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## The Nonprofit Nerd (January 2018)

The Nonprofit Institute at Portland State University

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# THE NONPROFIT NERD

Research you can use.

## This month's topic is Opinion Research

We recently sent out a survey about using data in nonprofit work. We received a lot of great feedback from many of you -- thank you! We are working hard to analyze the data from the survey to inform our decision making on our upcoming Nonprofit Data Lab project.

One of the many interesting things you had to tell us involved the challenge of learning about (and getting feedback from) people you *aren't* currently reaching through your programs. So, we are devoting this month's newsletter to a discussion of [opinion research](#) as one tool to consider adding to your toolbox! To learn more about how opinion research is used here in Oregon, we're featuring an interview with Su Embree of DHM Research, a Portland-based public opinion research and consulting firm.

*Let the resources and insights we share in The Nonprofit Nerd inspire you to get your nerd on and find innovative ways to make research and data work for you and your nonprofit!*



### RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Opinion research (sometimes called "public opinion research" or "market research") refers to a wide range of quantitative and qualitative approaches to researching opinions and how they change over time in groups and communities. You might be familiar with large-scale opinion research like the University of Chicago's [General Social Survey](#) or [Gallup's opinion tracking polls](#), but opinion research methods are used in a wide range of settings and at many different scales, to learn about the beliefs, attitudes and perspectives of groups of people.

Opinion research can be an important source of information during nonprofit strategic planning, providing key insights for [Landscape Analysis](#), or providing context for program evaluations. You also don't necessarily need to collect your own opinion research for data to inform your work! A number of research institutes regularly publish opinion research related to current events, controversial or important issues, and these data are often free, timely and relevant for nonprofits. Check out the available opinion research topics at [Pew Research Center](#), [Public Agenda](#), [Cornell's Roper Center](#), and for Oregon-specific insights, [DHM's Research Blog](#), which includes recent Oregonian perspectives on immigration, housing costs and economic policy. Nonprofits focused on environmental issues may want to check out Yale's [Climate Change Communication Center](#).

If you're interested in branching out to conduct some of your own opinion research, the University of Kansas' [Community Tool Box](#) includes a great, in-depth guide to help you think about questions you might ask using opinion research. If you're taking a qualitative approach to your opinion research (a great way to explore topics in-depth with local stakeholders), [Public Agenda's Choicework Guides](#) offer free and field-tested discussion guides on a range of topics that can be adapted to your organization's specific questions or community.

To reach more people or cover a wider geographic area, a number of firms maintain representative "panels" of survey participants who can be tapped to answer customized survey questions, and these panels can put robust survey methods within reach for organizations who don't have in-house data capacity. See Pew's [American Trends](#) for a description of how panels work, and read on for some suggestions from Su Embree for how smaller nonprofits can access lower-cost DIY survey tools. And finally, for the true nonprofit nerds out there, the [SAGE Handbook of Public Opinion Research](#) and the [International Journal of Public Opinion Research](#) are great resources to take your opinion research knowledge to the next level.



### NERDS AT WORK



This month we feature an interview with Su Embree, President and Principal at Portland-based [DHM Research](#), sharing her wisdom on how nonprofits can leverage opinion research.

**What are the most important things for people to know about opinion research? What are some common misunderstandings**

Opinion research can sway social and political discussions, influence policies, change voter behavior, and it can have a huge impact on how leaders make decisions. Community and business leaders make better decisions when they have an understanding of what the public values. Public opinion is NOT about the most vocal and organized group, which oftentimes is a small segment of the population. It's more often the quiet middle that represent the largest slice of our community. Opinion research is about getting a representative sample - a true cross-section of the community. Our work involves hearing from all voices in the community. We believe opinion research is about giving people a voice for greater community impact.

