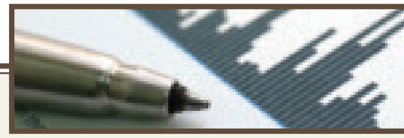


# Understanding the Motivations of Donors And Prospects Through Market Research

*By Justin Greeves*

The last 10 years have been a time of tremendous change for nonprofits across America. While I have never been an employee of a nonprofit, I witnessed this change from the supplier side in my career as a marketing researcher and consultant. In 1993, when I began my career in research, our work was primarily conducted with blue chip companies, political candidates and a handful of associations. We did not conduct any research for charitable nonprofits (except politically-related nonprofits), and the conventional wisdom at the time was that most nonprofit organizations simply did not have a need or have funding for the types of services we provided.

Just over a decade later, there are many conferences, organizations and individual consultants that focus exclusively on the area of nonprofit research. Nonprofit organizations employ individuals who have titles such as “chief marketing officer,” and many nonprofit leaders and managers consider research a critical part of their business planning. Many nonprofits engage in paid advertising, and employ advertising agencies and public relations firms to help sing their praises and build their brand recognition. Some of the more sophisticated nonprofits conduct tracking research weekly or monthly to monitor and manage their brand, enhance donor stewardship and manage their organizational reputation. Most of these projects would have been unheard of a decade ago, and likely would have been seen as diverting resources from the mission of the organization. Today, research programs are seen as a critical part of understanding how to improve the organization. In 2005, as a research supplier specializing in this area, I reviewed no fewer than 100 requests for such research from nonprofits.

The business pressures of an expanding nonprofit universe have triggered an amazing transformation, and they reveal the value that research can provide to nonprofits of all types and sizes, from the biggest global organizations to small local charities and foundations. The intent of this article is to provide some practical advice, from a survey researcher’s point of view, on how nonprofits and the gift planning community can effectively use research to better understand their donors and prospects. It will also provide advice on the types of research you should consider as your organization prepares its yearly plans and budgets.

**Abstract:** The author discusses the benefits of donor research and provides advice for designing a donor segmentation study. He outlines types of qualitative and quantitative research, and reviews resources available to do-it-yourself researchers. Syllabus for Gift Planners code: 2.01.01

### *Who are your best customers?*

In business, not all customers are equal. The same is true for donors to charitable organizations. Customer loyalty research has become its own science and is filled with products, tools and lore on how valuable a "good customer" is to an organization. It goes without saying that identifying your best donors is critical to organizational growth and success, but how do you use research to discover these hidden gems and bring them closer to the organization?

While not all nonprofits engage in research, those that do have a clear understanding of the benefits of an ongoing program. Amy Gill, director of philanthropy marketing at The Nature Conservancy, has been involved in several research projects in her five years with the organization and says, "We use research as a way to establish a baseline for who our members are, what is important to them and how much they value their relationship with The Nature Conservancy so that we can monitor changes over time. We want to understand what the relationship is and be sure we are doing the right things to nurture it, including communicating what we are doing, clearly stating our goals and measuring how well our members receive all of these important pieces of information." A stream of information on who your members are and how their attitudes and beliefs are changing is critical to managing your organization's most valuable resource.

Many nonprofits know the basics about their donors: name, address, contact information, years on file, dollar value of gifts, recent gifts, etc. This information is very valuable for staying in touch with donors, but it isn't much help in understanding what they might give in the future, and it provides no help in understanding their true motivations behind supporting your organization year after year. That information is often spread widely across the organization, in the minds, e-mails and phone calls with fundraisers and front line staffers embedded in your organization.

Research provides a way to put flesh on the bones of donor lists and divide your donors into groups to identify your highest valued targets. This family of research often lives under the name "segmentation research," and it is critical for seeing the full landscape of your donors. Generally, segmentation research provides a way to understand a group of individuals and place them into like-minded groups in terms of behaviors and/or attitudes. A good segmentation study serves three specific purposes:

1. Slicing up the donor pie into distinct groups that share similar attitudes.
2. Matching the attitudes of those groups with specific and often unique behaviors.
3. Providing the ability to target, profile and communicate differently to influence each unique group's behaviors and attitudes.

By conducting a segmentation study among a broad base of donors, including those at all giving levels, giving histories, etc., we develop a prism from which to compare and view the entire universe of donors, identify which groups of donors are "the best" and understand what makes them different than the rest. The single most valuable outcome of segmentation research is a basis for decision-making that encompasses your donor base in totality, not just a myopic view of a single group or donor level that you might get from a standard quantitative study that focuses only on a single aspect of their relationship with your organization.

