

## Designing a Stakeholder Survey

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### Why do a Stakeholder Survey?

When faith-based schools do [strategic planning](#), it is important to gather data on the perceptions of their constituents. Their perceptions are important because these are the people the school is serving, either directly or indirectly. The school's publics can bring to light issues which those working at the school may be too close to see. And the perceptions themselves, if pervasive, can be opportunities and threats which the school needs to respond to in order to accomplish its mission.

Designing, administering and analyzing surveys can be a highly technical undertaking and some organizations invest much time and money in this kind of research. Faith-based schools are usually not in a position to invest in consumer research as large companies like Coca-Cola or Microsoft do, but by observing a few design principles they can use surveys to gather important and useful data.

### The survey process

This document is a tool to assist faith-based schools in preparing simple surveys that can provide reliable information about constituent perceptions. As a whole, the process involves several steps:

1. **Determine what it is you want to know.** It is helpful to identify the key pillars that support the school's mission, then ask what you need to know about constituents' perceptions to strengthen those pillars. It is also helpful to conduct Focus Groups, or use more open-ended methods like a SWOT questionnaire with a smaller group prior to designing the survey. This will surface perceptions that can be tested with a larger audience to see how pervasive they are.
2. **Decide whom you want to include as potential respondents to the survey.** This could include: parents, alumni, students, employees, benefactors, board and committee members, potential future parents, neighbors or the public at large. Questions must be worded in such a way as to make sense to these different constituent groups. Because this is an opportunity for stakeholders to participate in the planning process, it is generally best to include as many people as possible.
3. **Decide on a method of distribution and collection.** Doing the survey on-line, using a service like Survey Monkey or Google Forms, is generally easier for respondents and improves response rates. It is also easier and quicker to get results compiled. If paper is used, it is more expensive and staff or volunteers must be arranged for the tedious process of compiling results. Phone canvassing is generally not cost-effective for the faith-based school but may be the best way of reaching a sample of the general public or prospective parents. The method of distribution will also impact the way questions can be asked. For instance, some

survey programs allow you to skip the respondent to another question when a question is answered a certain way. Some allow comments embedded in a multiple choice question. Some allow for cross-tabulation of questions and others do not.

4. **Anticipate how you will use the results.** Look again at what you want to know, considering all areas of the school, and identify the data that would be most useful to you. When thinking about the information you want, ask what you would do with the information. It's inefficient and sometimes causes credibility issues to be asking questions you don't intend to do anything about. For instance, if you ask about your curriculum and receive a wide response that people think it's terrible, would you be willing to take steps to improve it? Would you at least be willing to learn more about why people responded this way? If you did learn more, are you open to it leading to change? If your response would be to just dismiss their opinion as ill-informed, then don't bother asking. Too many times schools get back information from surveys and find they really aren't interested in the results after all, or don't know what to do with them. Try to think this through beforehand as much as possible.
5. **Craft questions that will get you the information you want.** You have to be strategic. If you ask too many questions, people won't take the time to participate. If you phrase questions that ask more than one thing, you get unclear results. e.g. If you ask them to respond to the statement "I would you like to see the school increase its emphasis on humanities and math" and people disagree, you don't know whether they are disagreeing about humanities, or math, or both. That's why you have to be clear about what information you really need.
6. **Test the survey.** Take it yourself. This will likely make you see interpretations of questions you hadn't intended. Ask others who have not been involved with developing the survey to take it and give you feedback on the clarity of questions, completeness of choices and opportunity to express their thoughts.
7. **Administer the survey and compile the results.** Do this in the most efficient manner possible so that you can...
8. **Analyze the results and report them** to the decision-makers who need the information, as quickly as possible. Also report results, at least in a general way, to the constituencies you asked to participate.

### Four helpful principles in designing a survey:

1. Start by identifying what information you want to have and why.
2. Don't ask a question if the response, whatever it be, is not going to influence your course of action.
3. Start with the information you want and the decisions you anticipate having to make and choose or formulate your questions around these.
4. The longer and more complicated the questionnaire, the fewer people who will participate. Try to limit it to fewer than 30 questions.