

BEST PRACTICES

Best Practices #037: Surveying Member Interests Heading: Meetings and Demonstrations



Making sure that the interests and needs of members are addressed adequately by your club should be a constant concern of officers. When club meetings begin to get a little stale – or when the members show signs of restlessness or boredom – it’s time to think about ways to poll the club to elicit what members want. This technique can also be useful to a club just getting started.

Like woodturning itself, surveying member interests is as much an art as a science. It requires careful planning and execution to garner a broad response and identify precisely what will fulfill the needs of members. Here are some tips to make sure that this exercise yields useful data and guidance that can be put into action in designing club programs and demonstrations.

Preliminary Steps

While an opinion survey can yield positive results that can help your chapter achieve its goals, the board should first take a thoughtful look at where the chapter is and where it wants to go – and ask some preliminary questions. Have the chapter and its board created a strategic plan? If so, is that plan meeting the expressed needs of the members? Are there adequate enticements to build the membership? Is there a balance between the novice and experienced turners relative to participation, programs, membership, and general involvement? Are veteran members being retained while new members are joining?

Why a Survey?

If the answers to those questions suggest a need for a deeper probing of member interests, a club survey can enlighten the board and contribute meaningfully to a chapter’s well-being by identifying gaps in information that need to be bridged.

A good survey will identify:

- The nature and content of programs members want
- Meeting location and time preferences, and other logistic issues (refreshments, audio-visuals, etc.)
- Members who are willing to mentor, and members desiring a mentor
- Self-reported skill levels of members
- Level of interest in technical aspects of turning
- A summary of lathes and other wood working tools owned by members
- Specific skill sets of members

Moreover, developing a customized survey can target individuals with varying skills, knowledge, and abilities. And, it will give voice to those members who are more reserved, uncertain, or even uncomfortable about asking questions or making suggestions. Some individuals are willing to express themselves privately, anonymously, or in writing as opposed to raising an issue or question publicly.

Survey Types

For most purposes, there are two main survey types – open- or close-ended – and each has its own advantages.

Open-ended questions allow members to provide their own answers. This gives them the opportunity to express their own thoughts, but also requires more time and effort to categorize and organize responses. Open-ended questions tend to produce varieties of answers and are more difficult to analyze. So if you have a large chapter, data summation could become quite cumbersome.

Close-ended questions list several possible choices, and members select either one or multiple answers. These questions produce more uniform answers than open-ended formats, but also depend upon your knowing and including all relevant answers in the list. Possible responses to close-ended questions must be exhaustive and also mutually exclusive in providing for the selection of a single response.

Here are examples of a question that is structured in both styles:

1. Open-ended

What types of programs would you like the club to sponsor in the coming year?

2. Close-ended with ordered responses

How important to you are each of the following possible meeting programs? (Circle one for each item.)

None Little Some Much

A. Wood preparation 1 2 3 4

B. Tool sharpening 1 2 3 4

C. Finishing 1 2 3 4

D. Exhibiting turnings 1 2 3 4

3. Close-ended with unordered response choices

Which of these four topics would you most like to see as a program for next year? (Circle number of your answer.)

A. Wood preparation

B. Tool sharpening

C. Finishing

D. Exhibiting turnings

4. Partially close-ended

What topic do you want most for a program next year? (Circle number of your answer.)

A. Wood preparation

B. Tool sharpening

C. Finishing

D. Exhibiting turnings

E. Other (please specify) _____

To be sure, close-ended questions are easier to tally and analyze. On the other hand, the partially close-ended style gives the opportunity for members to add items of interest, or surface items that may not have been recognized by those who created the survey.

Wording the Questionnaire

To obtain the intended information, and to be understood by all respondents, are challenging tasks.

When composing questions, three considerations should be kept in mind:

- 1) the particular people for whom the questionnaire is being designed;
- 2) the particular purpose of the questionnaire; and
- 3) how questions will be placed in relation to each other in the questionnaire.