While all segmentation studies are unique, there are a few general parameters that all such studies follow:

- They include large sample sizes. In my experience, segmentation studies among nonprofit donors begin at 1,000 respondents and may go as high as 4,000 respondents depending on the total size of the universe of donors, the likely number of segments and the level of precision clients need.
- Segmentation studies are often much longer than other studies. Because segmentation studies must include batteries of attitudinal questions, behavioral questions and communications questions, it's not unusual for a segmentation study to be 20 minutes long for the respondent. The positive news about this is that nonprofit donors are generally open to longer surveys because they are interested in both the organization and the subject matter and really do want to help if they have the time.
- Nonprofit segmentation studies are usually not "blinded." The respondent is told up-front in the survey who the

client is, and he is given some information about the general purpose of the study. So-called “blinded” studies don’t reveal the name of the client, and are typically done when evaluating multiple organizations or products, with the client remaining anonymous so as not to bias the respondent or the results. Because of the anonymity, blinded studies are more expensive (compared to an identical non-blinded study) because of lower response rates, higher refusal rates and general respondent skepticism.

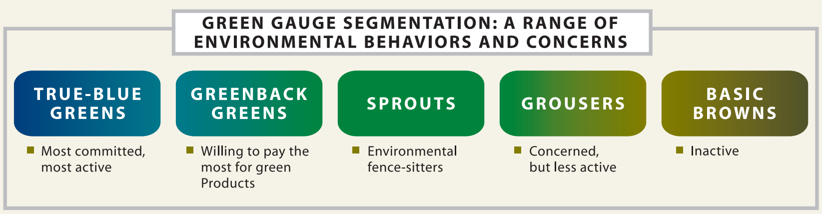
A well-designed segmentation begins with hypotheses about what your highest value donors look like demographically, how they behave toward the organization and what attitudes and values they may have. These ideas will likely come from two sources: past research and/or internal expertise from those inside your organization who interact with your donors on a regular basis. It is critical to gather these sources together and transfer that knowledge to those actually conducting the research. It is also best to develop hypotheses about each donor group that may exist and the characteristics those groups might have. These ideas are important not because they drive the result, but because they help provide context for which types of questions might be helpful to identify the unique supporter segments that exist in your organization.

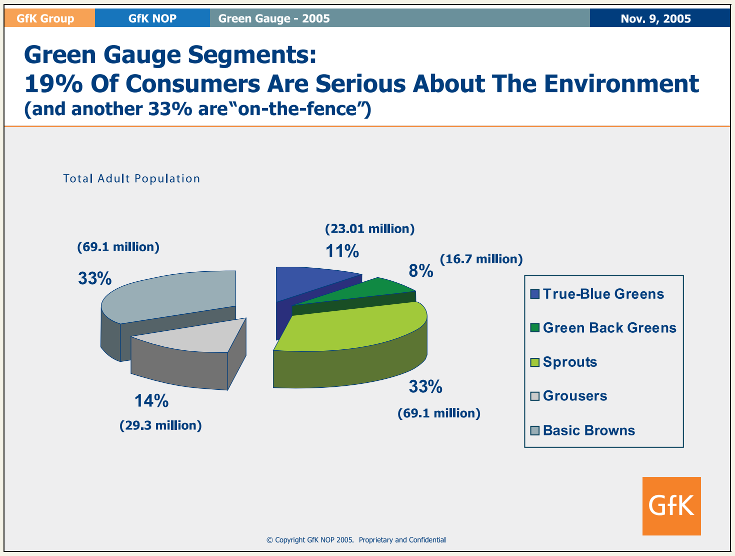
Although each segmentation study is unique, here is a general outline of a segmentation questionnaire. Questions should cover the following topic areas:

- Loyalty measures: includes questions on satisfaction with membership, satisfaction with the organization, likelihood to continue support, likelihood to recommend the organization to friends.
- General giving attitudes: includes questions that are general to *all* nonprofit giving, such as: I enjoy supporting environmental causes; I avoid giving to organizations that work outside of the United States; I like to support organizations that help children. Obviously, these will be tailored to your objectives, but should be general enough to get a broader view of donor motivations to see the full competitive landscape.
- Specific giving attitudes: these questions cover the range of attitudes that donors have about *your* organization, their reasons for giving and evaluations of your programs, methods, goals, effectiveness and management. These will generally come from your brainstorming and should be all about *your* organization.
- Donor behaviors: these questions cover how donors behave toward your organization and include questions such as: I thoroughly researched ORGANIZATION before I gave a financial donation; I regularly communicate with the staff and management of ORGANIZATION; I prefer to donate online to ORGANIZATION, etc. Again, many of these questions will come from your internal brainstorming and will attempt to differentiate donors into unique groups.
- Communications: generally, these questions will include usage of specific communications vehicles, frequency of communications, understanding of goals and mission, interactions with staff, etc. These questions are critical to achieve the ability to target key groups at the conclusion of the study, giving you the ability to prioritize key communications channels and media activities.
- Demographics: these questions should include at a minimum: age, gender, education, income, marital status, employment status and past giving history. Some of this data may come from your own donor database and need not be asked. Many segmentation studies also include a significant number of lifestyle questions that are used to generalize the results and target to key communication channels and assist more broadly in marketing efforts. These are often very helpful in making segmentation and marketing efforts more actionable, but do require a significant amount of time for the respondent. Further, they can also be collected through a shorter follow-up study for a lower cost.

