



SMITH TRAVEL RESEARCH

## Ten Traps to Avoid with Employee Opinion Surveys

Reprint July 2, 2008 Article By James Houran, Ph.D. - 20/20 Skills™ Assessment

**The most productive and successful organizations maintain strong internal operations and strong internal and external relationships with all touch points of the business.** However, many organizations have never had the opportunity to evaluate themselves impartially and professionally on these two key outcomes. That is the ultimate purpose of Employee Opinion or Climate Surveys, and they should be conducted at least once a year. That said, critically assess your approach before you start a new survey program or prepare to launch the survey process upon which you currently rely. **In particular, there are ten predictable pitfalls that prevent organizations from conducting useful Employee Opinion Surveys.** Any one of these traps can substantially compromise the ROI you anticipated from the survey in the first place:

**Trap 1: No impartial survey partner.** Use a third party to administer and analyze the survey to ensure objectivity and to encourage candid feedback from respondents. Employee Opinion Surveys that are perceived as being a credible and "safe" forum by employees typically do not necessarily require additional incentives for participation.

**Trap 2: No validated survey.** Organizations should not develop custom content such as statements to be rated or open-ended questions on their own unless they have a questionnaire expert on staff. Writing survey questions seems simple and easy, but there is a science to it. For more information about this issue, see:

<http://www.2020skills.com/asts/Three%20Things%20to%20Know%20Before%20Conducting%20Your%20Own%20Surveys.pdf>

Rather than "throwing together" a list of questions whose meaningfulness is unknown, use an established survey. Select only providers whose surveys are well-validated and conform to the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. In this way organizations can trust that the survey content is relevant and

unbiased with respect to different levels of employment and employees of different backgrounds.

**Trap 3: No comprehensive survey.** Employee Opinion Surveys should measure more than subjective "employee satisfaction." The most useful surveys measure aspects of an organization's business practices (Operations) and manner in which an organization deals with its internal and external customers (Social Maintenance).

**Trap 4: No consistent format.** Use an online survey format to maximize confidentiality, response rate, efficiency and accuracy of the data collection. Plus, online surveys are more eco-friendly and cost effective compared to traditional pencil-and-paper formats... and often the results are available faster.

**Trap 5: No emphasis on behaviors.** Frame open-ended questions in the context of behaviors, not simply attitudes. This helps to ensure you receive specific and actionable feedback. For example, a company might ask employees: "Do you like working here?" or "Do you feel our organization satisfies its customers?" These types of questions often fail to extract concrete information on behaviors that is needed to build effective action plans for improving service quality. By contrast, we at 20/20 use two default probing questions: "What is the organization doing right to meet the needs of its employees and customers?" and "How can the organization improve in meeting the needs of its employees and customers?" The value with these approaches is that the questions now target specific behaviors in specific settings.

**Trap 6: No proper data analysis.** Most people who conduct surveys turnaround and analyze the data with outdated methods such as percentile rankings, percentages or raw-score sums. These approaches give only overly general information at best and downright misleading information at worst. This is because these approaches fail to detect and take into account response biases



## Ten Traps to Avoid with Employee Opinion Surveys (Cont'd)

related to respondents' age, gender and other background factors. When accuracy and validity of outcomes is critical, the best analytics to use are Item Response Theory. These are the same gold standard statistics used in such well-known assessments like the GRE, MCAT and LSAT. Item Response Theory also provides richer, more actionable information than traditional approaches.

**Trap 7: No segmented data for optimal impact. When sample size permits, have separate reports for different departments, divisions or properties. Analyses that aggregate results across the entire organization can mask important information. There might be an overarching company culture, but divisions or departments can have small but significant deviations from the umbrella culture that can impact survey responses.** We recommend segmented reports for teams with ten or more employees.

**Trap 8: No timely communication of survey results to employees.** Research shows that Employee Opinion Surveys add at least 0.70% to the balance sheet when organizations act on the results. Other benefits include increased employee retention, satisfaction and productivity. Therefore, present survey feedback to staff within 30 days of survey completion and develop action plans to address areas of concern within 60 days of survey completion.

**Trap 9: No selective or strategic action planning of survey results.** It is important to know that Operations and Social Maintenance issues are all interrelated. This is a strategic advantage, because it means that organizations can make substantial and positive impacts in the workplace without necessarily having to make wide, sweeping changes. Greater results are achieved if you impact key issues that will produce a domino effect. From among the survey results, decide on an action plan that best suits your needs and act on best predictors that will have greatest impact.

