

Case Study Focus:

Exploratory Research

Non-Profit

Background

The May 2005 graduating class of college seniors holds the distinction of being the first group of students to have their entire higher academic tenure take place after the events of 9/11. Their total college experience was shaped by these terror attacks, the subsequent war on terror, and all of its consequences. The Partnership for Public Service, a Washington DC based non-profit agency whose mission is to inspire a new generation to serve and transform the way government works, wanted to be the first and formally discover how 9/11 has fashioned this group's worldview, affected their ideas about public service, and measure in what way it impacted their career choices. The Partnership's conviction was that the results would serve as a valuable resource for numerous government officials and agencies as well as journalists and the public at large, illuminating the challenges we face in the 21st century and how today's young adults perceive public service as a way to positively approach these challenges.

Why iModerate?

College students are a challenging audience to reach through traditional research mediums. However, these web-savvy individuals are accustomed to communicating online, so despite their transient nature they tend to hold onto their e-mail addresses even when their phone and physical contact information changes. Therefore, The Partnership chose the Internet as the best vehicle to overcome the traditional hurdles of effectively communicating with this audience. In addition to conducting an Internet survey with this group, The Partnership wanted to be able to speak directly with these senior to get a clear picture of the "why" behind their career choices and more precisely, the thought processes driving the survey answers they gave. iModerate's one-on-one qualitative sessions in conjunction with their existing quantitative survey was the perfect research combination to achieve the desired results.

Methodology

The national survey of graduating college seniors took place May 2-5, 2005. Participants were selected using Survey Sampling International's SurveySpot Panel. The sample of 805 college seniors had an accuracy of +/- 3.5 percent at the 95 percent confidence interval. A subgroup of 101 participants took part in iModerate's live, one-on-one interview sessions on May 2-3, 2005. These respondents were randomly intercepted during the survey and were directed back to the study for completion after the iModerate sessions.

iModerate Session Objectives

- Discover what was fueling the respondents' interest/lack of interest in working for the federal government.
- Understand how the respondents define public service and government work, and how they think of them as career choices.

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- Gauge the impact of 9/11 has had on this group of students' view of public service, working for the government, and on their career choices.
- Establish the best ways to speak to and reach this audience so that they consider the government a reliable career path.

Results

The iModerate sessions added tremendous color and depth to an otherwise standard quantitative study allowing The Partnership to attain insight and clarity around respondent data. The one-on-one interviews helped expose why today's college seniors perceive public service the way they do, how 9/11 and the war in Iraq affected their early adulthood and views on government, and what these students need to hear and feel to develop a more positive outlook towards public service and government work.

For example, when questioned about public service in general, it was revealed that students do not immediately equate public service with government. Only 19 percent of this year's graduating seniors described government work as "completely" a form of public service. In tandem with this data, the one-on-one chats exposed that their definition of public service can best be summarized as having "anything that has a direct effect on the people being served." This designation alone provides valuable insight into their perceptions and how potential employers need to speak to captivate this audience and impact their choices.

"When I think of careers in public service I think of teachers, mentors people willing sacrifice some of their time to encourage and raise the standard of living for the poor...I think of the government as more of keeping structure in our society."

The survey data also demonstrated that one particularly strong barrier to working in this area is that the student's perceive the public service arena as low paying when compared to the corporate sector. This student's sentiment backs these findings and strengthens what the data revealed to be the key motivators for the class of 2005; salary and recognition.

"Most of this generation has been raised to get the job, get the goal, get the promotion, and public service does not provide for the same kind of external accomplishment. Now the same kind of recognition we're looking for. It's not a healthy thing but it's how we've been raised. This is the age of movie stars and sports heroes and who wants to do public service when you can be a millionaire."

As iModerate's moderators dug deeper it became evident that public service and/or government work was not believed to satisfy the audience's key motivations. Even those whose stimulus stemmed from service the greater good did not see government as the

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best vehicle to accomplish this. Instead they view it as a place where people often toil in obscurity with limited ability to have an impact.

“There is little room for voice in the government...there is a set of established ways and little can be done to change them.”

Moreover, many of these students see government as a vague, impersonal body that to them is daunting and undefined. They were hard pressed to understand the many different facets of the government and how their education and skills might correspond. In fact, 12 percent of respondents said they don't even know what careers in government were available. In the sessions, many students cited this problem and were quick to offer these solutions: Portray the government more specifically, highlight individual opportunities, humanize the vase body, and show students exactly how in government they could work towards their goals and have the meaningful impact.

“For me, honestly, if I know that I would actually be making a difference in areas that I was concerned about I would be more likely to enter into public service.”

As expected, respondents had much to share about the impact of 9/11 on their lives. Most said it served as a wake up call, and made them more aware of government. As a result they are “critical consumers.” A deeper understanding of this new consciousness comes from session excerpts such as this:

“It has totally changed the way many of us feel about government. Some of us don't feel safe, don't feel the government is going everything that they can to prevent some things that have occurred, other feel the government is doing well with what we have. Overall I think we watch what's going on around us more than we did before.”

In short, the iModerate sessions proved extremely significant for The Partnership for Public Service as they garnered substantial information from this hard to reach audience utilizing a medium that college students gravitate towards. The sessions helped to clarify many lingering hypotheses and provided more substantial findings on which to act on. Furthermore, the media found the entire study so compelling that many outlets chose to publicize it, including: *The Wall Street Journal, USA Today, The Associated Press, United press International, The Chronicle of Higher Education, FedSmith.com, Federal Times, FedNews OnLine, and Federal News Radio.* This wide spread publicity made the study front page news, offering its significant results a tremendous public platform on which to stand.