Why Some Members Won't Recommend Your Organization

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Asking members how likely they are to recommend an organization to others may be one of the most commonly asked survey questions in membership studies.

The basis for asking this particular question is the belief that if members are strong supporters of the organization, they would be more likely to stake their personal reputation on recommending the organization's membership to others.

It also believed that members who are not likely to recommend the organization have some disagreement or issue with the organization. It is among the non-recommenders that there is a potential for misunderstanding, which could lead to unreliable results being reported.

When the question is presented as *"How likely would you be to recommend ABC?",* this straightforward, concisely worded question may not be interpreted by some survey participants in exactly the way the researcher had intended.

We have discovered that some of the reasons why members are not likely to recommend the organization's membership have nothing to do with the organization itself, but rather on resistance to the act of recommending.

When non-recommenders were asked why they would not be likely to recommend the organization, we received responses like:

> *"I have very little time for networking."*

> *"I don't feel like I should be a salesperson for the organization."*

> *"I am not the type of person who gives my comments unless I am asked."*

> *"Most of the professionals I associate with are already members."*

> *"I never make recommendations of this sort."*

Summary statistics on the percentage of non-recommenders among the membership population can be misleading if one interprets non-recommenders to be members with issues or concerns with the organization.

Eliminating members from the group of non-recommenders for these kinds of reasons can be accomplished by adding a condition to the question.

The following conditional question is an example of how a professional membership association might effectively focus members' attention on the organization as the basis for their likelihood to recommend:

> *"If someone who is a (list type of professional here) or is studying to be one, asks your opinion (advice) on joining a professional association, how likely would you be to recommend (list organization name here)?"*

The conditional question can also be applied to other types of membership-based organizations.

An open ended follow-up question can be presented to non-recommenders to determine the basis for their response, and the wording of this question is determined by the scale used in the likely to recommend question.

For the likely to recommend question, we use a five point fully labeled scale to capture responses, because this scale allows for the reporting of top two response ratings, it provides for a smooth transition to the follow up open ended question for non-recommenders, and it has been shown to be a reliable scale.

The response options are:
1. *Extremely likely to recommend*
2. *Very likely to recommend*
3. *Somewhat likely to recommend*
4. *Not very likely to recommend*
5. *Not at all likely to recommend*

Since those who selected one of the bottom two response have clearly indicated, to one degree or another, that they are not likely to recommend the organization, the follow up question can simply be worded as "*Why are you not likely to recommend ABC?*"

The content analysis of these verbatims can confirm that non-recommenders have issues with the organization, and more importantly, determine which areas are the sources of the issues.

We have found that the conditional wording of the likely to recommend question consistently provides verbatim responses by non-recommenders that are based on their experience with the organization, rather than on the act of recommending.

The conditionally worded likely to recommend question allows the researcher to confidently report that non-recommenders are truly those who are not likely to recommend the organization because of the organization.

One can only speculate how members, who previously have been unlikely to recommend the organization because they focused on the act of recommending, would have answered the question if they had based their responses on their experiences with the organization.

About the Author

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