A well-designed segmentation study will classify your donors into actionable and specific groups. It will also project the size of each group and the related profiles of those groups. The results of a segmentation study should tell a story about your donors and help to bring the subject populations to life, putting a face on groups of similar individuals. One of the most fun parts of a segmentation study is naming each of the segments. This is really more art than science, and it helps to engage other internal users in the process. Each of the names should represent the essence of that donor group, and should easily convey the story of that group to anyone inside the organization. Some of my clients have even gone so far as to assign icons to the donor groups as a mnemonic device and quick portrait. Segment naming is something you can get everyone in your work-group engaged in to help create buy-in, generate discussion and produce greater internal dissemination of the research results.

The best way to understand segmentation is to view the results of a study to see how the data can be applied. Since 1992, Roper Reports™ has conducted a syndicated segmentation study, The Green Gauge Report™, which measures the changing attitudes of Americans toward the environment. This study, updated in July 2005, divides the U.S. adult population into five distinct segments, from the most and least environmentally focused consumers, as shown below:




The segments within the Green Gauge Report™ reveal that one-in-five Americans (19 percent) are the highest opportunity targets for environmental marketing and support. This slice of America represents two distinct segments with different, but complementary behaviors:

**True-Blue Greens** are the environmental leaders and activists, and represent 11 percent of the U.S adult population. Results of the most recent study (July 2005) indicate this group is most likely to walk the environmental talk. Demographically, they include a higher proportion of executive and white-collar workers who have higher than average education levels and regularly access the Internet for information.

- This group is not just a potential source of financial contributions, but also of volunteers. These activists want to be involved in organizations and will likely contribute their time to support causes in which they believe.

**Greenback Greens** represent eight percent of the U.S adult population, and are the environmental spenders. This segment has little time to get involved in the environment, but is very willing to pay to do their part through green products and services. Demographically, this group is younger than the True-Blue Greens segment, and has slightly lower education and income levels.

- This segment is likely to be the strongest target for cause-related marketing efforts that involve the environment. Greenback Greens also meet the income threshold to represent a significant base of financial support for any environmental nonprofit.

The results of segmentation can also provide direction on where to target your message and get support for your organization or issue. Sprouts (33 percent of the population) are an ideal swing group on environmental issues. Results reveal they evaluate each environmental issue on its own merits and the personal benefits and effects it would provide. In contrast to the Sprouts, the Grousers (14 percent of population) and the Basic Browns (33 percent of population) are groups that are not likely to be motivated by environmental concerns and, in fact, may best be avoided. Campaign resources instead should be directed toward the "swing" and "pro" populations that are more positively pre-disposed toward an environmental cause or organization.

The findings above demonstrate that segmentation research provides a wide view of the consumer (or donor) landscape, and can help direct scarce organizational resources to their highest and best use. Segmentation projects can represent a significant investment to an organization, but the results provide a strong and lasting foundation for decision-making for everything from donor stewardship to issues management and communications strategy. Many of the projects I have been involved in are still being used five years after they were completed, and the organizations highly value the investment made in understanding their audience.

There are several practical rules of thumb to follow when viewing segmentation results. Segmentation studies often produce multiple solution sets, and deciding which is "the best" often boils down to organizational comfort and personal experience. A few pointers from my own years of experience scrutinizing cross-tabs may help save you time and money as you try to identify "the best" solution, using the rules below.

1) Segments should *never* be of equal or near-equal size across the board. The rule of thumb that many in the industry use is the largest segment should be five to six times the size of the smallest. Similarly sized segments typically are not actionable, and intuitively don't make sense if you believe in the 20/80 rule which says that 20 percent of your customers provide 80 percent of your business.
2) Segments should reveal significant differences (using statistical testing) in key *behaviors* across the groups, such as amount given, years on file, loyalty, and motivations, or whatever furthers your business objectives. Segments that are somewhat or very similar on the key behaviors you wish to influence are usually not actionable and you should continue to push for alternative segmentation solutions. It is always a good idea to look at the potential solution sets against these key variables (as profiles) before deciding on a final solution.
3) Think of your segmentation results as just the beginning of your quest to learn more about your supporters. No single piece of research is a panacea. Use the results as a basis to do more targeted exploration among the groups, either in a formal setting (such as focus groups) or informally in anecdotal feedback and chats with supporters and staff. Be sure to ask for permission with respondents in the initial study to re-contact them with follow-up questions. This is a quick and easy way to set the stage for a second phase and reduce costs.