**Trap 10: No participation of employees in action planning the survey results.** Employees want to feel need and appreciated. Plus, employees often have excellent ideas about how best to leverage strengths of an organization and to address its blind-spots. Thus, take advantage of their knowledge and insight when formulating action plans for the survey results.

**When implemented well, Employee Opinion or Organizational Climate Surveys are wise, strategic business tools that contribute to your bottom line. They imbue employees with a sense of recognition, value and company "ownership." And survey results can guide revisions to business practices so as to enhance efficiency and profitability.** The paradox is that investments in tools to enhance organizational culture and functioning seem unnecessary when business is good, and they hardly seem prudent when

business is slow. Unfortunately, these mindsets are fatal impediments to enduring business success.

**Whatever the size or nature of your organization, the ideal is to move your business from one of "excellence to significance."** Reaching this goal involves understanding and enacting three key insights about your employees:

- ◆ Employees are also customers served by your organization.
- ◆ Employees have a valuable vantage point on the business and workplace culture that management lacks.
- ◆ Employees have valuable and unique insights into what works and what does not.

Simply stated, talent is the foundation of business success in the broad service industries. Whether you are administering an Employee Opinion Survey for the first time or are launching such surveys at regular intervals, take note of these serious but avoidable survey traps. You do not want anything undermining your ability to capture and leverage the wisdom of your employees. ▲

### *About the Author*

*James Houran, Ph.D., President, 20/20 Assessment™, is a member of the American Psychological Association, the American Psychological Society, the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International and the American Hotel and Lodging Association. Dr. Houran is a recognized expert on peak performance, online testing and interpersonal and organizational compatibility. He has authored over 100 journal articles, and his award-winning work has been profiled by a myriad of media including the BBC, Court TV, NBC's "Today show," USA Today, New Scientist, Psychology Today and Forbes.com. 20/20 Assessment™ is a service of HVS.*

*For more information on the best practice 20/20 Employee Opinion Survey™ or a free consultation on organizational issues, contact:*

