

## It's Time to 'De-Average' Satisfaction Ratings

How many times have you conducted a satisfaction survey of the attendees of your annual conference or continuing education classes only to find that the average ratings are all pretty much the same? Not only are there no differences among sessions, but the average satisfaction ratings don't seem to change from year to year, no matter what you do differently. With no distinguishable differences in average satisfaction ratings, it is difficult to use this information to provide meaningful feedback.

The reality is that there may be significant differences in individual ratings given by your members, but those differences are masked as soon as you calculate the average. Because an average is a measure of the "middle" of a set of numbers, the high and low responses offset each other.

As Table 1 illustrates, the distribution of members' responses can vary significantly for different areas of the association and still produce the same average satisfaction rating. Relying on a central number that neutralizes the extremes can be misleading. This brings to mind the college professor who suggested that using an average is like sticking your left foot in a bucket of ice water and your right foot in a bucket of boiling water and declaring that, "on average", your feet are at room temperature.

Even though the annual conference and the website have the same average satisfaction rating in Table 1, it would be a mistake to believe that members have the same opinion of both. These respondents are evenly split between being "delighted" and being "disappointed" with the annual conference, while all the respondents find the website's performance "acceptable".

**Table 1**

Response	Response Value	Member Benefits	Annual Conference	Member Services	Website
Excellent	5	20	50		
Very good	4	20		10	
Good	3	20		80	100
Fair	2	20		10	
Poor	1	20	50		
Total Responses		100	100	100	100
Average Rating		3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0

In spite of this basic flaw, averages are still widely used because they are easy to calculate and easy to understand. But there is an alternative. When analyzing opinions and attitudes, researchers use an alternative statistic that is just as easy to calculate as averages and gives better information. This statistic is called the top 2 rating. A top 2 rating is the percentage of respondents who gave one of the two best possible responses to a rating question.

Notice in Table 2 that the responses that produced identical average ratings produce different top 2 ratings.

**Table 2**

Response	Response Value	Member Benefits	Annual Conference	Member Services	Website
Excellent	5	20	50		
Very good	4	20		10	
Good	3	20		80	100
Fair	2	20		10	
Poor	1	20	50		
Total Responses		100	100	100	100
Average Rating		3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
Top 2 Rating		40%	50%	10%	0%

When analyzing responses to satisfaction rating questions, top 2 ratings are superior to average ratings for several reasons. First, top 2 ratings have the sensitivity to identify differences in response distributions, as shown in the table above.

Second, in order to change members' behavior (e.g. attend the annual conference, enroll in continuing education programs), it is necessary for them to be motivated. And in order for them to be motivated, they must first have a strong positive opinion. Only members who give a top 2 response have a strong positive opinion. For this reason alone, it is more important to know how many members' responses are in the top 2, than it is to determine what the average or middle rating is.

A third reason to use top 2 ratings is that when there are differences between the top 2 ratings from one year to the next, that change is meaningful. Changes in average ratings can sometimes provide a false sense of accomplishment. Table 3 illustrates this point.

In this example, the average satisfaction rating for this activity improved from year one to year two, while the top 2 score remained unchanged. Notice that the only change was that 50% of respondents changed their opinions from poor to fair.

Relying only on average satisfaction ratings would lead to the conclusion that the performance of this activity has improved, even though there has been no change in the percentage of respondents who have a strong positive opinion of this activity.

**Table 3**

Response	Response Value	Year 1	Year 2
Excellent	5	50	50
Very good	4		
Good	3		
Fair	2		50
Poor	1	50	
Total Responses		100	100
Average Rating		3.0	3.5
Top 2 Rating		50%	50%

Moving from average satisfaction ratings to top 2 ratings requires no change in how surveys are administered. The only change is the way in which the responses are analyzed and reported. Top 2 ratings are as easy to calculate as average ratings, and top 2 ratings provide a more accurate reflection of your members’ opinions of the experiences that you provide to your members.

About the Author

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