be set or a program must be planned;
- You want to evaluate the effectiveness of programs to change people’s knowledge, attitudes, health or welfare;
- You are a researcher and a survey is used to assist you.”

So readership surveys that help determine what your readers are reading or would like to read fall into Fink and Kosecoff’s reason No. 2 for conducting a survey. Marketing surveys that test the effectiveness of advertising or help your advertising staff market your student media to potential advertisers also are among reasons to do survey research.

Now that you know you need to do survey research, how to do it? If you’ve never done either of these types of surveys, or if you’d like to get some tips on how to do survey research, read on:

**John Milliken, general manager, The Lantern, The Ohio State University:**

“(To get professors to use the student media as a class project) you just have to talk to professors and lecturers and talk it up. Ask. I don’t know of any other way to do it without asking. It seems to be very popular, at least here on this campus, direct application of knowledge into a practical, day-to-day business application.”

**Lloyd Goodman, director of student publications at the University of Texas at Arlington:**

“There are people here on campus doing really nifty surveys using things like Survey Monkey (surveymonkey.com). For me, going into this originally, I guess eight years ago was the first time we did the first one. The hardest part the first time around was drafting the questions and knowing what information was wanted and how to get that information. Now that we’ve paid a company to do that twice, this year we just updated the survey, dropped some things, added some things. If we had to do it ourselves, I would probably be depending on something like Survey Monkey because there just seems to be a lot of tools out there.”

**Brad Arendt, director of student media at Boise State University:**

“When we first approached the university with doing an online survey, we only did one survey where they called by phone, and that was really expensive and it took a lot of hoops for us to get through. For the online, the university was telling us you’re not going to get any response, and it’s going to be slow. Don’t expect a lot of stuff. What we had always considered our ace in the hole is that we had things to give away. So we would do advertising trades to give away \$50 at the bookstore, or a semester’s worth of books was one of the prizes that we had, and so these were things available for people that completed the survey.

When our online survey was completed, the university was surprised by the readership, or by the completion percentage, because it was more than double - it was almost triple what any department had had with an online survey at that point. We also did a lot more as far as marketing the survey. We also put ads in the paper, follow-up e-mails; we put up posters around campus, sidewalk chalk and we had the prizes. You can get some valuable information.”

**David Freeman, director of student publications at Appalachian State University:**

“It’s kind of like reporting — 95 percent of the work comes before you ever go ask the first question. If you’re not asking the right questions to the people that you want to reach, then the survey’s kind of useless. So the most important thing that I would recommend is just working as hard as you can so that the list of questions is what you want. It’s getting at the information that you want to get that will be different for everybody, so there’s no generic marketing tool out there for everybody. You have to figure out how to make it your own.”

**Michael McCann, student advertising manager, The Sunflower, Wichita State University**

“Just write down a list—what it is specifically you’d want to know. Narrow that down to like 20 questions. What do want to know; who has that information, and how are you going to get it? Those are the three key things you want to realize. Who has that information? The people who read your newspaper. How am I going to get that information from them? My best suggestion would be e-mails and listservs.”

## Keep These Reminders in Your Hip Pocket

When you feel overwhelmed, get some professional help. Aside from paying a third-party vendor to conduct research, there are several departments on every campus that have faculty members who understand survey research. Try these departments for help: communications, marketing, statistics, psychology and math.

### **Answer the three most important questions to any research project.**

What do you want to know? Who has that information?  
How can I get it?

### **Pre-test your questionnaire.**

The best way to insure a good survey response is by getting a small group of people to test drive your questionnaire. It's easier to make adjustments than to get all of your data back and realize that no one understood question No. 3.

### **Offer incentives for completing your questionnaire.**

Answer the question 'What will I get out of taking this survey?' with something valuable. People are more likely to complete a survey if they get something in return.

### **Market your survey.**

Don't forget to let everyone know you're doing a readership/marketing survey. Put advertisements in the newspaper, online or in whatever medium you have access to. Send out fliers on campus. Send out campuswide e-mails. Whatever you can do to attract attention.

### **Seek professional help.**

Go back to the professionals after you collect your data. Unless you're confident in your ability to enter data in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences or Statistical Analysis Software, you might want to seek the help of statistics folks on campus, or at least hire a statistician to help you enter data and perform correlations. One or both of these should be available from your college, as both programs are used by faculty members for survey research. Check with your IT department to see if a site license may be available.

