

THE SILENT MAJORITY

Those who feel strongly about a subject are more likely to take action. The question is, where does the rest of the community stand?

THE COUNCIL CHAMBERS are packed, and tension is in the air. It seems like no one in the community wants to euthanize the prairie dog population that has been overtaking the city parks and ball fields. If only we knew whether there was a silent majority out there who would support a middle ground.

Almost every city administrator or town councilmember has been in this position on one or more occasions. And if it's not about prairie dogs, it's about historic preservation, trash collection, zoning changes, compensation plans, or snow removal. And it happens because those who feel strongly about a subject are more likely to take action, whether it be signing a petition or attending a public meeting, than are those who have no strong preference, prefer no action, or simply don't care one way or the other. The \$64,000 question is, of course, where does Richard Nixon's famed "silent majority" stand on the issue, and are they in fact a majority.

The obvious way to find out is, of course, to do a survey. But surveys aren't cheap, and thus aren't a practical way to cut through every issue that

comes before local governments across Colorado. But there are ways to incorporate survey research into your decision making in a cost effective way.

First, build surveys into your budget. You do need to keep in mind that, absent major intervening events (like the current economic downturn), tracking data shifts occurs relatively slowly. So there is no reason to consider doing a survey every year, but maybe every other or every third year. There are advantages to doing periodically scheduled surveys. When limited in that way, only a very small number of people will ever complain that you are spending too much money to find out what is on the minds of the people who live in your community. Staff also can save up questions and, if practicable, time major decisions to the time of the survey. Of course, this will never work for all issues, but for those that can be planned out, it will work exceptionally well.

Second, think creatively when it comes to polling. School districts, counties, and other community-based organizations often conduct their own surveys. If questions you would like to have on a survey come up, and don't conflict with

questions being asked in theirs, ask if you can pay them to piggyback a few of your questions onto their survey. This could help them reduce the cost of their survey, and allow you to get answers to your questions at a fraction of the cost of conducting a stand alone survey.

Third, proactively approach other branches of local government or community groups to see if they would be willing to do a true community survey, and share all the costs. Obviously, the questions will have to be limited to keep the survey length reasonable, but by keeping down the costs for each survey, you might be able to do them more frequently, thereby asking a complete survey's worth of questions over time.

When considering a survey, another issue is who should be surveyed. Some feeling comfortable doing a survey of just registered voters, pointing out that they are the only ones who are truly vested in the decisions that are ultimately made, as they have taken the time and responsibility to register to vote. Other communities, however, prefer to conduct a survey of all residents, not just registered voters, pointing out that local government



decisions affect everyone living in the community, not just those who vote. Voter surveys do tend to be less expensive, particularly when the sample is drawn off a readily available voter list, most likely provided by the county clerk at little or no charge.

Finally, there is the issue of how to conduct the survey: by telephone, through the mail, or via the Internet. Each methodology has its strengths as well as its weaknesses.

Telephone surveys today are challenged by the issue of the increasing number of cell phone-only households, as well as the nonresponse rate due to answering machines. That said, as evidenced by last November's election, phone surveys are still remarkably reliable in predicting the outcome of even close elections, given proper sampling and weighting. The advantage is that they tend to be fairly accurate, quick, and — most importantly — best at minimizing the single largest factor in skewing surveys, the issue of a self-selecting sample. This phenomenon exists when people agree to take a survey based on the subject of the survey, as opposed to their willingness to take a survey. With a

properly administered phone survey, respondents are not told what the survey is about before agreeing to participate. That is one reason that market researchers cringe when a city or town wants to publicize an upcoming survey, thinking that will get more people to want to take the survey. In fact, publicity does a survey a disservice by letting possible respondents know in advance what the topic of the survey is.

Conducting Internet surveys in most cities and towns is difficult and the results unreliable as the sample of email addresses will in most cases be extremely limited.

Mail surveys have their own set of benefits and problems. On the plus side, they allow for techniques (like ranking a variety of issues, picking items out from a list) which is difficult, if not impossible, to do to the same extent over the phone. They can be less expensive, but not by much if they are administered correctly. On the negative side, response rates are notoriously low for most mail surveys — usually less than 25 percent. But a properly administered mail survey (using the Dillman Method as a case in point) can easily achieve response rates

in the 50 percent to 70 percent range, but they entail using at least three mailings, the last being a certified mailing, which adds significantly to the price. A second drawback is that a properly administered mail survey will take up to two months just to mail the surveys and receive them back. It is a common occurrence to receive completed questionnaires as late as 10 months after they were last mailed out — long after results have been tabulated and finalized. Perhaps most significantly, all mail surveys suffer from a significant self-selecting sample issue. In its own way the mail survey is not unlike the packed council meeting — those with a gripe to air are more likely to take part. Finally, with mail surveys, you will never know who it is who actually filled it out. Was it a head-of-household or a grade school student?

Despite their potential drawbacks, properly conducted surveys can help municipal governments better serve their residents by ensuring that they are better able to hear from all their citizens — from the squeaky wheel to the silent majority.