### *Who are your best prospects? A real world application from The Nature Conservancy*

The research business relies on the kindness of others to participate in surveys, answer our sometimes repetitive questions and give researchers honest feedback on what makes respondents tick. Most reputable research firms follow a strict code of ethics that shields respondents from clients, but allows the final aggregate result to shed light on individual's general patterns of behavior. In this way, we can use the research process as a way to find things out about the total population that an individual in that population would typically not be willing to share with a development officer, a

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fundraiser or a marketer. Because of this independence and the kindness of others, a good piece of research can shed light on who might be your best target.

Identifying your best prospect must begin with a knowledge of who your best customer is (from the segmentation research described above) because your best model for success is likely to be found in members or prospects who share similar traits to your core supporter base, but just aren't there yet. Primary research can be used very effectively to narrow down your best prospects and find those hidden gems in your databases and customer lists.

In 2004, my firm was approached by The Nature Conservancy to conduct research among its general base of donors to identify those who were the best prospects for The Legacy Club, a deferred giving donor stewardship program. We also conducted a parallel research effort among Legacy Club donors to understand and compare this group with the opportunity targets. The Legacy Club program recognizes donors who have made deferred gifts by providing them with special recognition, offering them access to specialized communications about projects of interest and providing local opportunities for enhanced staff interaction and access. The program has been highly successful and the leadership of The Conservancy saw an opportunity to improve its effectiveness. "We did the research because we know this group represents an incredible opportunity in terms of our potential organizational resources and we need to know how to manage that asset," says Amy Gill of The Nature Conservancy. "We have 14,000 people who have made the commitment to The Legacy Club, and we always had a lot of anecdotal information about who they are and what they value. However, up until the start of this research, we had never done anything quantitative to really establish a baseline on who these individuals are and what they value. We used this research as an opportunity to understand whether our personal conversations and anecdotes were accurate, and to see if we were missing something."

The project began with qualitative research in the form of focus groups among current Legacy Club members. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand the motivations, emotions and personality types of these donors and add context to the results. (See the section below, entitled *The Value of Qualitative Research,* for more information on why to employ qualitative research.)

Following the focus groups, our workgroup took an inventory of existing donor databases, including many thousands of donors who had been on file for a number of years but were currently not members of The Legacy Club. Starting with this file, we set out with the objective of sizing the market and pre-identifying the general patterns of life-income and estate giving prospects in order to develop communications strategies to get donors to consider including The Nature Conservancy in their estate plans. The outcomes of the study needed to also reveal the demographic and attitudinal profiles of these potential estate donors in order to focus the organization on those who represent the greatest giving opportunities.

Specifically, the individuals included in this study:

- Were not currently Legacy Club members.
- Had five years of continuous giving history.

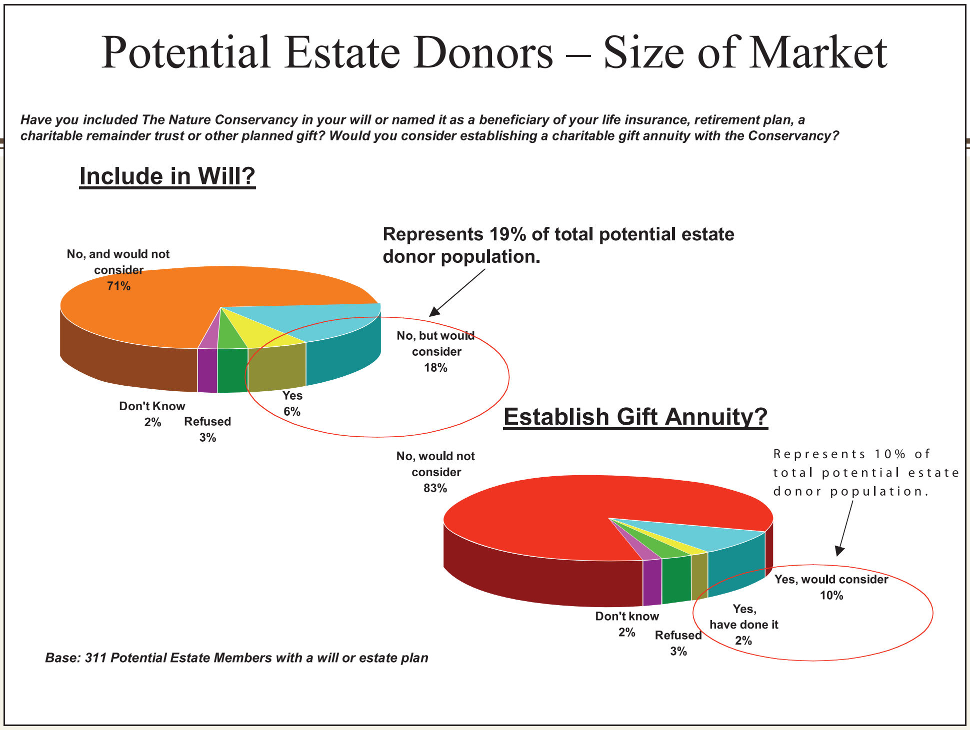
The key behaviors we were looking for to identify our targets (through our research project) were:

