

Media Interest is a Numbers Game

Hallmark Proves that Surveys with Humor, Reliable Stats and Surprise Answers Win Media Coverage

Reporters love surveys that impart interesting statistics to readers, particularly fun info or “brights” that will balance out the scandals and disasters on the front page.

And the best pitches combine numbers and a bit of lighthearted news. That’s why **Hallmark’s** recent “survey of American niceness” was a winner in the media-placement stakes.

A close look at Hallmark’s survey and its media strategy will provide you with step-by-step instructions for developing one of your own that will grab the media’s attention and promote awareness of your product or company.

Nice Move

The idea for a niceness survey germinated late last year as part of a marketing strategy for the greeting card company’s Gold Crown stores, its premier retail locations. The stores’ new ad campaign used the line, “When you’re nice on the inside, it shows on the outside.”

“It relates to the personality we’re trying to project,” explains **Amanda Hulshof**, Hallmark’s manager of marketing media relations. “What we wanted to do before the brand hit was to precondition the audience to the niceness idea.”

To develop the survey and handle media pitching, Hallmark called on Fleishman-Hillard’s Kansas City office. Vice president **Dan Barber** and senior account executive **John Armato** brainstormed on questions that would generate headlines. But they ceded the creation and actual surveying of some 1,000 individuals to Fleishman-Hillard’s research arm. “We talked to our research folks to decide what questions were sound in a statistical sense,” explains Armato.

The finished product, which took about three months from idea-stage to press distribution, contained a fun potpourri of stats on nice behavior. For instance, 80 percent of respondents said they are willing to hold a door open for

someone, but only 36 percent were willing to tell a friend that they had food stuck in their teeth; 65 percent are willing to loan a friend \$20, but only 43 percent would shell out the dough if the amount were \$100.

The press kit announcing the survey was sent out in March to 500 media outlets, and included a “self score” survey allowing people to determine their own niceness rating.

The survey got big play in daily newspapers, including a story in the coveted “orphan” slot in **The Wall Street Journal’s** *Marketplace* section. It also generated a lot of radio coverage, Armato explains. “A lot of radio hosts just picked out the self-score test out of the press kit and read it on the air.”

Survey Scoop

The folks at Hallmark and Fleishman-Hillard did a lot of things right in executing the “nice” survey. Here are the key elements that can make your next survey a success.

1. Fun: “The media love humorous surveys,” says **Eric Greenberg**, director of management studies for the American Management Association. “They’re soft news, and no one is going to get into trouble for using them.” From the get go, Hallmark intended the “nice” survey as an amusing look at social behavior.

The survey also poked some gentle fun at Hallmark’s own image as a purveyor of nice greetings. The willingness to use humor that plays off the product or company not only hammers home the connection between the survey and the client, but also appeals to the media.

In 1996, the **Quilted Northern** toilet paper company conducted a survey among travel writers, asking which countries claimed to have the best and worst toilet paper. “The tone we used was making fun a bit about what we were doing,” explains **Jaye Hilton**, group manager for **Bozell PR/Chicago**, which handled the survey for Quilted

Northern. “But the theme was comfort, and that reinforced the idea that this is one of the top toilet paper brands in the U.S.”

2. Impeccable statistics: The media needs to believe that your survey results, no matter how lightweight the theme, are statistically sound. Hallmark used a large pool of respondents and called on experienced researchers. “The credibility becomes crucial,” Barber says. “I had a number of reporters call me just to check on how the survey was conducted.”

A statistically sound survey also lessens the chance that the media will perceive it as self-serving. “We felt we balanced the self-serving interest with legitimate news,” says Armato.

This is particularly important for surveys that are more serious in nature. “If a PR person is preparing a release about a survey that shows the upside of his industry, it is good to include a downside list of concerns,” explains Greenberg. “Better to position your client as an expert in the field who can make critical comments on the findings.”

Hilton says you can expect the cost of a survey to range from about \$4,000 (for a random sample) to about \$28,000 for a survey for which a specific audience is selected.

Tip: Make sure you have at least a sampling of 500 respondents in your survey. “Five hundred is not exactly a magic number, but it begins to approach some level of respectability,” says Greenberg. “If you’re talking to random individuals, 500 is the bedrock, but a thousand is better.” If your survey is limited to a niche group (e.g., travel writers, women CEOs), you can get away with a smaller sample.

3. Good design: If a survey is designed to gauge a broad issue, the media won’t ask if it’s self-serving. “If we had asked 10 questions about people’s greeting card-buying habits, that wouldn’t have gone over,” says Armato.

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Good design also means building in questions that promise varied answers or surprise results. In other words, a survey that finds 75 percent of people think they're nice won't offer many hooks. But finding out that most people would hold a door open but far fewer would alert a friend to food-filled teeth is a fun comparison for the media.

Tip: Make sure your survey contains open-ended questions that invite longer responses, Armato suggests.

4. Multiple pitching targets: The varied questions built in to the Hallmark survey allowed results that would appeal to different media, Armato explains. For instance, a *Money* magazine reporter expressed interest in the results of the question about loaning a friend \$20 or \$100; and women's magazine *Self* asked about results to a question asking people to identify their best friend (women usually named another woman; men named their spouses).

Caveat: Don't go survey-crazy and bombard the media with a new one every month. "You've got to use them with

discretion," says Hallmark's Barber.

Tip: Consider making your survey an annual event if it's a hit the first time around. "You end up with comparative data, and you can say whether it's gone up or down from year to year," says Greenberg.

5. News hook: Even a lighthearted survey like Hallmark's carries more weight with a tie to a trend. The press kit included a release claiming niceness is "back in style," citing evidence like the popularity of the TV show "Touched by an Angel," and kids' idol Barney.

Tip: Keep your pitch to the media simple. "We summarized the findings in one fact sheet and also had infographics [bar charts]," says Hallmark's Hulshof. "That makes it appealing to the media."

6. Interactivity: The self-score niceness test allowed readers, listeners and viewers to get involved in the survey. Hallmark generated widespread placement among radio deejays and talk-show hosts, who read the test on the air.

Tip: Don't forget that interactivity also applies internally. "The more you

can integrate a survey into the Web site, the advertising and marketing, the more you'll score a hit with your client," says Hulshof about building support internally for a survey project.

In the same vein, make sure your client or CEO understands that you can't control survey responses. "Consider that you may come back with answers that may make your client institutionally uncomfortable," warns Greenberg.

While you can certainly plan out the general theme or "feeling" the survey should project, you can't guarantee the outcome, Armato says. "This is a legitimate research tool. Once that survey goes out the door, you live with what you get."

7. Source credibility: "It's not just anybody who can do a survey about niceness," Hulshof points out. The media will want to know why your company or client is positioning itself as an expert on a given subject, and you'd better have a good answer ready. "It made sense that this came from Hallmark," says Barber. "We know everything about being nice." ♦