

Query style guide

What is a query?

A “query” is an email that links to a survey form. The email seeks stories and insights, with relevant context. The form has a few structured and open-ended questions to elicit knowledge and experience from recipients.

Knowledge, not opinion

Create queries to gather knowledge and insight, not opinion. It’s the basis of Public Insight Journalism and what separates this from other media efforts to solicit audience response.

To do this, be thoughtful about the specific knowledge and insight you can expect to find, who might possess it and what sort of call to action and questions will draw it out. At the same time, remain open to new ideas that come from the survey.

The goals of a query

The key to crafting a strong query is clear thinking both about the goals for the query, and about the audience’s expectations upon seeing the query in their inbox.

What result do you want to achieve with this query? What’s the question the newsroom wants answered? What hunch do you want the Network to help flesh out? What dots need to be connected?

The first step is usually a conversation with a reporter, editor or producer. PIJ is a new tool, so it’s important to be clear about their needs, what we can accomplish, and what is or is not a good use of resources.

Determine either by yourself or with the reporter/producer/editor: are you looking for a few good sources or dozens of people to respond, so you can spot a trend?

Next: who’s your audience? Who are you hoping will respond?

Before you write anything, know the answers to these questions. Without them, you’ll end up writing something that lacks focus. Your readers won’t know what’s expected of them, and they won’t respond.

Walk through the grid on the right for the first couple of queries you create – it will help you get accustomed to this approach. (*Also available as a pull-out worksheet in section 6.*)

Peg: What's the time-based reason for doing this query?

Question: What is the core question of the query?

Goal (home run): If what a reporter says they want is 80% of the potential, what's 100%? Don't promise this, but keep it in mind and bake in a question that addresses it so you can reach high.

Network goal: In what areas will this query deepen or improve the PIN?

Target audience: What group of people are you going after?

Audience mindset: What's the frame of mind of the people you're going after?

Message: What are the phrases and words you'll use to get your key points across to the audience?

Uses: How can you imagine sources who respond being used in your programming?

Query questions: What are some questions you might ask in the query?

Outreach: What organizations, events, websites or blogs will you reach out to to find people who will want to respond?

The audience's expectations

Scenario 1: It's 7:50 p.m. Dinner's over and I'm about to watch my favorite show, but decide to check my email first. Hey, cool! MPR News wants my help covering the news. Cool. Let me read this. I like MPR a lot, and am flattered to be considered. As an avid listener, I find lots of things interesting. I don't think I'm an expert, but I know a fair bit about the questions they're asking.

Scenario 2: I'm checking my email at work and have way too much on my plate today. Emails from customers, coworkers, my kids—oh and one from MPR News. Is this spam? How did I get on their list? I didn't "subscribe" to anything. But, on second glance, this is actually kind of interesting ... and I do know something about it.

These are just two of many possible scenarios. The stories are different, but the upshot is the same: Free time is scarce. People get lots of email, and don't always realize that they asked for it in the first place. As a result, they're ruthless about what they do get, and will often delete or complain first and ask questions later.

It's a big challenge to get through to people via email. Best case scenario? 30% of the people you email will even open your message. Be concise and direct, but also compelling and interesting.

Soliciting knowledge, building relationships

Every query email should serve four purposes:

1. To get people to click on the link to the survey form
2. To solicit knowledge from people in our Network
3. To build a relationship with people in our Network
4. To inspire people in the Network to forward it to their friends

Writing the email

Your first and main task is to get people to click into the survey. To do that, you have to provide just enough information to help them understand what it is we're looking for, but not so much information that they stop reading and delete because we took too long to get to the point.

There's no hard and fast rule here. Sometimes you need a few sentences to state your case. Sometimes what we're looking for is so clear that no preface is needed. Make sure you've done your homework on the topic. You can use relevant reports, recent statistics and interesting side notes to add context to your question. If in doubt about the right approach, get right to the point.

Your email should...

- **Set the stage:** Why are we sending this to them, and why now? What's the purpose of this email?
- **Give them something to do, quickly:** Once you've set up the main question, provide the survey link. If it's obvious what you're looking for, the link can go right after the headline. In other cases, you'll have to do some work to make sure the call to action doesn't come too abruptly.
- **Establish tension:** Like good literature, good journalism explores tension: What two forces are in conflict? What's hanging in the balance? What might happen next? What's changing?
- **Give some context:** People want to know how things connect to one another. What's the larger backdrop for the query?