- Had made a testamentary gift to The Nature Conservancy but had not informed The Nature Conservancy of the gift.
- Have or would consider including The Nature Conservancy in a will or estate gift.

Using the above points as the beginnings of our hypothesis on which groups of members would be the best targets for estate donations, we conducted a telephone study among a sample of donors who met the criteria noted above. In total we completed 400 computer assisted telephone interviews (CATI) among potential estate donors. All donors were contacted at home during the evening hours and were asked approximately 20 minutes of both closed- and open-ended questions about their feelings toward The Nature Conservancy, their attitudes toward conservation and their own personal donation and financial planning habits.

The results of the survey were revealing, and indicated great opportunity for further targeting a specific slice of the membership base for estate donation, specifically:

- One-fifth (19 percent) of this population has or would consider including The Nature Conservancy in their wills (see graph below).
- One-in-10 (nine percent) is a good target for a charitable gift annuity (explained in plain English in the survey).




The Nature Conservancy is energized by the knowledge that nearly one-in-five of the givers in their database is a high valued target. So the next logical question is, who are these donors and what makes them different from the rest? Further, how can we target them for specific kinds of communications to get them to become estate donors? In order to answer these questions, we turn to sub-group analysis using cross tabulations (commonly called cross-tabs) to understand how this group is different than others.

By setting up "Potential Estate Donors" as a sub-group to be examined within the data set, we can compare their answers to the broader sample of the remaining 400 included in the study. The analysis from the cross-tabs reveals some interesting differences, specifically, Potential Estate Donors:

- Desire a greater level of organizational involvement in The Nature Conservancy than others.
- Are more likely to be extremely satisfied with their membership to The Conservancy.
- Are more likely to have visited a preserve site.
- Are more likely to have $100,000+ in household income.
- Are *less* likely to have children.
- Are more likely to be currently employed full time.

These results have real value for an organization like The Nature Conservancy, and they will have a long-term impact on the way The Nature Conservancy conducts its prospecting. "We have learned how this prospect group compares to Legacy Club members, and who among that sub-group might be able to become a Legacy Club member. We now know for certain the real size of this opportunity," noted Amy Gill.

Findings will also impact the way The Nature Conservancy conducts its planned giving activities in the future. The results of the Legacy Club sample have started to change the way the organization thinks about its own stewardship priorities. Amy Gill explains, "This research really cemented the long-held belief that the people who make estate gifts and life income gifts make them for different reasons. The outcomes of this research will influence the way we talk about those gifts and opportunities. We have to reverse the way we have looked at donor stewardship. In the past, we were more inclined to focus on stewarding those that have made irrevocable gifts, but now we know how important it is to steward those that have made bequests (revocable gifts), or at least bring them up to the same level in terms of stewardship. It also solidifies that those who are making bequests to The Nature Conservancy are more engaged donors than those making life income gifts."

Plans are already in the works at The Nature Conservancy to think more strategically about how to engage potential estate donors. "Our next step is to take the research beyond the theoretical level to create national and local stewardship plans. We will create recruitment programs, tactics and guidelines to convey what Legacy Club members want nationally and what they want locally," notes Amy Gill.

Interestingly, the results of the research are not only used by The Nature Conservancy's gift planners, but have been disseminated throughout the organization. Amy Gill has organized and led presentations to help get the word out to all that can benefit from the results of this research. "We have used the results of the research for internal communications

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and training. Because our staff and fundraising staff are spread across the country, we have been able to communicate the research findings to staffers and leaders at each state chapter and say, 'this is what Legacy Club members look like and this is why they are important to our organization.'"

The investment in this project has helped Amy Gill and her team better advocate for resources inside the organization. "Now that we have the results in black and white and it's not just anecdotal, we have been able to influence decision makers across the organization on who this group is and why they are important to the organization."

