

RESEARCH FOR BROADCAST MINISTRIES

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Raising funds for ministry is a lot like making dinner for guests you don't know very well. You have three choices:

- You can select a menu *you* would like, or something you think most people would enjoy, and hope your guests will be pleased with the dinner.
- You can ask them directly what they want, and cook accordingly.
- Or, over time you can get to know these people so well that in many cases, you'll already know their favorite dishes without having to ask.

Consider the similarities in trying to communicate with a file of donors you know little or nothing about. Many broadcast ministries unfortunately select the first of the three options above. They communicate things the *ministry* thinks are important, in a style the ministry is comfortable using, with little or no solid understanding of the people they're trying to reach. Just like with a dinner party, there are times this guesswork will provide a feast everyone enjoys. Often, though, the guests can be left unfulfilled. Worse yet, you could provide them with something distasteful or even offensive, such as serving steak to a vegetarian, or rich desserts to a diabetic.

The most desirable is the third option: getting to know the donor file so well you often know what they'll respond to without having to ask. However, it's improbable to reach option three without moving first through number two: consistently asking for information. For a dinner, you'd contact your guests in advance and ask them about their likes and dislikes. You would then tailor your menu around their needs. For donor communications, you can do the same thing: contact current, lapsed, and/or potential donors, and find out about your target market. Then tailor your fundraising and communication efforts according to what is likely to have the greatest impact. In short, this is *marketing research*.

If you're like some ministry executives, just those two words conjure up images of incomprehensible statistics, reams of data, or number-crunchers who don't understand your ministry objectives. This is unfortunate. A good researcher will provide a simple interpretation of the findings, suggest ways to make your efforts more effective, be available for any questions you have, and even help your organization implement the findings. And all of this will be done within a framework of understanding and concern for what your ministry is all about.

Rather than being some dark, unapproachable science, marketing research is simply a systematic method of seeking information from a representative sample of your target market.

No organization should ever be driven solely by marketing research, but all ministries can make use of research as a tool to increase effectiveness. Consider some examples of how (and why) various organizations have relied on marketing research to help advance their ministry.

Research helps you understand how your donors think. One broadcast ministry used to look upon its donors as people who were committed to the organization. Direct mail was written as if these were highly committed donors who would support the ministry no matter what type of work the organization did. Research into the donor base found that many donors were committed to the ministry's current *cause*, rather than to the ministry itself. If the ministry shifted to a new focus, these donors would find another charity that worked with the old cause, rather than following the ministry to its new efforts. It was crucial for the organization to understand this before moving forward to refocus their efforts.

One common research technique is focus groups. This is where groups of eight to ten people are lead through a research discussion by a trained moderator. Often focus groups are held at a professional facility, which allows you to watch the proceedings from behind a one-way mirror (participants are told they are being observed, but quickly grow comfortable with the concept). For most ministry executives, this is the first time they've ever been able to "eavesdrop" on a group of donors as the ministry and its efforts are being discussed. Rarely do executives leave these groups without a drastically altered understanding of how their donors think, perceive things, and understand the work of the ministry.

Terry Redmon is Vice President of LIFE Outreach International, which produces the national television ministry *LIFE Today*, with James and Betty Robison. Like many ministry executives, he doesn't want to make decisions in a vacuum. "You wish when your show is airing all over the country you could just go from house to house and watch reactions to your show!"

Redmon feels research can help achieve some of that impossible wish. "The beauty of focus groups is that you're hearing from your people on *their* terms. You get to hear the heart of the donor." His experience is that focus groups can help recreate the initial responses of viewers. "What comes out is really what's in their hearts rather than a prepared response. That thought off the top of their heads is in many ways the kind of response they make when we're trying to get a response from a television program."

Research lets you plan for the future. A radio ministry undertook a donor study a few years back to evaluate some changes they had made. The concerns that prompted the study turned out to be inconsequential to donors. However, the ministry learned

something very basic, but very crucial: the average age of their donors was around 74 years old. Without this knowledge, the organization could have simply continued to operate as always until they lost most of the donor base. Knowing this startling fact, they could make long-term plans to attract a new generation of donors before the old one gradually passed away and left them with no support.

Research answers questions without expensive experimentation. Earlier this decade, LIFE Outreach International was the James Robison Evangelistic Association. The ministry was planning to change its name, logo, and the focus of its daily television show. They used comprehensive research to map out the best way to implement these changes. According to Redmon, “Looking back on it now, even years later, I’m grateful to God that we did the research. It ended up saving us hundreds of thousands of dollars in an educational process that we might have had to go through with our file. I felt like we found out a lot of those answers in advance, rather than through the process of trial-and-error.” Redmon points out that trial-and-error “not only costs you a tremendous amount of spending money, but it can cost you a tremendous amount of money in support.”

Many ministries sell products to raise much-needed funds. For one such television ministry, there was very little repeat product business, and converting a buyer into a donor was rare. The marketing leadership felt that the problem must come from buyer remorse: the products were disappointing to buyers, who then didn’t want any more contact from the organization.

The ministry commissioned a research study on this issue. The findings showed that people were quite satisfied with all aspects of the products they received. There was a different (and completely unsuspected) significant problem which was holding back potential donor support. Without marketing research, the organization would have embarked on an expensive, time-consuming, and unnecessary trial-and-error process to improve the products. With research, they could instead focus their efforts on the real source of the problem.