Structuring the Survey

Every email links to a survey, which consists of questions designed to elicit information for the story at hand, and gather other relevant info for follow-up or continuing coverage, or to target queries down the road.

The sequence of questions should be structured in such a way as to lead the respondent through a thought process similar to an interview; each question opens up onto the next. The path eventually leads to a broad question asking for what we *didn't* ask already.

The intention? By now, the source is inclined to share surprising information that tells us something we didn't know.

We try our best to guard against “blue sky syndrome”—a condition that afflicts people who are asked to share their story without guidance. People who have contracted this all-too-common malady will compose tragically long, rambling responses that are difficult to digest and challenging to act upon in the fast pace of a newsroom.

But there's a cure. If prompted with the right series of questions, any person can share interesting details about their own lives. Your surveys should have a mix of these types of questions:

6. **Structured (closed-ended) questions**
Structured questions are usually the first questions we ask. These questions have a predetermined set of answers that the respondent can choose from: yes/no, drop-down menus, check boxes, etc. Using these can help set the stage for more general questions and gives people an idea of where the questions are headed.
7. **Open-ended questions**
Open-ended questions are designed to give the respondent space to tell their story in their own words.

Who to send the query to

Whenever possible, target the query to people who you think are more than likely to have the sort of knowledge and insight you seek. Sometimes it's obvious: Pilots of Cirrus airplanes are likely to know about the performance of the Cirrus SR-20. People who make less than \$15,000 a year are likely to be taking part in a government-sponsored health care program.

But often, the target audience isn't as obvious. Sometimes you'll have to guess that someone with a specific characteristic will know more about a topic than someone else. Who might know about shopping online? You might direct the query to younger people in the Network, or search on the “interests” and “passions” fields in AIR to see who lists an interest in shopping, computers or the Internet. Discussion with the reporter/editor can help target who might best fit the bill.

For example, people who live in a certain ZIP code may be more likely to work at a particular factory that you're covering -- or know someone who does. And, people who are in their 40s are more likely to care about and have experience with issues in K-12 education – even if they haven't told us yet that they are parents of K-12 kids.

Are you voting in a small election that has big consequences?

With Congress in play and the race for the White House right around the corner, there won't be a shortage of coverage on the congressional mid-term elections. But we'd like to learn about local races that have big consequence.

Question 1: Tell us about a local race that will affect your life.

Question 2: Who are the candidates?

Question 3: What's at stake?

Question 4: Is there anything else we should know about this race?

(from a 2006 Weekend America query)

Tone & style

All the newsrooms and programs that use the PIN have a distinct identity. They each have a different way of looking at the world, and have informally or formally crafted a voice they use to address their audience. That voice should be reflected in the tone and style of your queries.

A query from a show that uses humor might prod its readers to ask for personal stories.

A query from a newsroom working on a fast-turnaround story might pose the question – and even the deadline – in the subject line.

The tone of a query should also be informed by the expertise of the group you're targeting. For example, the Network has many people with expertise in sustainability or entrepreneurship. A query targeted at the overlap between these two groups addressed both expertises at the top of this email:

Customer-friendly banking: myth or fact?

Banks are always offering creative incentives to get new customers: George Foreman grills, an instant \$25 in your new account, gardening kits, no ATM fees, etc.

But the love doesn't always last. Have you switched banks because the customer service didn't live up to the promises that got you through the door?

If so, [we want to connect with you](#).

(from a Marketplace Money query)

Do you see business opportunity in the summer sun?

2006 had the hottest January-June stretch since the US started keeping track in 1895. Forecasters predict more of the same from July through September.

Meanwhile, elevated AC use is stressing electrical grids, crops are wilting in drought conditions, and the heat puts elderly and disabled people even more at risk.

But to solar entrepreneurs, sun = power. Does the heat and sun help some businesses thrive? [Do you see a golden opportunity in the withering summer sun?](#)...

(from a Marketplace Sustainability Desk query)

Some rules to live by

Do:

- Edit your copy and links carefully
- Be consistent with how you title your queries for particular shows
- Be consistent with who you say your queries are from (publicinsight@mpr.org, etc.)
- Avoid subject lines with “spammy” words like money, grow, rich, etc.
- Be clear about reporters' deadlines
- Be clear about how responses will be used
- Thank people who respond within a reasonable timeframe

Don't:

- Send queries to groups of people that don't expect to be asked for their help with news
- Ask for opinion, unless you ask for relevant experience first
- Send queries to people who have been contacted in the last 30 days
- Forget to thank sources who respond
- Prejudice the response by revealing a bias or angle