### *The Value of Qualitative Research*

An area for discussion that is often overlooked in today's research environment—with its emphasis on quantifying return on investment and having "hard numbers"—is qualitative research. Qualitative research is sometimes described as the softer side of market research, and it is dominated by focus groups, in-depth interviews and other open-ended types of discussions. While quantitative research tools, such as segmentation, answer the question of "how many?" or "how different?", qualitative research provides the answers, in respondents' own words, to the whys and hows of donor motivation.

Qualitative research is not statistically projectable, and we can't say that because five of the 10 focus group participants express a certain opinion, 50 percent of donors will also feel that way. However, we can certainly learn a lot from listening to donors. These types of research efforts are critical for setting the context and staying abreast of subtle changes in the marketplace. In my experience, many researchers on the client side shy away from qualitative research in their projects, either because they feel like they have "done focus groups before," they don't feel they have the budget, or because their bosses "want hard numbers, not just another donor feedback session." I am going to put forth a few reasons why I feel an ongoing qualitative research program is critical for nonprofits to include in an annual research budget.

**Emotion is king**. I have conducted many pieces of qualitative research for both nonprofits and for-profit organizations, and the thing that makes nonprofits completely different is the intense focus on emotions. When customers of a for-profit describe a product or an experience, they often spend a lot of time talking about the attributes or features of that experience. It can take quite a bit of probing to get close to any emotional motivations behind their purchase. However, on the nonprofit side, emotions quickly rise to the top of any discussion because they are exactly what nonprofits sell and what donors get in exchange for their gift: things like trust, peace of mind, love of family and personal security. As a researcher, I need to know exactly which emotions are behind donors' decisions to help my clients deliver the right types of communications and position their programs in just the right emotional tone. You are not going to get many emotions from a cold, quantitative interview that follows a programming script, and I would argue that quantitative research tends to lower the amount of emotional feedback you get from respondents. This type of insight really requires either a one-on-one setting or a small group interview.

Further, you may want to consider conducting this type of research as a follow-up to a quantitative piece to test ideas, get emotional reactions to programs and understand the feelings that are inspired by your organization.

**Getting you and your team out of your own office building breaks down many internal barriers and fosters group teamwork.** There is something about anecdotal customer feedback that is infectious in an organization. Customer comments spread like wildfire, and occasionally it takes the direct, unedited quote of a big supporter to dispel a long-held belief of senior management or totally shift the minds of the project team. I urge anyone involved in a research project to actually attend the focus groups or interviews and hear the comments directly from donors. Usually their comments inspire, and occasionally a single customer comment leads to a new idea, program or competitive advantage that would have gone unseen.

"Having our staff observe the focus groups in action made a huge difference in how we understood and used the results of this research. When you actually witness the dynamic of how your members interact with each other, you pick up on the nuances of their relationship with your organization, what makes a lasting impression and what they feel strongly about. In the quantitative study you may find out you get a score of 97 percent on loyalty, but that just doesn't carry the same meaning as hearing people talk about why they are so engaged in the organization. Those anecdotes get passed around the office very quickly and really bring the results to life," says Angie Sosdian, director of philanthropy for gift planning at The Nature Conservancy. Watching focus groups from behind the glass also provides the benefit of encouraging great discussions in the back room, and helps to solidify a diverse project team of researchers, marketers, developers and communicators both inside and outside the organization, which makes for an even more successful project.

**"Group-think" can be good.** We often hear that we need to control for "group-think" because it represents the dark side of focus groups and is something to be avoided. Believe me, a skillful, professionally trained moderator will know when to continue and when to move on to something new or get others involved in the discussion. While we certainly don't want any single individual dominating the discussion or driving others to their way of thinking, hearing customers talk with one another and the process by which they come to consensus (or not!) is something any of us rarely gets to see in the real world either before or after a purchase, donation or decision. These types of discussions are usually confined to the living room, the dinner table, or a quick chat between friends. Small group discussions, whether in the form of focus groups or triads (groups of three individuals), help us get the context for decisions and also let us actually observe the ways in which donors speak, the words they use and the reasons they are alike, or different. These are all invaluable clues into what makes your supporters who they are, and what makes them value or avoid your organization. Qualitative research is one of the only ways to get this critical insight.

