

Gather constituent input

Getting qualitative input from parents and constituents

“Quantitative and qualitative research processes are not by nature antagonistic, although their advocates may be.”

Evert Gummesson

"Qualitative research in marketing:
Road-map for a wilderness of complexity and unpredictability"
European Journal of Marketing

Surveys of parents, prior parents, high school students and constituents give you invaluable data on the overall satisfaction of the people who pay your salaries through their referrals, tuition and contributions. You have heard me stress this many times.

But surveys can miss nuances that are unique to your school. So how else can you gather useful information about how your school is perceived -- what you can brag about and what you can improve.

Alternating qualitative research with quantitative research (surveys) annually is a proven way to benefit from the advantages of both approaches. Here are a couple qualitative options for information gathering.

Focus groups

One school in our conference alternated a parent focus group with an online survey. Here's what they learned.

- Don't cherry pick. Invite all parents so everyone has an equal opportunity to share their opinion.
- Choose a moderator carefully. The discussion leader needs to be trusted by the parents so they will be honest in their feedback. But the leader also needs to know how to keep the tone of the meeting constructive, so this doesn't turn into simply a discouraging gripe session.
- Stay away. In this approach you and the teachers need to trust the moderator and listen to his/her report. You will get more valid and useful information if you aren't there. Parents are extraordinarily concerned that their comments will affect their child's treatment by staff at the school.

Input gathering dinner

Two other schools have used a dinner event for gathering input. Here is a basic approach.

- Invite parents and connected constituents to a thank you dinner. (Yes, this means you need to find someone other than a parent to create the meal.)
- Based on RSVPs assign couples to tables strategically. Mix highly supportive families with less happy ones.
- Place a written list of four to five questions at each table. These should be clustered by topic, address issues that are areas of discussion at your school (e.g. physical and emotional safety at school, school climate, connection to the community, etc.) and ask for specific suggestions.
- Have large sheets of paper posted on the walls around the room with the topics noted. Ask each table to write their suggestions on these sheets.
- Provide a time for all guests to read these suggestions and a mechanism for agreeing or adding to them.

Share what you learned

In either case, be sure to share with your community, parents and constituents through your churches, what you have learned.

You will not get the increased loyalty benefits of this exercise if you don't connect the dots for people:

- We want to always be improving.
- Therefore we ask for your opinion and input.
- We listened through _____ event.
- We hear you say _____.
- We plan to address _____ this year (or next year).
- Here is our plan (or we will share our plan next fall after we have the summer to research and organize it).

Delegating:

You need to lead the team in determining what information to ask about. You can delegate organizing either event.

Credits:

Thank you Justine Leoni, Rick Nelson and Heidi Jorgenson for sharing your experiences, even if you shared them long ago.

Binder tab: March

School size: All

Marketing process step:

- 1) Who are we?
- 2) What do families want?
- 3) What needs to change?
- 4) How do we tell our community?
- 5) How do we track results?