Here are some suggestions:

- Use simple wording. Adapt wording to the vocabulary and reading skills of your participants but do not talk down to them. Are any words confusing or too technical? Do any words have double meanings?
- Avoid the use of abbreviations, jargon, or foreign phrases. We use a lot of jargon in the wood turning community. Will participants understand terms such as “AAW,” “riding the bevel,” “faceplate,” or “hollow form”?
- Be specific. A question about turner experience should specify what levels or lengths of time are considered “experienced.” Likewise, in the question “Did chapter programs meet your needs last year?” it is important to be specific about exactly which time frame is meant.
- Use clear wording. Words such as “regularly” and “occasionally” mean different things to different people. Some vague terms include: majority (more than half of what?); often (daily / twice weekly / weekly?); government (local / state / federal?); older people (how old?).
- Include all necessary information. In some cases, participants may not know enough to adequately answer a question. For example, “Do you agree or disagree with the chapter’s proposed community service?” Some participants may not know about the proposal, so a short summary sentence should be provided.
- Avoid questions that may be too precise. People’s lives are usually not so orderly that they can recall exactly how many times they ate out last year or how many chapter meetings they attended in 2005. To help participants formulate an answer, a response category could include a range to select from, for example, 0-3, 4-8, 8-12.
- Phrase personal questions in non-threatening ways. If there is a purpose to ask personal questions in the chapter’s survey, be sure that they are phrased in non-offensive ways and include broad categories such as age range or income-level range rather than asking for specific information.
- Avoid questions that are too demanding or time consuming. Examples: “Please rank the following 15 items in order of their importance to you;” or, “In 25 words or less, what is your philosophy of wood turning?”
- Use mutually exclusive categories. Make sure that only one answer is possible. In the example: “How did you hear about this wood turning demonstration?” the response categories are: “from the chapter website, from a friend, from the newspaper, at work, at a chapter meeting.” The participant may have heard about the chapter demonstration from a

friend at work, for example, so that more than one answer is possible.

- Avoid making assumptions. Questions such as “What kind of a lathe do you have?” or “Do you use a fixture for tool sharpening?” make assumptions about the participants, i.e., that they have a lathe or specific jigs. A better set of questions would start with the first question establishing the situation, followed by the question of interest. For example: “Do you have a lathe?” “What kind of lathe do you have?”
- Avoid bias in questions. Biased questions influence people to respond in a way that does not accurately reflect their positions. A question can be biased in several ways: (1) when it implies that the participant should be engaged in a particular behavior; (2) when the response categories are unequal or loaded in one direction; (3) when words with strong positive or negative emotional appeal are used, such as “freedom,” “equality,” “boss,” “bureaucratic,” etc.

Here are some examples of biased questions:

1. More turners are using Acme Brothers finish than any other variety. Do you use Acme Brothers?

A. No

B. Yes

This question implies the participant should use Acme Brothers finish.

2. How would you rate the programs for last year?

A. Satisfactory

B. Good

C. Excellent

The answers provide no negative options, which will skew the results.

3. Do you agree that chapter dues should be increased?

A. No

B. Yes

This is a leading question. A better question would be:

Do you agree or disagree that the chapter dues should be increased? (Circle one)

1. Strongly disagree

2. Disagree

3. Agree

4. Strongly agree

- Avoid double-barreled questions. “Did the green wood turning demonstration help you with preserving green wood and improve your turning skills?” It is better to ask about “preservation” and “turning skills” separately.
- Use complete sentences. Trying to keep the questions too short and concise may result in questions that are cryptic and easily misunderstood.
- Plan ahead. Identify each question and each response item with a number or letter for easy tabulation.