*Since gift planning and development ultimately boil down to a personal relationship between a donor and an organization, having intimate, anonymous conversations with donors in a neutral setting produces valuable nuggets of information your supporters may be afraid, embarrassed, or unwilling to share directly. The dynamic created in a one-on-one interview with an experienced interviewer can produce results you have to see to believe.*

**You can't measure what you don't ask.** Quantitative market research tracking programs often take on a life of their own inside organizations. The questions become sacrosanct, and that yearly data point is eagerly awaited. The very existence of a question becomes its reason for being in the next wave, leading to longer and longer instruments that become so unwieldy they actually hurt the overall program. Qualitative research, done each year, provides a way to make sure you are asking the right questions, and also *not* asking about things that are no longer relevant. Sometimes, the organizational focus on tracking results becomes so great that no one stops to think, "are we asking the right questions?" or "what has changed in the market that we need to incorporate?" Qualitative research is a great way to validate what is being asked, understand what new decision factors are in play among your customers and identify concepts that are outdated and no longer necessary. I have seen many cases where the discipline of yearly qualitative research gives my client an edge, and alternatively, cases in which the lack of ongoing dialogue with customers makes tracking research irrelevant, stale and not actionable.

**Sometimes they will tell us things they won't tell you**. Conducting research with a recognized and professional firm gives a sense of independence that no organization could achieve on its own. Since gift planning and development ultimately boil down to a personal relationship between a donor and an organization, intimate, anonymous conversations with donors in a neutral setting produce valuable nuggets of information your supporters may be afraid, embarrassed, or unwilling to share directly. The dynamic created in a one-on-one interview with an experienced interviewer can produce results you have to see to believe. I have seen respondents cry, laugh, storm out (and come back), share and tell me things they wouldn't tell their best friends or family. The shield of anonymity we uphold is critical to our ongoing success, and it also helps get the truth out, even when it's not something they want everyone to know.

### *Do-It-Yourself Survey Research*

The emergence of the Internet as a communication platform has altered the primary research landscape. For those working on limited research budgets, this means increasing opportunities to reach your target audiences by employing self-service tools to undertake quick research studies. There are many caveats, but the power of the Internet for conducting self-service research is very significant, and if done well, the do-it-yourself (DIY) approach can provide cost efficient outcomes.

Hakan Atak, an expert in online research and founder of ExaSense, a research consultancy specializing in online information synthesis, provides advice about shortcuts and sources in three areas that are of most interest to research DIYers: survey tools, sample sources and analytical tools. "The new web-based research tools provide great opportunities for conducting cost-effective research, but DIY researchers still need to pay careful attention to the foundation elements of credible, usable and projectable research, which begins with good sample and clear definition of the research problem. The old adage 'garbage in, garbage out' is still true today," Hakan cautions.

**Survey Tools** There are many web-based survey design and implementation tools available on the Internet. Business models of web survey platform vendors vary, but generally speaking hosted solutions, in which the system software is accessed via the Internet, are more cost efficient than buying and installing these systems in your own information technology (IT) environment (which may require additional IT resources to manage). Some vendors charge monthly subscription fees, and others require longer term contracts. A few of the leading self-service hosted survey vendors include WebSurveyor, Zoomerang, SurveyMonkey, Inquisite, Netreflector, SurveyHost, SuperSurvey, and EZSurvey. All these systems offer e-mail invitation facilities, in which the user simply supplies the e-mail address list for the group to be surveyed. After data collection is complete, these systems offer basic to complex reporting capabilities and data export facilities.

**Sample Sources** There are a variety of e-mail sample providers that will "lend" you targeted e-mail address lists per your specifications. Some providers also offer just-in-time samples by deploying banners at special interest portals to attract visitors of those sites into your survey as it happens. The leading online sample vendors include SSI, GreenField, MarketTools, and HarrisInteractive. Depending on your study objectives and target audience, sampling for your self-service research project may require significant energy to coordinate—both business and technical.

**Analysis** Many of the web survey tool vendors also provide various web-based self-service tools for analysis and data tabulations (many at an additional cost) that are adequate for writing reports. Alternatively, you can buy and deploy desktop software from vendors that provide statistical analysis software. SAS, and SPSS are good examples for desktop data analysis, provided you have the necessary skills to utilize them. Similarly, you can use Excel, and Access from Microsoft to analyze your data and view the answers of various subgroups within your data.

Hakan Atak outlines these key questions to think about as you design and execute your own research program.

**Clearly identify your research objectives:** What is the challenge you are trying to investigate and how do you frame the problem?

1. Clearly state the hypotheses you are trying to test.
2. Scan the Internet for the subject matter issue to get more informed. If possible, talk with experts in the area to better assess your research situation.
3. Clearly list your assumptions about your target audience.
4. Depending on your audience profiles you may consider incentives to keep the cooperation rate in check—you

***There are now literally thousands of blogs updated daily by eBusiness insiders, community advocates, policy makers and corporate leaders.***

want your audience's time and attention and that sometimes may require compensation. There are companies that specialize in incentive fulfillment such as incentivelogic.com.

**Carefully design your sample:** What is the best platform to reach your target audience (web/telephone/postal-mail/e-mail)?

