

SURVEYS, RESEARCH AND BIAS-FREE QUESTIONS

Written by [Cindy Simpson](#) on July 12, 2018

The Association for Women in Science (AWIS) has been around for almost 50 years. We are multi-sector and multi-discipline with members in universities, corporations, government, non-profits, and all areas of science. Recently, we have noticed a change in the makeup of our membership, with many younger members joining the organization, in addition to our mid- to senior-level members. However, there has also been an increase in the number of other organizations available for people in our sector to join. **This competitive landscape makes it all the more important that we remain tuned into the needs of our industry.**

RESEARCH: WHO, WHAT AND WHY

When we were initially growing AWIS, we threw a lot of projects at the wall to see what would stick. **Now that we're more mature as an organization, it's important to be strategic and intentional in our investments.** Risk and innovation is good, but the stakes are higher. We infuse effective research practices into every level of our organization to ensure we are on the right track before we begin a new project.

We have conducted a number of surveys and focus groups to ascertain exactly what it is our members need and the types of professional development that will meet their goals and objectives. If we don't understand and collect that critical data, we could go down a path that is not supported or

beneficial for the organization or, more importantly, our members. I recommend including non-members in these focus groups and surveys to get a broader perspective, and to find ways they might be brought on board.

We use the information we obtain and synthesise it to decide what products, toolkits or workshops to make available to our chapters and members. Web analytics help us to understand which new markets we should explore, and to determine the validity of the market we're currently in. During a recent makeover of our website, we've taken note of which pages get the most hits. The research section of our website is the most viewed by members and non-members alike, so we have built that section out to include more of our research, while keeping certain content exclusive to members.

CASE STUDY: GENDERED LANGUAGE AND BIAS

We have conducted collaborative research with about 20 other professional scientific societies on the topic of awards and recognition.

There is a correlation between awards and recognition provided to women and the amount of biases that exist in the nomination process, the structure of the awards, and the makeup of the committee. One form of bias revolves around the use of gendered language. **When people hear certain words, they associate them unconsciously with a certain gender.** Male-associated words are those that are described either as standout, ability, or research. Examples of standout words are excellent, superb, magnificent, supreme; ability word examples include intelligent, brilliant, capable, analytical; and research word examples are method, manuscript, grant, or research.

Female-associated words are generally thought of as those that are used to describe women and are identified as either grindstone or teaching words. Examples of grindstone words include hardworking, meticulous, methodical; teaching words include instruct, course, service, or lecture.

Why is this important? **When writing survey questions, it is particularly important to pay attention to language.** For example, in learning more about a potential candidate to hire, a question could include “Describe a time when you used analytical skills to address an issue which showcased your innate talent” (analytical and innate are both thought of as male-associated words). Another example would be “If you missed an important meeting because your administrative assistant did not put it on your calendar, how would you counsel her?” (assumption is that the administrative assistant is a female). To combat the influence of bias, survey questions should be constructed to be as free of bias as possible.

Research like this can go beyond the boundaries of the association and benefit all facets of an industry.

Cindy spoke in the “Exploring New Markets: How Research, Analytics and Risk Assessment Can Help” session during SURGE Spring, an interactive virtual summit hosted by AssociationSuccess.org on May 2nd-4th. Click [here](#) to register to watch the sessions on demand.