



Using Mirror Surveys to Increase Board Awareness and Staff Effectiveness

by

Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D.

How often have you heard a Board member decry member surveys? “We don’t need to waste our time and money on another member survey, we know what our members want. We hear from them all the time.” Sometimes the most vocal members represent the majority of members, but often times they do not.

Mirror surveys can be administered to Board members to show them where they are in synch with the membership and where they are not.

Mirror surveys can also be administered to the staff to show them how well they understand the quality and value of the services they provide to members. It is well documented in the service quality literature that service providers who understand their customers/members are much more effective in delivering high quality service.

A mirror survey is administered to Board members and staff, and is similar to a member survey. In both surveys, participants are asked to provide overall ratings for the products, services and experiences the association provides its members (e.g. member benefits, publications, continuing education, advocacy, conferences, website, member services, etc). But, while members are asked to rate each of these offerings in the member survey, the mirror survey asks Board members and staff to rate these same offerings in the way they think members will rate them.

The mirror survey is administered at the same time as a member survey and requires that the Board and staff put themselves in the shoes of the membership. It is easy for the Board or the staff to see the results of a completed member survey and say “I knew that”, but it is quite different for them to accurately predict in advance what members will say.

When the results of the member survey and the mirror survey are compared to each other, a simple gap analysis will show where there are significant differences between the two ratings. We recommend that ratings be summarized and compared as top 2 ratings, rather than as average ratings.

There are several benefits associated with mirror surveys. First, it forces the Board and staff to critically assess the offerings of the association from the perspective of the

membership. In our experience, the first time a mirror survey is conducted, the Board and staff will typically overestimate the ratings given to the association's products and services, such as member benefits, continuing education, website, publications, advocacy, etc. That is, they believe the association's offerings are better than what members are saying. It can sometimes be a wake up call when you realize that members don't think as highly of what you offer as you think they do.

On the flip side, the Board and staff will usually underestimate the ratings given to the performance of the Board and staff. We believe the reason that the Board and staff underestimate their impact on members is because of the number of problem calls and complaints that they hear from members. Most of what they hear first hand can be disproportionately negative. Once they realize that they are more appreciated than they thought, the result is generally a boost in morale.

Perhaps the most important reason for conducting mirror surveys is that over time, members' ratings of association-provided products and services will usually increase. We believe this gradual increase in ratings is related to the staff consciously thinking about how their interactions with members impact members' perceptions of their service, and then providing a higher level of service.

Board members and staff are usually anxious to see the results of their mirror survey and how well they predicted members' ratings. These surveys can be fun and challenging, while helping to increase the Board's awareness of members' opinions and the staff's effectiveness in dealing with members.

About the Author

Larry J. Seibert, Ph.D. is the President/CEO of Association Metrics, a research and consulting firm that specializes in voice-of-the-member association research for strategic planning. He can be reached at larry@associationmetrics.com or by phone at 317-840-2303.