Putting the Survey Together

1. Begin with a short introduction that explains the questionnaire’s purpose, identifies its source, makes clear how the information obtained will be used, and assures participants of confidentiality.
2. The first questions should be easy, avoiding controversial topics. Write interesting questions that are clearly related to the questionnaire’s purpose. Don’t use open-ended or long questions with lengthy answer choices in the beginning of the survey.
3. Address important topics early rather than late in the survey.
4. Arrange questions so that they flow naturally. Keep inquiries on one subject grouped together. Start with general questions and then move to those that are specific.
5. Try to use the same type of question and response throughout a series of questions on a particular topic. For example do not needlessly break a participant’s concentration by using a multiple choice format followed by a yes / no question, followed by an open-ended question.
6. Place demographic questions (age, gender, experience level, etc.) at the end of the survey.
7. Print it in an easy-to-read typeface.

8. Numbered responses should mean the same thing throughout the survey.

Example:

If you begin with:

1 No

2 Yes

do not switch to:

1 Yes

2 No

1. Avoid making participants turn a page in the middle of a question or between question and answer.

2. Be sure that the question is distinguishable from the instructions and the answers. You could put the instructions in boldface or italics, or upper letters for questions and lower case for answers.

3. Questions and answers are easiest to read if they flow vertically. By placing answer choices under questions (rather than side by side), the participant moves easily down the page. If you feel this format results in too much wasted space, you may wish to reorganize your questions.

Example:

1 Excellent

2 Good

3 Fair

4 Poor

Rather than: __Excellent __ Good __Fair __Poor

1. Give directions about how to answer. Include directions in parentheses immediately following the questions. It is better to repeat directions too often than not enough. Here are some examples of specific instructions you might use: Circle the number of your choice;

circle only one; check all that apply; please fill in the blank enter whole numbers; please do not use decimals or fractions; etc.

2. Plan how you are going to tabulate the results for analysis – before you send out the survey.

3. Pre-code as many items and response categories as possible to help tabulate and analyze data more quickly. Again, identifying each question and each response item with a number or letter for easy tabulation makes it much easier to enter directly from the survey. Try to position the response blanks in the same place on the page to make tabulation easier.

4. Use transitional statements to enhance continuity. Transitional statements serve three functions: 1) to signal that a new topic is about to begin; 2) to start new pages; and 3) to break up the monotony of a long series of questions.

Examples:

Next, we would like to ask you several questions about your chapter.

Another important purpose of this survey is to learn what wood turning skills you would like to acquire.

Finally, we would like to ask a few questions about you to help us interpret the results. Make sure the participant is referring to the same chapter activities mentioned in the questionnaire and defining them similarly. A “validation item” at the beginning of the questionnaire identifies the program and sets the stage for the questions to follow. It is a brief summary of the chapter’s activities and the people involved.

Example:

The Mid Columbia AAW chapter included a range of program topics last year focusing on a variety of skill levels and included guest demonstrators. These chapter meetings included all-day sessions, demonstrations, and classes. Members attended from a wide-spread geographic area including southeastern Washington and northern Oregon.

Survey Distribution

It is relatively well-known that typically survey responses are not great, so how will you make your chapter’s efforts pay off?

Questionnaires and surveys can be disseminated to members in a variety of ways – through the regular postal mail service, electronically through e-mail, or by posting on the chapter’s website or listserv. However, the best way is to do it at a regular meeting.

Most chapter meetings have a structure of sorts, such as business meeting, announcements, and show-and-tell sessions, followed by the program for the month. When chapter members arrive, a hardcopy of the survey can be handed to them along with a pen or

pencil. When the formal meeting begins, the purpose and intent of the survey can be explained. Time can be set aside to allow members to fill out the survey. Encouraging participation by setting aside time to complete the survey will very likely increase the numbers who take part and will generate the most complete representation.

If the chapter's secretary takes a roll, or if members sign-in, then absentees can be sent a mailed or electronic copy of the survey and given a specific time within which to complete and return it.

