

WRITING GOOD SURVEYS

Tips for conducting program evaluation

You have identified the information you need to answer your evaluation questions and developed a plan for collecting it. The next few tips sheets will review common data collection approaches. This tip sheet provides recommendations for developing and using surveys.



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). Compared to other data collection approaches, surveys are relatively easy to conduct and allow you to gather information from a large group of people in a cost-effective way. 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.

Developing your survey

Closed-ended versus open-ended questions

Closed-ended questions are structured and provide respondents with response choices (e.g., yes/no, or agree/disagree). Open-ended questions ask respondents to provide answers in their own words (e.g., How would you improve the services that you received?).

Closed-ended questions should be used whenever possible, since these questions tend to be easier to answer and analyze. It is often recommended that at least 70 percent of the survey be closed-ended.

Save open-ended questions for areas where you want deeper responses or where you cannot provide a meaningful set of response options.

To gather the most useful information, be careful in selecting the response choices for closed-ended questions. Remember that your response options should be:

- Mutually exclusive and non-overlapping.
- Exhaustive, containing every logical alternative response.

Developing survey, continued:

- Balanced, with both positive and negative answers.
- Relevant and appropriate from the respondent's perspective.

Order of questions

Respondents should understand the order in which questions are asked and be able to move easily through the questions without confusion. Consider the following:

- Choose your first question carefully. It is crucial in determining whether the respondent will participate. Make sure it is clearly relevant, easily understood and answered, applicable to everyone, and interesting.
- Group questions into coherent sections (e.g., those that deal with a specific topic or those that use the same response options are formatted together).
- Place “sensitive” questions that respondents may be uncomfortable answering as close to the end of the survey as possible.

Writing effective questions

It seems like writing a good survey should be easy. However, there are some common errors in survey writing that can limit respondents' ability or willingness to complete the survey. To avoid these errors, consider the following:

- Keep each question short and use simple sentence structure – it is generally recommended that surveys be written at a fifth or sixth grade reading level.
- Use basic vocabulary that is free of professional jargon.
- Present questions neutrally – make sure nothing in the question or the response choices suggests a “right” answer.

- Think carefully about words and phrases that may have double meanings – especially if you are of a different age, ethnic/cultural background, or educational level than the respondents.
- Be specific about time frames.
- Avoid questions that are too abstract.
- Avoid asking questions that require unreasonable amounts of time or work to answer.

Formatting

The appearance of the survey is also important – the fonts used and the layout of the survey will influence how easy or difficult it is for respondents to complete the survey.

- Provide a title that identifies the purpose of the survey – use a bold, prominent font.
- Separate each distinct section of the survey with appropriate headings and subheadings.
- Use an easy-to-read, clean font such as Times or Helvetica.
- Do not crowd the survey – make sure that the survey has “white space.”
- Include brief instructions in each section, explaining how to respond.
- If using a two-sided survey, clearly indicate that additional questions are on the other side.

Review and pretest the survey

Before you begin to collect data, it can be especially helpful to read the survey out loud, so that you can determine how the survey flows and identify questions that sound awkward or unclear. Also, 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.

Sample survey questions

QUESTION	CRITIQUE
<p>In the last month, how many nights did you spend in a shelter?</p> <p>a. None b. 1-5 nights c. 5-10 nights d. 10-15 nights e. 15 or more nights</p>	<p>The response options are overlapping, making it more difficult for respondents to select the correct answer. For example, someone who spent 10 nights in a shelter could select option (c) or option (d). This will also make it harder to interpret the results.</p>
<p>How helpful was the program staff?</p> <p>a. Very helpful b. Somewhat helpful</p>	<p>The response options do not cover the full range of possible response that people may want to give. They are also not balanced, since they do not allow respondents to provide negative answers.</p>
<p>How often have you been the victim of abuse?</p> <p>a. Very frequently b. Somewhat frequently c. Somewhat infrequently d. Very infrequently</p>	<p>The question itself is vague, as it requires each participant to define for themselves what it means to be an abuse victim. It will be difficult for you to interpret their responses, as you will not know what they meant by “abuse.” The response options also need more clarity. Terms such as “frequently” can be defined differently by different respondents.</p>
<p>How often have you traumatized your child by hitting him/her? _____</p>	<p>The question has a judgmental, rather than a neutral, tone. Parents may not feel comfortable providing an honest answer. This may also not be a good choice for an open-ended question. Response choices should have been provided, so that survey responses could be easily tabulated. As is, you may receive a range of answers that are not easily compared, such as “sometimes” “once a week,” or “3 times.”</p>
<p>Have you ever been prescribed psychotropic medication?</p> <p>a. Yes b. No</p>	<p>Survey respondents may or may not know what is meant by “psychotropic medication.” It may be more useful to ask respondents whether they have been prescribed any medication to help them manage emotional issues.</p>
<p>How many times have you seen a counselor for emotional or social support? ____ times</p>	<p>The time frame for this question is unclear. Respondents will not know whether this refers only to services recently received from your agency or to a longer time period, such as their entire lives. Unless the number of appointments was very small, most people will have difficulty answering the question accurately. Many will either need to spend a great deal of time reviewing records to answer the question correctly, or will simply guess at the answer. It may be better to obtain this information from agency service records.</p>

