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For years, researchers have conducted member surveys to determine how to improve their organizations in ways that had the greatest impact on member loyalty/satisfaction and member recruitment/retention. Often times this included asking members to rate each member benefit or association activity on how well the association was performing, as well as how important each benefit or activity was to the member.

Members were typically asked to rate performance and importance either on a 5 point scale, a 10 point scale, or maybe even a 100 point scale. By asking members to provide two ratings for each benefit or activity, responses could be plotted on a 2 X 2 matrix (importance vs. performance), a gap analysis could be conducted, or a ranking of average ratings could be produced. From these various analyses, managers could then prioritize the areas that needed improvement.

Even though this approach is easily understood, simple to administer, and appears logical, it does have a number of shortcomings.

Shortcoming #1 - Longer Surveys

The most obvious shortcoming of this type of analysis is that it necessarily produces longer surveys. For example, if the association wanted to understand how to improve its annual meeting, members would be given two rating questions for each attribute of the annual meeting (e.g. educational sessions, speakers, sponsors' exhibits, venue, food, social activities, etc.). If 10 attributes are being tested, respondents will be asked to provide 20 responses. Surveys that cover multiple aspects of the association (member benefits, website, publications, Member Services, continuing education, advocacy) can easily become quite lengthy.

Shortcoming #2 – Lack of Variation in Responses

A number of studies on research methodology have found that when individuals are asked to state importance, their responses tend to cluster at the two extremes (i.e. most items will be rated as either very important, or not important at all.) This puts the majority of the responses into only two buckets. Without gradations in importance, it becomes difficult for the analyst to provide a ranking of priorities when the differences in ratings are not statistically significant.

Shortcoming #3 – Lack of Differentiation

When asking importance questions, it is assumed that what respondents indicate as important, actually impact their decisions. This is not always the case. When the airline industry conducted a study to determine the criteria travelers use in deciding which airline to fly, the factors that emerged as the two most important, were “price” and “airline safety”. Further analysis revealed that the factors that actually drove their purchase decisions were “on time arrivals” and “wait time at the baggage claim”.

It became clear to the researchers, that even though price and airline safety were important, there was no discernable difference among airlines’ safety records and their prices were competitive. Because these factors were consistent among the airlines (no differentiation), they were not key drivers in the decision process. But instead, the key drivers of a decision are the criteria for which one alternative is superior to the other alternatives.

Shortcoming #4 – Social Bias

Sometimes members will rate a benefit or an activity as very important because they believe that is what a socially responsible member should consider to be very important. For example, they might rate continuing education and publications as very important to their membership, even though they do not participate in the association’s continuing education programs, or read its publications. Because members might believe these items should be important to members, they will indicate a high level of importance.

A Better Way

Instead of asking members to rate “importance”, researchers can calculate “impact”, using just the performance rating responses in a multiple regression analysis. A variety of software packages are available that can perform multiple regression analyses without a deep understanding of statistics, including Microsoft Excel®.

The process is rather straightforward - simply ask members to provide an overall rating of the activity being studied (e.g. annual meeting), and then ask members to provide performance ratings for each element of the activity (e.g. educational sessions, speakers, sponsors’ exhibits, venue, food, social activities, etc.). The overall rating question must precede the attribute rating questions in the survey to prevent order bias.