### **GO IT ALONE?**

If you want to tackle a survey on your own, you can find information about conducting surveys in most elementary statistics textbooks.

A good how-to guide is Arlene Fink and Jacqueline Koseoff's "How to Conduct Surveys: A Step-by-Step Guide."

For information on creating good interview and survey questions, check out these websites:

- [owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/559/06/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/559/06/)
- [www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1480/index.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1480/index.html)
- [www.leeds.ac.uk/iss/documentation/top/top2.pdf](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/iss/documentation/top/top2.pdf)

For information on determining sample sizes, check out these websites:

- [www.statisticallysignificantconsulting.com/Sample-Size-Help.htm](http://www.statisticallysignificantconsulting.com/Sample-Size-Help.htm)
- [www.stat.uiowa.edu/techrep/tr303.pdf](http://www.stat.uiowa.edu/techrep/tr303.pdf)
- [greatbrook.com/survey\\_sample\\_selection.htm](http://greatbrook.com/survey_sample_selection.htm)
- or find a sample size calculator at [www.wimmerdominick.com](http://www.wimmerdominick.com).

You can also find .pdf documents and how-to videos at SurveyMonkey.com or SurveyShare.com.

While SurveyMonkey offers free accounts, you will need to purchase a professional subscription to enable you to get the number of responses you will need to conduct a readership or marketing survey. You can purchase a subscription on a month-to-month basis, quarterly or yearly. A one-year subscription offers unlimited responses for \$200, which should give you plenty of time to conduct a readership and marketing survey.



### **DR. KAY L. COLLEY**

serves as faculty liaison and student media director at Texas Wesleyan University, where she is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication and teaches journalism and public relations courses. Her professional background includes stints in public relations, magazines, daily newspapers and weekly newspapers. She has advised the student newspapers at the University of North Texas and Blinn College.

**QUESTIONS ON QUALITY:**

These questions were done in a Likert-scale or semantic differential style: “What would you like to see more coverage of in *The Sunflower*?”

Readers were give the options and asked to mark their preferences: Campus news, opinions, editorials, entertainment, Greek life, features, national news, entertainment, sports, comics and puzzles, financial tips, horoscopes, weather, local news, human interest pieces, employment opportunities, student issues, campus events, family-oriented news/articles and world news.

**SAMPLE QUESTIONS**

The following are some of the questions *The Sunflower* asked in its readership survey. Says McMann, “Looking at the some of the key areas (writing quality, layout/design, availability, pho-

tography and story topic selection) and what certain groups of readers rated the quality as, gives us a better idea of what *The Sunflower* might need improvement on and what they are doing an excellent job at. This also will help with what groups *The Sunflower* might need to focus on more to gain more readers.”

**Using coupons**

When asked the question (Q38) “Do you frequently use the coupons found in *The Sunflower*,” 689 responded and almost 29 percent stated they do frequently use coupons in *The Sunflower*. However when asked the question (Q39) “I would like to see more coupons in *The Sunflower*,” 617 responded. Nearly ¾ of them, or 72.4 percent, said they would like to see more coupons in the paper.

**The overall quality level of *The Sunflower* has affected my interest in reading the newspaper:**

Very Positively                      1              2              3              4              5              6              7              Very Negatively

**As a *Sunflower* reader, we would like you to rate the newspaper regarding the following areas. Please mark the number on the scale that reflects your opinion regarding the Sunflower.**

	Excellent	1	2	3	4	5	Poor
Q19. Writing quality		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q20. Layout/Design		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q21. Photography		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q22. Story topic selection		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q23. Accuracy of information		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q24. Objectivity		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q25. Availability of the paper		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q26. Usefulness to you		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q27. Headline articles		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q28. Opinion columns		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q29. Crossword/Sudoku		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q30. Comics		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q31. Campus events coverage		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	
Q32. Sports news coverage		<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	

Please mark the number on the scale below each statement that best reflects your level of agreement with the statement. We are interested in your candid opinion.

**The articles I read in *The Sunflower* are informative and worth my time.**

Strongly Agree    1              2              3              4              5              6              7              Strongly Disagree