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May 2008	Number of Rooms	Occupancy Rate (%)		Average Room Rates (in \$CAD)		RevPAR (in \$CAD)		Room Supply % chg	Room Demand % chg
		2008	2007	2008	2007	2008	2007		
Nova Scotia Area	1,424	55.6%	59.5%	\$105.82	\$93.40	\$58.84	\$55.57	-0.4%	-7.0%
Halifax, NS	3,477	79.8%	75.3%	\$142.77	\$130.94	\$113.93	\$98.60	2.9%	9.1%
Montreal Downtown	9,965	70.4%	77.9%	\$149.26	\$153.81	\$105.08	\$119.82	2.3%	-7.5%
Montreal Area	5,776	62.3%	67.2%	\$105.91	\$106.53	\$65.98	\$71.59	4.8%	-2.9%
Quebec City, QC	3,933	79.0%	69.2%	\$161.30	\$136.10	\$127.43	\$94.18	0.2%	14.3%
Quebec Area	5,720	54.5%	56.1%	\$119.23	\$115.06	\$64.98	\$64.55	0.0%	-2.7%
Toronto Downtown	13,735	81.3%	75.7%	\$190.26	\$187.40	\$154.68	\$141.86	1.0%	8.4%
Toronto North/East	6,683	65.4%	66.5%	\$118.66	\$117.59	\$77.60	\$78.20	4.7%	2.9%
Toronto Airport/West	8,166	71.6%	71.7%	\$118.61	\$115.84	\$84.92	\$83.06	4.2%	4.0%
Ottawa, ON	6,539	80.8%	80.2%	\$146.32	\$141.35	\$118.23	\$113.36	0.0%	0.7%
Ontario East	4,361	56.8%	58.8%	\$105.69	\$101.44	\$60.03	\$59.65	1.9%	-1.6%
Windsor/ Ontario SW	2,999	53.4%	56.4%	\$103.03	\$102.05	\$55.02	\$57.56	0.5%	-4.9%
London/ Kitchener	7,349	58.1%	59.4%	\$105.87	\$101.60	\$61.51	\$60.35	6.2%	3.7%
Ontario North/ Thunder Bay	2,204	67.4%	73.0%	\$91.98	\$89.61	\$61.99	\$65.42	0.4%	-7.4%
Ontario NC/ Sudbury	4,552	60.3%	58.6%	\$100.64	\$96.62	\$60.69	\$56.62	1.4%	4.4%
Niagara Falls, ON	9,533	62.4%	57.6%	\$130.80	\$130.95	\$81.62	\$75.43	0.1%	8.4%
Ontario Central	3,743	55.5%	50.4%	\$106.61	\$102.47	\$59.17	\$51.64	2.5%	13.0%
Mississauga, ON	5,847	63.5%	62.2%	\$111.52	\$109.97	\$70.82	\$68.40	0.4%	2.6%
Winnipeg, MB	3,419	71.0%	73.2%	\$107.98	\$101.97	\$76.67	\$74.64	-0.9%	-3.8%
Regina/Saskatoon, SK	4,573	76.8%	78.4%	\$114.99	\$105.26	\$88.31	\$82.52	2.2%	0.2%
Calgary, AB	8,478	73.7%	76.5%	\$152.42	\$143.17	\$112.33	\$109.53	1.0%	-2.7%
Edmonton, AB	7,763	75.2%	75.5%	\$122.98	\$117.52	\$92.48	\$88.73	3.9%	3.4%
Alberta North Area	3,252	61.3%	68.1%	\$155.10	\$148.10	\$95.08	\$100.86	4.4%	-6.0%
Alberta South Area	9,987	63.2%	66.6%	\$133.46	\$128.48	\$84.35	\$85.57	3.7%	-1.6%
Vancouver Downtown	8,247	83.5%	83.9%	\$187.49	\$176.52	\$156.55	\$148.10	2.3%	1.8%
Vancouver/ Burnaby Area	1,979	78.7%	83.6%	\$123.21	\$115.46	\$96.97	\$96.52	0.0%	-5.8%
Richmond-Surrey/ East Area	5,213	72.8%	75.2%	\$119.24	\$112.62	\$86.81	\$84.69	2.8%	-0.5%
British Columbia Area	6,080	55.0%	51.1%	\$122.57	\$116.20	\$67.41	\$59.38	0.6%	8.3%
Kamloops/ Kelowna Area	4,707	62.8%	63.8%	\$112.84	\$103.67	\$70.86	\$66.14	0.1%	-1.4%
Vancouver Island	4,292	71.2%	74.2%	\$136.33	\$132.25	\$97.07	\$98.13	1.2%	-2.9%
<b>Provinces</b>									
Alberta	29,480	67.1%	69.4%	\$127.94	\$121.26	\$85.85	\$84.15	3.4%	-0.1%
British Columbia	29,764	65.9%	67.5%	\$126.65	\$117.48	\$83.46	\$79.30	1.1%	-1.3%
Manitoba	4,342	61.9%	65.5%	\$92.85	\$85.50	\$57.47	\$56.00	-0.4%	-5.9%
New Brunswick	3,798	47.8%	51.5%	\$101.73	\$93.30	\$48.63	\$48.05	3.9%	-3.6%
Newfoundland	1,834	75.3%	74.0%	\$113.31	\$107.38	\$85.32	\$79.46	0.7%	2.4%
Nova Scotia	4,901	60.3%	57.5%	\$119.60	\$107.45	\$72.12	\$61.78	0.9%	5.8%
Northwest Territories	124	INS	INS	INS	INS	INS	INS	INS	INS
Ontario	75,711	64.7%	63.0%	\$122.91	\$119.34	\$79.52	\$75.18	1.9%	4.6%
Prince Edward Island	949	46.0%	41.5%	\$92.86	\$86.93	\$42.72	\$36.08	0.0%	10.9%
Quebec	25,394	59.8%	64.6%	\$119.18	\$114.00	\$71.27	\$73.64	1.2%	-6.3%
Saskatchewan	6,256	65.9%	66.2%	\$97.62	\$90.43	\$64.33	\$59.86	0.9%	0.4%
Yukon Territory	630	53.1%	54.4%	\$97.20	\$98.93	\$51.61	\$53.82	0.0%	-2.5%
Canada	183,183	62.4%	63.0%	\$119.42	\$112.74	\$74.52	\$71.03	1.7%	0.8%

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**DEFINITIONS**

Occupancy:	Rooms sold divided by rooms available.
Room Revenue:	Total room revenue generated from the sale or rental of rooms.
Average Daily Rate (ADR):	Room revenue divided by rooms sold.
Room Revenue Per Available Room (RevPAR):	Room revenue divided by rooms available (occupancy times average room rate will closely approximate RevPAR).

*If you have any questions regarding this publication please send a message to [bmacdonald@hvs.com](mailto:bmacdonald@hvs.com)  
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