An additional incentive for survey completion may be some sort of tangible incentive. Give a free ticket for the monthly raffle, a desired piece of wood, a bowl or a pen blank, or a gift certificate. All who participate can be entered into a lottery and a name can be drawn for the prize.

What Did We Learn: Some Practical Examples

In our local chapters, we have successfully implemented member surveys on more than one occasion. One survey / questionnaire asked members about their interests in turning, what they wanted for programs, meeting locations, their ideas (open-ended), and their willingness to serve on the board or on committees.

We had a very strong response and were quite pleased. That particular survey guided our planning over a sustained time period. It helped the board during transitions, it sustained our growth, it helped plan programs, and it put a solid thumb on the chapter pulse.

Another survey was quite simple. It simply asked about the make and model of each lathe the members have. This has been useful especially when a member wanted to try a lathe type before purchase, if a member needed to know about accessories for their lathe, or if members wanted to be able to exchange, borrow, or sell parts to other members.

We also learned that many of our members may have been turning for years but still had novice interests and skills. This survey enabled us to change our direction for a while and focus on fundamentals. It got us working on organizing more hands-on events, and it helped identify some members wanting some hands-on assistance and other members who were able to assist in meeting those needs.

Useful References

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Dillman, D. A. (1978). *Mail and Telephone Surveys: The Total Design Method*. New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc.

Sawer, B. J. (1984). Evaluating for Accountability. Corvallis: Oregon State University Extension Service

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A Sample Questionnaire

For guidance in designing a survey, some chapters may find the following example of one club's questionnaire helpful:

Name _____ Date _____

Phone _____ Email _____

Please tell us a little about your woodturning experience. Your responses will be kept in strictest confidence and will be tabulated for use in planning club activities.

1. Are you:

- A. Still working or
- B. Retired?

2. How long have you been turning?

- A. Fewer than 2 years
- B. 2 - 4 years
- C. 5 - 8 years
- D. 10+ years

3. If you have a lathe, what kind is it?

4. On average, how much time do you estimate you spend on turning per month?

- A. Fewer than 6 hours
- B. 6 to 10 hours
- C. 11 to 30 hours
- D. 30 or more hours

5. Please check below all your current woodturning challenges or interests:

- Determining what lathe or turning accessories to buy
- Finding wood
- Choosing suitable wood
- Processing green and dry wood into turning blanks
- Basics of holding the wood on the lathe between centers and safe use of a scroll chuck, including when and how to use compression and expansion

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- Alternative methods of attaching wood to the lathe – such as faceplates, screw chucks, friction and jam chucks, donut chucks, use of glue blocks, or vacuum chucking
- Choosing the correct tools
- Sharpening my tools
- Beginning a cut
- Controlling my tool throughout the cut and making a really smooth cut
- Using a skew chisel
- Achieving a pleasing shape and elements of design
- Supporting the work for unusual or delicate cuts
- Preparing my work for a finish by eliminating torn surface, sanding marks, tool marks, flat or high spots
- Choosing and applying a suitable finish
- Embellishing my work with advanced finishing or techniques such as: burned rings, scorching, texturing, stippling, liming, painting, pyrography, inlay, or carving
- Displaying, pricing and marketing my work
- Making turning tools
- Refining my skills and exploring advanced techniques such as hollowing tools to do hollow forms

Please check below your specific project interests:

- Pens
- Bowls
- Lidded boxes
- Platters
- Eccentric or off-center turning
- Ornaments or finials
- Spheres or eggs
- Vases
- Hollow Forms
- Goblets
- Furniture or staircase rail spindles
- Segmented turning
- Other- Please list: _____

Other Activities

I am willing to spend time helping a less experienced turner with some aspect of turning.

I would be interested in working with a more experienced woodturner to learn some aspect of turning.

I am interested in participating in a half- or full-day group project or hands-on turning event outside of regular meetings.

6. List any other club activities or presentations you are interested in below:

Issued: September 22, 2009