Research shows you how your organization is perceived. We all know what we *mean* to say...but often in communication what we say and what others hear are two completely different things. Communications research can show you what donors are hearing, rather than what you think you’re saying.

For instance, one television fundraising program made use of a number of endorsements from Christian personalities. The problem was that a few of these were controversial people, and to some potential donors they raised questions about the integrity of the organization. The ministry believed that getting endorsed by well-known individuals would lend credibility to their efforts, but their choice of endorsers actually decreased credibility for some viewers.

Another organization developed a fundraising program which showed a minister “overheard” as he prayed about the cause being presented. In a research test of the program, most viewers had strong negative reactions to this segment. They felt that while

it is entirely appropriate to pray on-camera, the manner in which this prayer segment was presented was staged and phony. Rather than showing the ministry's spiritual commitment to help, as was the intent, this segment raised serious integrity concerns in the minds of viewers. Without the research, this brief, seemingly innocuous segment could have torpedoed the entire program.

Whether your organization has used research before or is new to the process, there are a number of keys to unlocking the power of information for your ministry.

Be ready for change. Research is useless unless it is implemented. If your organization is not ready to make some changes based on the findings, don't spend the energy to do research. (This doesn't mean that research alone determines the direction of a ministry – only that it points out the likely results at the end of various paths.)

As Lloyd Parker, General Manager of K-LOVE Radio Network, puts it, "If you're going to do research, and pay for research, for Pete's sake listen to what the people are telling you. Because whether it's a perception or reality, that's what they think."

Keep an open mind. Research findings aren't always easy. One of the most humbling experiences is to present what you think is a terrific idea and have it roundly panned by your target market in a study. However, which is preferable: to have it fail in the research process, or to develop the idea and have it fail publicly and expensively in the marketplace?

It's natural to want to explain away undesirable findings. More important is that you evaluate them to see where changes may be needed. "You can learn a lot more from your critic than you learn from your fan, no doubt about it," says Redmon.

K-LOVE also dealt with this in its research. "The lightning rod issue for us was the fundraising Share-a-thon that we do," Parker explained. "Most people are very tolerant of it, but there were a few things said that made us realize it was probably more of a negative than we thought it was. We definitely listened to what the focus group people had to say. We're in the process of trying to change some of the things that we do, especially during the Share-a-thon fundraisers."

Don't approach research expenses with a fundraising mentality. A fundraising mentality is one that says when you spend \$5,000, it should directly bring in \$10,000. Good research pays for itself, but not always in ways you can trace back directly to the study. Exactly how much money was raised or saved by the radio ministry that found out most of its donors were elderly? It's impossible to track a single dollar back to the study directly...but without the study, the ministry might have faded away in a few short years.

Another element of the fundraising mentality that must be avoided is the temptation to raise money while conducting the research because "we've already got the donor on the phone, so why waste that chance to ask for a donation?" Not only can this approach

completely skew the research findings, but donors will feel misled. They agreed to answer your questions to help with the confidential survey, then are asked for money. Your ministry's integrity is its most valuable and irreplaceable asset – resist the temptation to raise a few extra dollars by asking for funds during what has been promoted to donors as a legitimate research project.

Understand the uses – and limitations – of research. Research is not a cure-all. Just like with the dinner party, once you discover the best menu, you still have to avoid spilling a whole bottle of Tabasco sauce into the cheesecake. One ministry researched the appeal of a donor premium. When the research suggested the premium had little appeal, the ministry ordered the items anyway, because the head of the ministry really liked it. It's a good thing he liked it so much, because they ended up with most of the premiums stockpiled in a warehouse when potential donors didn't share his enthusiasm.

Research is only a tool to be used wisely in the decision making process. It certainly won't replace God's leading. It won't make the decisions for you, and it won't provide all the answers or guarantee success. But you're much more likely to be successful with information than without it.

Allow sufficient time. Research efforts are often submarined by deadlines and lack of planning. If you're going to use research in a particular project, it has to be built in as part of the timeline, just like printing time, editing time, or travel. Research usually isn't done in a week. Depending on the methodology, it can take a little time to do it right.

Do it well or not at all. Speaking of doing it right, this is probably the most important element. Many honest attempts at research provide worthless or misleading information because of a biased questionnaire, a skewed sample, or other problems. Someone must be in charge of the research who understands the process intimately, and knows how to sidestep the myriad things that can provide biased information. For a few large organizations, this means an in-house research director. For most others, it means working with a professional research expert or company (hopefully one that understands both research and ministry).

Do you understand how donors perceive your ministry? Do you know why lapsed donors no longer give? Can you identify whether there are things your organization is doing that raise doubts about integrity in people's minds? Can you describe the demographics of your donor base (i.e. their age, gender, religious background, education level), and how that does or should affect your communications? If you can't answer these questions with confidence, it sounds like time to get some answers.

As K-LOVE's Parker says, "There are so many ways to get derailed, or think you're doing the right thing when you're not. In this day and age, I would think you've *got* to do some research."



“We really don't learn anything from our experience.
We only learn from reflecting on our experience.”

ROBERT SINCLAIR



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