**What is the role for opinion research in nonprofit planning and decision making? Can you give us some examples of how your firm has worked with nonprofits and how it supported their work?**

Some of our best and favorite work is with nonprofits and foundations. They are mission and purpose driven, which aligns with our belief that opinion research is about greater community impact. [The Chalkboard Project](#) conducted one of the most comprehensive public opinion studies on K-12 education in Oregon. They wanted to understand the values and priorities of Oregonians to help shape their communication and messaging strategy. What did Oregonians value about K-12? What were their concerns? What changes did they want to see? Chalkboard also used public opinion in their media strategy with editorial boards, newspaper articles, and with other news outlets. Public opinion research is also valuable for board alignment and can help build consensus.

**How can opinion research help foster inclusiveness in programs? Have you seen this kind of research help organizations to engage multiple perspectives and become more culturally responsive?**

Being culturally responsive and engaging multiple perspectives first takes understanding the audience and recognizing the opportunities and challenges. It's helpful to have some data. Opinion research can help identify trouble spots in programming. It's also valuable to assess engagement, which is so important to an effective program. Who's engaged and who's not? Why? Data can provide a framework that isn't a one-size-fits-all model. It can determine the unique profiles and characteristics that are important to multiple audiences. It can uncover and create opportunities for stronger outreach through a better understanding of values and beliefs. I believe that opinion research is data with "feelings." The best opinion research is about understanding how people feel so we can make better connections.

**Related to your point about engagement, we often hear from nonprofit managers who don't know how to go about getting feedback from groups who they aren't currently reaching through their programs. How can opinion research help with this?**

The perspectives of groups that are small in size or traditionally underrepresented can get muddled or lost in a broad cross-sectional approach. We often find it useful to have longer, in-depth conversations with members of these communities in order to be sure we understand their values and concerns. In this case, public opinion results help nonprofits assess not just what members of a particular group think, but why. We approach this situation by soliciting genuine feedback in a culturally relevant way, while continuing to maintain a rigorous and sound analytical approach. This can help nonprofits reach goals of hearing from multiple audiences in a meaningful way.

It takes resources to have those in-depth conversations. Time and relationship-building can be part of the resources brought to the table. Organizations may look to more collaborative ways of including members of underrepresented communities in the research, as part of an on-going process to build partnerships and make meaningful strides toward inclusion and equity in their work.

**You mentioned that this work takes resources. Are opinion research tools out of reach for small nonprofits? For groups who don't have in-house marketing or evaluation support, how can they benefit from opinion research?**

All nonprofits can benefit from opinion research. We recognize research can be expensive. There are multiple "do-it-yourself" options that are free or charge a nominal fee. [Survey Monkey](#), [Getfeedback](#), and [Google Forms](#) are all accessible and easy to use. [Editor's note: [Survey Monkey Audience](#) and [Google Survey](#) also have lower-cost options for conducting panel surveys, including at the local level.] Follow some best practices and these guidelines:

- Quality over quantity - ask what do you need to know vs. what you want to know. This will keep the survey short and you'll get a better response rate.
- Get feedback on survey questions from regular folks, like your friends outside the industry, different partners, and even your family.
- Distribution of the survey can be the biggest challenge. Use your networks and offer the survey data or reciprocity in return.
- Know what's out there. Are there datasets you can access? You may be surprised at the amount of free data!

**Do you have any advice for those who want to learn more? Where should they start? What are some of your favorite resources?**

Check out [our website](#) for articles, blog posts, and additional resources. We also have some fun visuals and loads of free data.

*Know someone you'd like to see featured in the Nonprofit Nerd? [Tell us](#) who and why!*



### INSTITUTE NEWS

- If you missed the deadline to apply for this year's Professional Certificates in Nonprofit Program Evaluation or Nonprofit Fundraising, [let us know](#) and we'll add you to our interest list for next year.



### FELLOW NERDS

If you're interested in learning more about opinion research, NPI recommends you get to know the great work of these fellow nerds, some of whom are based right here in Portland!

- [Oregon Metro's Opt-In Project](#) (join a panel and weigh in on local issues!)
- [DHM Research](#)
- [American Association for Public Opinion Research](#) and their [Cross-Cultural and Multi-Lingual Research Affinity Group](#)
- [World Association for Public Opinion Research](#) and their [Guide to Opinion Research Polls](#)



### JOIN THE NERD NATION

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