

Tricks of the trade: Creating the query email

- **Keep it short and in tune.** You have mere seconds to grab and compel to click. Use them wisely. If the topic is serious, the tone of your message should be too. If it's light, keep it informal. If you are creating this query for a show, write in the style of the show.
- **Teach people to be sources.** You will often be soliciting knowledge from people unaccustomed to sharing it. We call them sources, but that's not what they call themselves. Treat them as if they've never worked with a reporter before—because that's often the case. Michael Skoler once said about this process, “tell us your experience, and we'll help you discover your expertise.”
- **Challenge them.** People (especially public media consumers) love to chew on tough issues, solve problems, fill in blanks. Give them some work to do. You'll be surprised with what they come up with, and they'll be flattered.
- **Give hints.** Give some hints to guide them to the sorts of responses you seek, but keep it open for surprises. Blank canvases scare people: Give them a frame and faintly outline the picture they're going to help fill in.
- **Don't straitjacket them.** If your email makes it sound like you're just looking for people to parrot insights you've already defined, people will see through it. You'll either get no response, or only what you're looking for. Don't try to get obvious vox. Ask for insight.
- **Make it interesting.** Most people in the Network (at first, at least) will be public media consumers. They consume our content because they're curious and it's interesting. Public insight communications should cater to their curiosity and pique their inquisitive brains.
- **Maintain the relationship.** Communications with the Network should feel friendly, if not transparent. Thank them. Refer to the help they've given in the past. After all, we're not strip-mining their knowledge—we're asking them to share it with us as part of a genuine exchange. Give your email address & phone number in the email, and your readers will feel respected and trusted. They'll also be more likely to trust you.
- **Don't alert the competition.** Enterprising journalists just might sign up for the Network as an easy way to keep ahead of your newsroom. Hard to avoid that. But if you have a really hot story, you can ensure that the bulk of the surprise comes in the response, not in the query, by sketching the outlines of the story—without revealing the angle.
- **Ask them to forward the email.** Do this at the end of your note. We want to shake their personal networks, so ask them to forward the email to people they think know about the topic.

Tricks of the trade: Creating the query survey

- **Require only the basics.** You have the option to require certain fields. Only require fields that **MUST** be answered. (Name, location, email, phone, etc.) Otherwise, you risk losing people who don't feel comfortable responding to other required questions.
- **Ask for info that will help you later on.** Personal facts that are relevant to the query at hand will help you search for people later on. Always keep future uses in mind, not just the immediate story.
- **Structure the survey with an eye to sorting.** Ask questions that will help you quickly understand the person's perspective or experience or expertise. This will help you sort responses quickly.
- **Try to start with the specific.** In general, go from the very particular to the very general. This will help lead the source through a thought process, with luck, bringing them to insight that has news value.
- **Keep it short.** Too many questions will lead to attrition: you could discourage the impatient-but-insightful type. This isn't a hard and fast rule, though. Long, specific queries can be successful in the right situation.
- **Structured, or open-ended?** Open-ended questions yield the most insightful responses. Often check-boxes or drop-down menus are helpful at the beginning of the survey, but if you want to be surprised, give people the space to surprise you.
- **Don't prejudice the response.** Make sure you phrase your questions so that people with various takes on the issue will feel comfortable responding. If you assume that people think like you, you may cut out those who think differently. Test out the survey on one of your more skeptical colleagues before launching it.
- **Make the tent big, but not too big.** Chances are you'll want to hear from a variety of people. The questions should make sense to every group, but shouldn't be so general as to encourage generic responses.
- **Focus on *change*.** We're looking for knowledge, not opinions. Knowledge often surfaces as a change in behavior. Questions about *decision-making*, *cost/benefit analyses*, *if-you-knew-then-what-you-do-now*, and *what changes did you make when X happened?* can yield insightful responses.
- **What else should we know about this issue?** This should always be the last question you ask.