

Survey says: The role of surveys in your evaluation

Tips from Wilder Research program evaluation workshop series

Your evaluation can benefit your organization in a number of ways. It can help you measure how well you are serving your clients, find out what's working and what's not, influence policy, and raise funds.

Often, your evaluation will require that you obtain new information, and there are a number of ways to do so. One of the most common methods is using a survey.

When to consider using a survey

Surveys allow you to gather information from people in a written form, such as paper-and-pencil or online questionnaires (as opposed to interviews, which are completed in-person or over the telephone). Surveys have two key advantages over other collection methods: they are relatively easy to conduct and they allow you to gather information from a large group of people in a cost-effective way.

A survey can be a good choice when your questions are well-defined and have a limited range of possible answers, when you have contact information for the people you are seeking information from and believe they will be willing to complete the survey, and when you have the ability to process and analyze the relatively large amount of data you collect. They can also be a good choice if you are collecting information about a sensitive topic.

However, a survey may not be your best choice if:

- You want information from people who have limited literacy skills, including children.
- You need in-depth information about people's experiences or perspectives.
- You want to interact with your respondents, by clarifying questions or providing them with information.
- You only need to gather information from a few people.

- Your intended respondents represent cultural communities for whom structured surveys are a less familiar or uncomfortable strategy for gathering information.
- You do not have a way to contact potential participants.

Confidentiality

It is often desirable to keep surveys anonymous, that is, not requesting information that might help you identify the respondent (e.g., name or social security number). If survey respondents do not need to provide this information, they may feel more comfortable giving honest information.

However, there are a number of reasons you may need identifying information. You may want to connect survey data to other information (e.g., service records or background information) about participants. If you are collecting surveys at two points in time (e.g., before and after service delivery) you may need to match them. You may also need to collect names in order to distribute incentives to those who completed surveys.

Collecting names or other identifying information does not need to be a deterrent for respondents. Often people are comfortable providing their names, so long as the reason for collecting that information has been explained to them.

Consent forms

Generally, consent forms are not necessary for anonymous surveys. Signed consent forms may be necessary, however, if you plan to:

- Include children or others who cannot provide their own consent (in which case you need consent from a legally authorized person, such as a guardian).
- Collect very sensitive information.
- Use the results for purposes other than program improvement, such as publication, training, or participation in a larger research project.

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Designing your survey

It's important to identify your evaluation goals and priorities, what information matters most, and develop a measurement plan *before* you begin designing your survey.

It is also important to collect surveys from as many people as possible. A higher response rate increases the likelihood that the opinions of your respondents will reflect the perceptions of your entire target population.

As you design your survey, some things to keep in mind to help you increase your response rate and to collect accurate data include:

Keep it focused – Review your data collection goals before designing your survey. What is essential to find out? How will the information gained through the survey help you answer key evaluation questions?

Consider your audience – Make sure the survey is culturally appropriate for participants in terms of language, measurement approach, and questions asked. Also, make sure it is developmentally appropriate for the age of your participants.

Keep it short – Make the survey long enough for you to gather needed information, but not so long as to tire or annoy respondents. If your survey is too long to be easily completed, consider whether all of the information is necessary and whether you could gather some information using a different strategy.

Use closed-ended questions when possible – Use closed-ended questions – structured with response choices (e.g., yes/no or agree/disagree) – whenever possible, since these types of questions tend to be easier to answer and analyze.

Keep it clear – Provide respondents with clear, brief and easy-to-follow instructions. Use basic vocabulary, free of professional jargon. Some surveys use “skip patterns,” which means that respondents may be asked to skip some questions depending on how they answered other questions. Skip patterns should be used only if necessary. If they are used, they should be easy to follow.

Present questions neutrally – Make sure nothing in the question or the response choices suggests a “right” answer.

Review and pretest the survey – Have several people similar to your intended respondents complete the survey and provide you with feedback about questions that were hard to understand or answer.

Encourage participation – Explain the purpose of the survey, why it is important, and how you will use the information.

Make it easy to return – If the survey is being done by mail, provide a stamped addressed envelope for respondents to use to return the survey. If the survey is being done at your agency, provide a clear and easy place to anonymously return it.

Allow enough time, but not too much, to complete – If the deadline is too far away, respondents may be more likely to forget to complete or return it. Depending on your target group, you might want to allow a few days to a few weeks to complete the survey.

Provide reminders – Issue a reminder to increase the likelihood of someone completing a survey. If time allows, two to three reminders are better. Reminders may be given multiple ways: email, phone call, postcard, personal contact, or signs in your agency.

Offer incentives for participation – It does not need to be large or expensive; a small gift certificate or cash can be effective, or, depending on your audience, free participation in an event or a t-shirt may do the trick. If you do not have funding, consider seeking donations.

For more evaluation tips, go to www.wilderresearch.org and click on Tools for Effective Community Work (under Research Topics).

FEBRUARY 2009

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