

VENDOR RESPONSE: AN EXPERIMENT

RON SELLERS

GREY MATTER RESEARCH & CONSULTING

Originally published in *Quirk's Marketing Research Review*, December 1998

Researchers spend millions annually on directory listings, advertising, direct mail, telemarketing, websites, and brochures – all in order to get business. But as an industry, how responsive are we – *really* – to potential customers?

Researchers get requests for information all the time, often as a result of the marketing dollars we spend. These requests can come by fax, phone call, mail, and now through websites or e-mail. Even corporate researchers often have to market their services or department to internal clients.

As a vendor, I'm concerned about providing quality service to my clients. But as a research consumer, I'm often frustrated by the lack of response from vendors. After another in a long line of unsatisfying experiences with a potential vendor, I decided it was time for a little experiment.

Although focus group facilities were chosen for this exercise, this applies to every research vendor, and often to corporate research departments as well.

My fax was pretty innocent: "Please send me information on your focus group facility." It requested a list of zip codes from which the facility could recruit, a layout of the facility with room capacities and shapes, and room rental costs. "I am looking to receive this information by May 12, for potential future project work (I moderate across the country)," it explained.

This simple request was faxed to the Bid Director at one focus group facility in each state, generally chosen at random out of the *Quirk's* directory. The faxes were sent April 20, giving each facility almost a month to respond. (And, lest you think this was a waste of time for the facilities, note that I really *do* moderate across the country, and have targeted a couple of facilities I want to try – and one I've already avoided – based on this experiment.)

So what would happen when potential business was placed on a vendor's doorstep...or, more accurately, on their fax machine? Here's what: out of 50 vendors to receive this fax, 20 did not respond in any way. No brochure, no return fax – nothing. Interestingly, over half of these 20 had spent money to make themselves more visible in the *Quirk's*

directory, to attract new business: 11 paid for a listing of their services, four printed their logo, and four had a display ad (including one with a full-page ad, and one with two large four-color ads).

Why would a research company spend money to promote their services, then not respond to a request for information? Good question!

A handful of these non-responders listed an e-mail address, so I tried again. All responded this time. One admitted a change in management at the facility, and said my fax must have been lost in the shuffle. Four claimed they never received my fax. While this is possible, more likely is that it came in and was lost or misdirected (all fax numbers were triple-checked). One claimed she sent the package, but the post office returned it as non-deliverable (again, quite possible, although it had the same address as the 30 packages which arrived).

One was quite blunt: he never saw the fax, but he said another employee may have seen it and dismissed me as a "rate picker" – often when they get busy, "our operations manager dumps them because we don't have time to mess with them." Of course this makes me think of the "shoppers" I've managed to turn into ongoing clients over the years, but that's certainly each vendor's decision to make.

Whatever reasons or excuses those 20 had for not responding, 30 did reply. It was fascinating to note the broad range of what was received. To wit:

- Seven vendors did not send something which was specifically requested (either the zip code list or the pricing).
- Nineteen vendors enclosed a brochure, ten did not, and one sent a letter explaining that their new brochure was at the printer.
- Twenty-two attached a personalized letter or note, while two sent a form letter, and six didn't bother with any sort of communication beyond a brochure.
- Many included extra information, such as menus, references, maps, hotel recommendations, etc.
- Although I requested the information be mailed to me, and the only fax number provided was what was stamped at the top by my fax machine, three facilities responded only by fax (including two that were just handwritten notes).
- Six vendors responded the day after my fax, and another ten responded within three days. Others straggled in, including six that waited until right before the deadline, even though they were given 22 days.

Some of the individual responses were fascinating, as well. Consider your own reaction if you had received any of the following:

- An Ohio facility sent along everything I asked for, and more...with typos in their materials, including my name misspelled. Not a big deal to some, insulting to others.

- A facility from a small state sent me what I requested...copied on scratch paper. Worse yet, it was reports from another client's project. Security concerns, anyone?
- A Kentucky company enclosed a series of Xerox copies so poor they were almost unreadable. They also had a typo...in their own company name.
- A Georgia vendor sent a little of everything: business cards, a small brochure, maps, a Rolodex card, and a letter – jumbled together in the envelope in no particular order without being clipped together. It was just a messy pile of papers when it all spilled out on my desk.
- A Colorado firm sent what I asked, with no note, no brochure – just some plain-paper copies paper-clipped together. Although there was nothing "wrong" with it, it paled badly in comparison with some of the nice letters and informative brochures I received.

And that last point is the most important one. When potential clients request information from you, it's likely they are requesting the same information from your competitors. How does your response stack up?

Let's say you received information from two potential vendors. One was an outdated brochure with a form letter, missing a key piece of information you requested, sent in an envelope with your address scrawled in pencil on the front, which you received the day before your deadline. The other was a personal letter, a nice brochure, and all the information you needed, in a professional-looking envelope with a typed address, sent to you immediately. Which company would you want to work with?