1. Clearly define your target audience(s) for the research so you can screen down to the correct sample frame.
2. Insure that you have a representative sample so as to minimize systematic biases. Should you consider panels? In most cases, the web should provide good coverage for reaching various audiences, but you need to make sure that you considered connectivity characteristics of your target audience before you settle on web research.

**Question and Questionnaire design:** Are the questions clearly understandable to all and are they being asked in a fair and unbiased manner?

1. Make sure the questions are objective without leading the respondent to a specific answer.
2. Questionnaire flow should nearly always be general to specific and be sure to ask "unaided" questions before "aided" questions.
3. Think about the length of the survey. If possible, pretest it with your friends and colleagues who may fit your target respondent profile.
4. Are there tracking questions and standard wording you want to use to be able to track results over time? Define your key tracking questions or outcome variables for any modeling or multivariate analysis.

**Analysis and results:** Think about the end of the study at the beginning. Have you collected all of the data you intend to analyze and report on?

1. Before fielding your study, try to visualize the report elements, charts, graphs, tables, and multivariate results you intend to relay to your report audience. What are the key outcomes and metrics from the study and how will you present them?
2. Focus on results that are statistically meaningful, rather than things that just seem interesting, but may not be significant. Most software packages include significance testing and testing should *nearly always* be conducted at the .05 significance level (95 percent chance of being true, five percent chance of being false).
3. Respect respondent confidentiality – you must disclose upfront if the results of the survey will be used for marketing or targeting or will be disclosed to a third party. See the rules posted at the Council of American Survey Research Organizations (www.casro.org//privacy.cfm) for more information.

This is by no means an exhaustive list of topics, but the questions listed above are the same stepping-stones that professional researchers follow to stay on course. If you follow standard procedures and cautions, a well planned and executed DIY research project can be as powerful as research done by professional research companies.

### Secondary Research and Blogs as Research

Secondary research refers to the identification and use of existing data in a research project. Internet search engines provide a quick and easy way to find various secondary data sources. These sources include news articles, white papers, published results from other primary research studies, discussion boards, Usenet groups, trade journals, publicly available databases and published government statistics. In some cases, you may even find enough information to conclude that you do not need to do primary research. In other cases, information gathered from secondary research sources can help you design even better primary research studies.

An emerging secondary data source on the web is what is collectively referred to as "Consumer Generated Media" (CGM) sources. Some also call these Word-of-Mouth (WoM) media sources. Generally speaking these are web logs (blogs) published by private individuals or organizations relaying their opinions about variety of topics from the perspectives of variety of persuasions. The PEW/INTERNET and AMERICAN LIFE project, reports that "more than 53 million American adults or 44 percent of adult Internet users have used the Internet to publish their thoughts, respond to others, post pictures, share files and otherwise contribute to the explosion of content available online."

Not surprisingly, there is a growing list of companies that scan and synthesize blog information as input to research, or as its own research, including companies like BuzzMetrics and Technorati.com. There are other companies, like ExaSense and Content Analyst, that specialize in automatically coding and enumerating this type of unstructured content into a usable format for further analysis. Clearly, CGM sources are growing in importance and are viewed by many as a valuable resource on what's happening in society today.

Many organizations, including nonprofits, have been quick to recognize the marketing value of blogs. There are now literally thousands of blogs updated daily by eBusiness insiders, community advocates, policy makers and corporate leaders. At first, blogs were celebrated for their "cool" factor, but now blogs are being used to build personal and organizational credibility by leveraging this new platform to attract customers and lead to increased product and organizational buzz both online and offline.

## Conclusion

In his Self-Assessment Tool for businesses, Peter Drucker asked his five "most important questions": *What is our mission? Who is our customer? What does the customer value? What are our results? What is our plan?* Answering these questions should convert knowledge into effective action by engaging the board, the staff and customers (or donors) in a process of organizational self-discovery. The quality of the process is clearly as important as the discoveries themselves. As charitable organizations increasingly feel the pressures of competition that have been a fact of life in for-profit businesses, the urgency of this process, and good answers to all of these questions, increases. Well-designed and carefully-executed donor research, and a strong effort to communicate the results throughout the organization, are key steps in developing a plan for increased voluntary support.

**Justin Greeves** is vice president of the Roper Public Affairs Group's Washington, DC, office. Mr. Greeves has spent more than a decade working as a senior researcher for three of the leading market research firms in the world: WirthlinWorldwide, Harris Interactive and Roper. In addition to The Nature Conservancy, he has conducted custom research and consulted on brand strategy with many well-known organizations in the nonprofit arena including the American Red Cross, the American Lung Association, the Council on Foundations and Independent Sector.