Getting a good response rate

A significant disadvantage of surveys is the risk of a low response rate. People may choose to not complete surveys for a variety of reasons, such as being too busy, not being interested, or feeling that it is not important. However, there are ways to help overcome this, including:

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? Make sure that each question appears relevant to the respondent.

Keep it short – Make the survey long enough for you to gather needed information, but not so long as to tire or annoy respondents. There is no set rule about how long a survey should be. Many respondents will take the time to complete a survey, so long as it is relevant and easy to answer. 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.

Keep it clear – Provide respondents with clear, brief and easy-to-follow instructions. 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.

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 the survey.

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 – Issuing even a single reminder can 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, postcards, 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.

While it is extremely unlikely that you will receive surveys from everyone that you invite to participate, it is important to collect surveys from as many people as possible. The lower your response rate, the more cautious you should be in interpreting your survey results. As your response rate declines, it becomes less likely that the opinions of your respondents will reflect the perceptions of your entire target population.

Other things to consider

Translating in other languages

If you translate the survey into another language, have bilingual individuals review the original survey and the translated version, to ensure that the meaning of the questions did not change.

Paper vs. online

While many surveys are done on paper, online surveys have become increasingly popular. To complete a survey online, potential survey respondents receive an Internet link, which allows them to answer questions directly on their computers. While this may be a quick and convenient approach, online surveys are not always the right choice. Consider issues such as your intended audience's access to the Internet and comfort with computers before selecting this approach. If you do choose to do an online survey, there are numerous Internet sites (such as Survey Monkey or Zoomerang) which allow you to create and collect surveys for a small fee.

Anonymity and confidentiality of survey data

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, such as service records or background information

about participants. If you are collecting surveys at two points in time (such as before and after service delivery), you may need to match surveys together. 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, however. Often people are comfortable providing their names, so long as the reason for collecting that information has been explained to them.

Regardless of whether surveys are conducted anonymously or not, information that is provided should be kept private to the extent possible.

- Allow respondents to have a private way of returning surveys, such as providing them with a return envelope that can be sealed. Do not require respondents to hand their surveys directly to a staff person.
- If you anticipate that there may be situations in which you would violate confidentiality (such as in situations where you may be mandated to report child abuse), explain that in advance to participants.
- Once you have received surveys, keep them stored in a safe and secure place where they will not be seen or read by others.
- Do not discuss the results of individual surveys with others, especially if that information will reveal the identity of the person who completed the survey.



Quick links to more information

Basic Guidelines for the Development of Survey Items. Excerpt from: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Evaluating Juvenile Justice Programs: A design Monograph for State Planners. Washington, DC: Prepared for the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by community
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA/evaluation/guide/documents/basic_guidelines_for_the_develop.htm

Developing and Using Questionnaires. United States General Accounting Office (GAO), Program Evaluation and Methodology Division
<http://buos.unl.edu/buos/jsp/search.jsp>



In future tip sheets

Conducting interviews (July, 07)

Ethical issues in conducting evaluations (October, 07)

Analyzing and understanding data (January, 08)

Find previous tip sheets on the web: www.ojp.state.mn.us/grants/index.htm or www.wilderresearch.org.

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