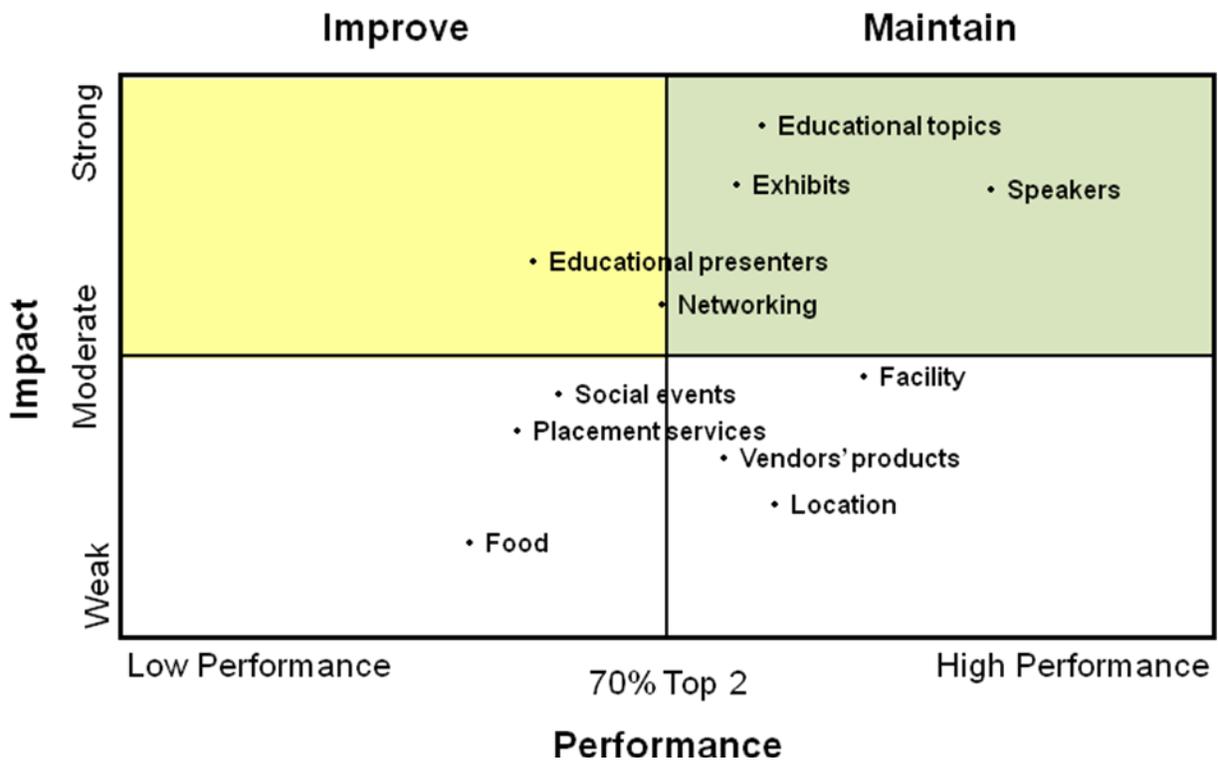
Members’ responses to the activity’s overall performance rating constitute the dependent variable in the multiple regression analysis, and the responses to the attribute performance ratings make up the independent variables. In the multiple regression output, some attributes will be statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < .05$) and others will not. Those attributes that are statistically significant will be the key drivers of the process (high impact),

and the level of impact will be determined by the size of their regression coefficient. The larger the regression coefficient, the greater the impact the attribute has on the overall perception of the activity.

Using the regression coefficients, the analyst can populate an Impact / Performance matrix, similar to the one below. All of the statistically significant attributes are positioned in the upper half of the matrix, and those that are not statistically significant are placed in the lower half. The larger the regression coefficient, the higher the attribute's position on the vertical axis.

By presenting the results in this way, Board members and senior managers can easily determine which key attributes should be improved (upper left quadrant), and which key attributes are performing at an adequate level (upper right quadrant). Improving the attributes in the lower half of the quadrant (low impact) will not improve members' perception of the activity.

By using multiple regression and other multivariate techniques to calculate impact, associations can more accurately assess which benefits and activities they should improve that have the greatest effect on member loyalty and recruitment/retention.



(For more information on plotting the performance ratings of attributes on the Impact / Performance matrix, see the Association Metrics' White Paper "Using Top 2 Scores to Assess an Association's Performance" <http://www.associationmetrics.com/resources.html>.)

About the Author

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