Lest you think this is a blanket indictment of vendors, it should be emphasized that I also received some very impressive materials. For instance, McMillion Research in Charleston, West Virginia responded promptly to the fax. They sent a personal letter outlining everything I needed. They enclosed a professional, spiral-bound brochure, with complete room dimensions and layouts, information about the area's demographics, and hotel and restaurant recommendations.

The Blackstone Group of Chicago provided a great example of how you don't have to overburden the prospective client with paper. They mailed a brief, personal letter answering all my questions, with a professional (and concise) four-color brochure providing informative background on the facility and its services. I didn't have to wade through stacks of paper to get the information I wanted. (Some companies even sent me pages of information on why focus groups are a good thing. I'm a moderator – I already know this!)

Midwest Survey and Research in Omaha turned a negative into a positive. They didn't have their new brochure ready yet. Instead, they took the time to send me a letter with all of the information I was seeking. They even copied their blueprints so I could have the facility layout I wanted. I now have an image of them as friendly, detail-oriented, and service-focused. Why? Because that's exactly how my request was handled.

You don't have to spend a ton of money. Sandia Marketing Services in Albuquerque didn't mail a four-color, gold-embossed brochure. Their materials weren't expensive, but they were friendly, prompt, informative, complete, and professional – which is why they already got work from me.

First impressions are essential. It tells me what kind of attitude and service to expect throughout the project. If you don't make a good first impression, how will you get a chance to make any kind of second impression?

So what defines good customer response from a research company? Consider the following recommendations, from someone who works on both sides of the coin:

First...respond! The most common excuse is "we didn't receive your request." The problem is, I've heard this excuse when I've requested information by fax, phone, mail, and e-mail. Sure, there will be occasions when something really does get lost in the mail...but it's much more common for something to get lost in the mailroom. Do you have a good system for handling information requests and bids? Is there accountability for this? Is someone consistently checking e-mail for incoming requests? If the contact person listed in *Quirk's* directory is no longer at your company, how are calls, faxes, and letters to this individual handled? Do faxes get distributed properly? On more than one occasion I've received a call saying, "Your RFP accidentally got stapled to the back of another fax – can I still give you a bid?" a week after the project is already in the field.

Respond promptly. Although the vendors were given over three weeks to respond to a simple request, many still waited until the last minute. This presents two problems. First, the vendor is saying without words that they are either very busy, or procrastinators. Either way, the client has a right to be concerned about the customer service he will receive. Second, if the client receives your information right before the deadline, but has information from your competitors for a week, whose information will he probably spend more time with?

Give the client what is requested. Two of the most impressive packets I received were missing the requested zip code list. There are times when these zips will determine what facility can be used (if recruiting is from a small client list, for instance). Don't make the client call up and put in a second request – this will only annoy her, and suggest that your company doesn't pay attention to the details. Virtually every time I search out vendors in a market I haven't used before, at least one doesn't include everything I request...and that's usually the one left off future RFP lists.

Carefully evaluate your marketing materials. What image do they communicate? Does a handwritten envelope suggest a personal touch, or is it unprofessional? Does your brochure look comfortingly old-fashioned, or hopelessly out of date? Is your website so filled with spiffy graphics that it takes forever to load and navigate through? Is all that extra material you sent a value-added bonus, or just annoying clutter?

When we do research for direct marketing clients, every detail is dissected to help them achieve better customer response. Why should our own marketing materials be less scrutinized?

Get help. Are you sure the things you highlight about your company are the things clients actually care about? If you're redesigning your brochure, why not ask your clients for their input? When following up on bids you've submitted, why not take a moment to ask prospects for their impressions of what you sent? Have an advertising agency as a client? Consider doing a trade-out for their professional help.

Finally – no excuses! When I say I haven't gotten what I need from you, and I get excuses, guess what I'll expect if there's a problem on the project? Consider which firm you'd want to work with:

You: "I didn't receive the information I requested."

Them: "Well, we never received your fax."

-- or --

You: "I didn't receive the information I requested."

Them: "Hmmm...I don't recall that fax coming in, but of course it may have gotten misrouted here. Either way, I apologize that you didn't get what you need. Tell me exactly what you're looking for and I'll get it to you today."

Are you more interested in defending yourself, or in getting the client what he needs?

This exercise was only one example of how researchers communicate with potential or current clients. We also do so through submitting bids, running ads, writing company newsletters, managing projects, networking at conventions, and many other ways. Are your communications moving your company forward, or backward? And what are the potential excuses for not improving things? "We're too busy." "We can't spend a lot of money." "We impress clients through our work, not our brochure." "We're researchers, not advertising experts."

Although there's a way around each one of these excuses, they all may have some legitimacy. But even though *you* see them as legitimate...will current and potential clients see them the same way?

QUIRK'S

Marketing Research Review

“Nothing astonishes men so much as
common sense and plain dealing.”
RALPH WALDO EMERSON



GREY MATTER
RESEARCH & CONSULTING