Wilder Research

Don't shelve that evaluation!
Tips from Wilder Research program evaluation workshop series

The main value of program evaluation lies in using its results. Most often, evaluation findings are used to understand a program's strengths and develop strategies for providing services that are more effective and cost-efficient. You can also use it to influence policy, raise funds, and market your program.

Creating a good product

Evaluation does not have to be time-consuming or extensive to be worthwhile. However, it is important to consider these steps to ensure that you end up with useful information.

- Know your audience – Who are the most important stakeholders for your results? What are they most interested in knowing?
- Know your resources – Design a process that can be ongoing, systematic, and within your budget.
- Spell out your program's theory – why do you provide your service?
- Build a logic model – illustrate how program activities will result in outcomes.
- Prioritize what information is most vital to have, given your resources.
- Decide how you will collect information.
- Consider ethical issues such as protecting client confidentiality.
- Create tools for gathering information. Make sure they are easy to use and will provide you with valid and reliable information.
- Gather information in a systematic way. Monitor and ensure activities get completed correctly.
- Analyze and organize your information in a way that will meet the needs of your stakeholders.
- Involve staff and other key stakeholders throughout the process.

Using your results

Choosing the right communication strategy
When sharing your evaluation findings, it is important to select the right communication strategy for each of your audiences. For example, program managers will be most interested in findings and implications, while legislators may want a brief piece that highlights key findings and recommendations for action. In determining your approach, consider what will be the easiest and clearest way to present the information to your key stakeholders.

- Consider what information will impact and what might overwhelm your audience.
- Determine if each audience is interested in 'hard facts' or a more anecdotal narrative of the evaluation findings.
- Avoid jargon and acronyms, specifically those terms which might be common within your field of interest but might be lost on the general public.
- Practice cultural sensitivity in sharing results.
- Use clear and concise writing, and include charts and graphs where appropriate.
- A short summary report can be more effective for some audiences. If you are creating a longer report, consider dividing the results into several smaller reports.

Improving service
Your program evaluation can be very useful in making your program more effective. Some things to think about include:

Program outcomes:
- What outcome areas showed the highest success rates? What program activities do you think contributed to these outcomes the most? Why?
- What outcome areas showed the lowest success rates? Were these success rates below the level expected or below an acceptable level? How could you strengthen programming? Are there new program activities to consider?

Satisfaction levels:
- In what areas were program participants most satisfied? What activities do you think most contributed to these ratings?

- In what areas were program participants least satisfied? How could you strengthen services to increase satisfaction?

Service delivery
- How much service did participants receive? What kinds of service? Was this consistent with the program's intended service approach? If not, should the program be modified to increase or decrease the amount of service each individual receives?
- If the program was based on an established service model, did it faithfully replicate the original model? If not, why not? How do you think the changes in the model may have impacted the program outcomes?
- What challenges and barriers to service delivery were encountered? How can you reduce them in the future?

When making program decisions, consider:
- Developing an action plan, identifying what needs to be done, by whom, by when.
- Consider both short- and long-term strategies.
- Prioritize key strategies that are most relevant to your program's goals.

Influencing decision-making
Evaluation can be a powerful tool when working toward broader change and improvement at a policy level. The following tips can help you influence decision-making of your board, executive team, outside funders, partners, and even policy makers at all levels of government.

Talking with decision-makers
- Make your point quickly.
- Understand your audience may hold different opinions, values, backgrounds.

- Demonstrate you know what you are talking about and show your passion for the subject.
- Be prepared to answer questions. And if you don't know the answer, say so but get back to the decision maker with the correct answer.
- Use personal stories to capture what the data represent.

Designing your evaluation
- Involve policy makers and/or their staff on your evaluation advisory committee.
- Understand the questions public officials want answered about service effectiveness and what they consider good evidence.

Using results for marketing and fundraising
Evaluation can enhance the reputation of your organization, help you increase visibility in your community, and increase your funding opportunities.
- Promote outcomes not just client satisfaction.
- Create a visual comparison of impact. For example, the Surgeon General drew attention to the impact of tobacco on the United States by describing it as the equivalent of a jumbo jet crash every day of the year.
- Package your findings for the audience you are trying to reach: Use media campaigns, annual reports, brochures, your web site, and one-on-one meetings as opportunities to communicate your successes to your stakeholders.
- Show the "return on investment" for putting money into your program. Can you demonstrate the benefits are greater than the costs?
- Use your evaluation findings to determine what grants to pursue, then include them in grants to make your case and to give you a competitive edge.
- If you have positive evaluation results to share from a demonstration project, you may be able to use that information to secure more funding.