

Getting to know your audiences

It's really important to have a good understanding of the people using your church, whether as part of your congregation, community, as visitors or volunteers. As well as helping you understand the types of facilities, interpretation and activities you might offer, you also need some benchmarks so you can confidently assess whether your heritage activities are actually making a difference. Not only will this reassure your funders, it will also help you target your scarce resources and funds as you continue to move forward.

Options for gathering information

There are lots of ways of gathering information about the people who do – and don't – use your church. You need to remember that numbers alone don't give us enough information. Numbers through the door can be a great way to demonstrate a new exhibition, for example, is bringing more people in, but it's much more helpful if you also have a good idea of who these people are, where they are from, how old they are, why they came, and how they found out about the church and event. It should also help you work out if they're likely to come back!

Setting up a questionnaire

One of the easiest ways to get a snapshot of who is coming to your church currently, what motivated their visits and what else might attract them in future, is using a simple questionnaire. You can prepare them easily on line, which makes sending them out (and completing and returning them) very quick and easy. Companies like SurveyMonkey are easy to use and offer up to ten questions for free (www.surveymonkey.com). Of course, not everyone is on line, so do print out some hard copies and circulate them as necessary too.

Tips to get the information you need

There's a number of things to think about and remember when preparing your questionnaire:

1. As ever, make sure you have a clear **aim** for your questionnaire, think about who it's for (**audience**) and what you want to convey about what you're doing and why (**message**). Stick to your aim and keep checking your work. You might like to start, for example, by finding out more about who uses your church currently and what might attract them in future. If so, use your ten questions to elicit this information – don't get sidetracked with other topics!
2. Keep your questionnaire as short, simple and quick as possible. People will give up if it's too long and complicated. Try out a first draft on friends and family – it is quick and easy to complete and does it tell you what you need to know? If not, go back and refine it.
3. You'll need a bit of preamble to explain why you're asking for information and/or feedback. Keep this very short and very positive (respondents won't even get as far as the questions if you ramble on too long at the beginning!) If there's more you want to say or explain, include a link to e.g. information on the church website; you don't need to say it all on the form
4. Start with a simple yes or no question that gives people a chance to demonstrate support straight away. E.g. Would you like to see more community facilities and activities at the church in future? Yes / no / don't know. Most people will say yes and that's a great start!
5. Don't use open-ended questions. People need a bit of help with the kinds of information you are looking for and it's much quicker to tick boxes than write in (and they won't be able to think of anything useful on the spot anyway, I guarantee.) For example, if you are asking whether the respondent has been to the church recently and what they went for, be specific. Ask 'Have you visited the church in the last twelve months? If so, what did you visit for?' Then have a tick list that includes a good selection of options from e.g. Church Service, Special Service e.g. wedding, Choral Event, Book Group, To Show Friends & Family around, To See The WWI Exhibition etc. Add the option 'None of these', just in case, plus 'Other' and a box to complete if they went for some other reason.

6. If they haven't visited in the last twelve months, you might also like to find out why not. Include a list of likely reasons based on the likely barriers you perceive – e.g. Didn't know the church was open; didn't know about the events programme – plus an option to write in something specific.
7. Use a similar approach as Point 5 to list the ideas you've had for future activities and events and ask which, if any, would encourage them to visit in future. Give them clear options plus to opportunity to write in their own ideas – you should encourage this kind of input!
8. You might want to ask for views on new practical facilities, such as toilets, heating, kitchen. Avoid wording that says 'Which of these additional facilities would you like to see at the church' as people are quite likely to tick them all. To get more meaningful feedback, ask them which of the facilities would make the respondent themselves – as opposed to everyone – more likely to use the church in future. This will help you assess real needs and priorities.
9. You might also like to encourage people to come forward as volunteers, but be careful how you word this as it will send some people running! You might like to list the kind of new volunteer-based activities you're considering, such as a Friends Group, a new website, a group to research church history. First ask if the respondent would be interested in *joining* one of these groups then ask if they would be interested in *setting up or running* any of them.
10. If you are inviting people to run events or get more involved, make sure your questionnaire includes an opportunity to leave contact details (name, phone number and/or email – keep it to the bare minimum). Make very clear how you intend to use this information and that you will not be sharing it with anyone else (assuming that's the case; if not, explain). Encouraging respondents to give you their contact details is also a great way of building up a mailing list, but if that's what you're planning, make sure you tell them this and enable them to opt out from your contact list at any point.
11. Be sure to elicit some information about the respondent. Be creative with your ten questions e.g. use one question to find out their sex and their age group (include 'rather not say') rather than using up two! It's also good to know where they live in relation to your church; options could be 'within the parish'; 'within ten miles of the parish'; elsewhere in the county etc. It's always useful to have views from 'outsiders' too, so use your networks to distribute your questionnaire beyond the immediate community if you can.
12. Finally, make sure you thank them for their time and that you welcome their views. You could include information about how they can find out more and/or where they can give you more feedback or other ideas if they want to.

Sample surveys and guidance

Here are some examples of surveys I have prepared for community projects. Feel free to have a go at filling them in. They're not directly relevant but will help you think about how to frame your questions and use the survey formatting to get what you need.

- Finding out about visitors and non-visitors to Kielder Viaduct
www.surveymonkey.com/s/6VX3XPR
- Eliciting support for installing audio visual equipment at Elsdon Village Hall
www.surveymonkey.com/s/ZFSYCNE

SurveyMonkey provides some useful tips on writing a good questionnaire:

www.surveymonkey.com/mp/survey-guidelines

Here are a couple of other websites about surveys and questionnaires:

<http://www.marketingdonut.co.uk/marketing/market-research/questionnaires-surveys-and-focus-groups/how-to-create-effective-customer-questionnaires>

<https://explorable.com/surveys-and-questionnaires>