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KNOW WHAT THEY KNOW
KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW

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A compelling scene in the movie "JFK" focuses on Donald Sutherland's character sitting at the foot of the Washington Monument in Washington, DC posing the question, "Who knew it, what did they know, and when did they know it?"

Information gathering takes many forms. Conversations (around the water cooler, in the grocery store line, at lunch) are informal ways to gather information. Reading, watching television, listening to the radio, and surfing the web are others.

Gathering informal information can be challenging: it takes a while, often isn't very accurate, and rarely includes more than a handful of people (usually acquaintances / co-workers). Although the results may give some indication of public opinion, it's hardly a representative sample.

The advertising business and the political consultants perfected the art of formal public opinion research years ago; but, until recently, it was slow in gaining popularity. From some of the world's largest and best known organizations to some of the most obscure, members / customers / constituents are now being asked what's important to them. And they're responding.

A basic membership scenario:
  • Jill joins a community-related organization in January.
  • Two weeks later she receives a 'thank you for joining' letter and is directed to the organization's website to verify her membership information. While at the site she volunteers to serve on a committee, and provides input on two issues of community importance.
  • In addition to all her other member benefits, once every 90 days Jill receives a follow-up member interest survey.
  • In part because of the recurring contact generated by the survey, Jill feels a strong connection with the organization, believes her opinion to be important to the group, enjoys reading about the results in the newsletter and on the website, and, at the end of the year, renews her membership.

Smart executives realize that the process of soliciting input and the subsequent results of the input are equally important for different reasons (retaining customers and generating new ones).