Understanding Your Audience By Monitoring And Response Cultivation

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An Affordable and Effective Strategy

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It's strange that media organizations, whose business is communication, often have so little knowledge of their audiences. Sometimes it springs from an arrogant "We know best" attitude, but for very small organizations, it's often because they can't afford to do regular surveys.

After considering this problem for years, we eventually came up with a new type of solution. It's not quite research, not quite monitoring in the usual sense, though similar. We call it "audience response cultivation".

Suppose you're running a radio station. How do you know how many listeners you have? How do you know what their tastes and opinions are? How do you know what sorts of programming they prefer?

If you never do audience research, you probably have some hazy idea of what your listeners are like, based on those who you happen to meet. But people who know the station staff are usually far from typical, and (if there are several radio stations serving the area) they're likely to be much more frequent users of your station than those who you don't meet.

What you need is some systematic way of finding out more about your listeners. The best way is to commission high-quality research. But what if you can't afford that?

This is where response cultivation can be used. The principle is simple: basic data collection, if done systematically, can be more useful than elaborate research done very occasionally.

Data is arriving constantly. If it can be filtered, organized, and viewed appropriately, spontaneous data can be a reasonable substitute for a survey.

Response cultivation in a nutshell
Response cultivation has three main activities:
(1) Encouraging audience contact, in a wide variety of ways;
(2) Keeping records of that contact;
(3) Regularly reviewing the records, so that you can work out the relationship between changes in your programming and changes in your response patterns.

Encouraging audience contact
The following examples are specially directed at radio stations, because it is for these that the problem of audience contact is most acute. Radio stations often operate with very small budgets, and in the normal course of events receive very little listener feedback. And because so little feedback is received, it's almost inevitable that the listeners who do contact the station will not be typical of all listeners.
To create a large enough flow of inquiries that the inquirers can be regarded (almost) as typical listeners, audience response techniques are used.

The main purpose of encouraging listener contact (from the researcher's point of view, at least) is to create a steady flow of listeners. But there are usually other benefits too, to offset the increased time spent dealing with listeners. Other things being equal (as demonstrated below) more contacts generally lead to more listeners.

The usual sources of feedback for stations which don't do surveys are:
â€¢Spontaneous letters from listeners
â€¢Spontaneous phone calls from listeners
â€¢Station staff talking about programs with friends and relatives

None of these sources is a good indicator of what the bulk of listeners are thinking. People who spontaneously contact a station often do so because they are upset about something, or want a favour. And the friends and relatives of station staff (though staff often refuse to believe this) are usually not a cross-section of society.

The solution to the problem of unrepresentative feedback is to encourage more feedback. Give listeners reasons to

contact the station, apart from making a complaint. Some steps you can take here are:
â€¢Frequently giving the address or phone number on air.
â€¢Having an easily remembered address or phone number.
â€¢Adding the address and phone number to all publicity which gives the broadcast frequency.
â€¢Holding competitions designed to attract a lot of entrants.
â€¢Having subscribers to the station - not only to raise money (as many stations do) but also to get information about listener preferences.
â€¢Making the station easy to visit
â€¢Having a web site that welcomes feedback.

The most effective ways of increasing audience contact are those which are done in the course of programming. For radio stations, two of the most common, and most effective are musical request sessions, and talkback (phone-in) programs. Both types of program can be extremely popular, attracting much larger audiences than other programs.

The principle of response cultivation is to make the most of imperfect information, by encouraging its flow from a wide variety of sources. In research terms, this is known as triangulation.

This is an analogy taken from land surveying. Think of it, in this context, as gathering information in three different ways, somehow plotting the three results on a graph. If you draw a triangle connecting the three, the truth lies somewhere inside that triangle. Of course, you're not limited to three types of approach: the more, the better.

How many responses do you need?
You don't need to collect a vast volume of data. But you do need to ensure that you use a multiplicity of sources. If you have less than about 20 contacts from any one source, there's a fairly high risk that atypical responses may unbalance the results. If you decide to summarize responses every month, and you have less than 20 per month, you're likely to find large apparent variations from one month to the next. If the programs haven't substantially changed, most of these variations are likely to be random noise, or sampling error. If you can manage to get a minimum of say 100 responses a month, you'll find that many of these unexplained variations will disappear.

Advantages and disadvantages of response cultivation
The main disadvantage of response cultivation is that it takes up time. Stations that encourage audience contact tend to have lots of visitors, and phones which ring all the time. So encouraging audience response can use up time that would otherwise be spent making programs. Obviously a balance must be struck - and the way to do it is to keep track of just how much staff time is spent on audience contact, how much purely on program making, and how much on both.

Some media outlets are worried about having their audience contact them. 'But we're understaffed," they say. "We don't have time to deal with our audience."

Our experience is that you don't have time not to. An organization that ignores its audience will usually - very gradually - lose it.

The main advantage of encouraging audience response is that it tends to increase the audience.

An interesting example is the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. It has about 50 local radio stations, all over Australia, all broadcasting much the same program. But the audiences in each region vary tremendously in size. Trying to find out the reasons for these variations, I used the statistical technique of multiple regression analysis. After controlling for factors such as population size and number of radio stations available in the area, the major remaining factor seemed to be a station's closeness to its community, and the level of contact between the local station and the local people. So, when other things were equal: the more contact a station had with listeners, the larger was its audience share.

Thus encouraging audience response has its rewards, in the form of larger audiences. To put it another way: when existing listeners are better known, new listeners turn up. This seems to happen even when there is no formal program for using the results of audience response

If you would like to know more about audience monitoring and response cultivation please visit our website, www.audiencedialogue.net.

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