COLLECT MEANINGFUL DATA: Survey Design Basics

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Purpose: Surveys are a fairly quick, cheap and easy way to get information from people. You can do surveys to assess community needs, test the success of a program, request input from staff, or gather feedback from clients after participating in a program or event. The simplicity is deceiving; surveys need to be done well for the data to give you good information. Here are some things to consider.

1. Construct Your Questions

Operationalize

What do you mean by "job satisfaction" for this survey? Do you mean confidence in ability to do the job, how much they like the job, or something else? What do you *really* want to know?

Avoid Value Language

Use neutral language. Example: a question about a "homeless problem" introduces bias into your data by assuming your respondents think homelessness is a "problem".

Social Desirability

People are usually honest, but also want to be seen as a good person. So, asking questions that are too sensitive (such as: "Are you racist?") may not get accurate answers.

Cognitive Load

Minimize the cognitive work it takes to take the survey; set your respondent up for success in completing the whole survey. Avoid making users calculate or remember too many details.

Language Basics

- Be **specific**
- Use **simple words**
- Be **clear, not vague**
- Keep it **short**
- **Don't talk down** to respondents

Think about Content

- What are you **actually** trying to measure?
- Do you need to **change wording** to be able to compare to other data?
- Have the ?s been **tested**?

Surveys Ask About

- **Behavior:** What do you do? What have you done?
- **Attributes:** Who you are - employed, gender, race.
- **Attitudes:** Do you favor a policy? Beliefs on topics.

Uses for Surveys

- Pre- and Post-tests when trying **new process, program, or resource**.
- Gathering **opinions**, understanding **processes**, gauging **interest**, etc.

2. Order Your Questions

- **Beginning:** Easy questions that directly relate to the topic give respondent confidence to complete survey.
- **Middle:** More challenging questions (not too hard!)
- **End:** Boring and demographic questions.
- **Very End:** Open-ended question ("Any other comments…")
- **Be sure the question order does not bias the responses.** Example: don't put questions about sexuality close to questions about sexual assault. This can seem to say sexuality is bad.

3. Ask about Demographics

- When possible, let people **self-identify** race, gender, and sexuality. Note: open-ended (write any answer) questions get more info, but checkboxes are easier to analyze.
- To be able to **compare with public data**, use similar language (e.g. Census categories). Balance this with client needs *(see the **Collect Meaningful Data: Being Responsive to Community** empower Tool)*.
- End all surveys with an open-ended question asking for **any additional comments** about the topic.

4. Increase the Response Rate

- Get **respondent buy-in** by providing clear information:
  - The **research goal** (example: "The purpose of this survey is to understand…").
  - **How data will be used** (such as, "Your responses will be used to improve the way the program…").
  - **What you are asking** of the respondent (example: "This survey will take about 10 minutes…). *Be honest!*
  - **Ensure confidentiality** and tell your respondents you will keep their identities confidential right up front.
- Provide a **clear timeline**:
  - **Send advance notice**: 7 days before sending/holding survey.
  - **Give a clear deadline**: such as, "Submit survey by Dec. 31."
  - **Send reminder:** 7 days before deadline.
- Consider giving a **small incentive**[2]:
  - **$2 & $5 cash stipends** increase response rates, especially when paid before survey begins. Cash is best. In kind services/gift cards are okay.
  - Offer to **share results.**
- Make survey **accessible and engaging:**
  - Don't ask too many questions. Don't make it too hard to complete. Give respondents something interesting to answer early in the survey to engage their interest.

Online Survey Tools

There are many online survey programs that help you build, distribute and analyze online surveys. Visit the MLWC website: Resources/Survey Tools for a list of some options.

When to Use Paper Surveys

Sometimes using paper surveys and pens is better. For example:

- To survey participants at an event and get all responses.
- When you don't have email addresses for all participants
- When you have just 2-3 quick questions.

Paper Survey Tips

- Use 1-2 pages maximum.
- Make it easier to read: put spaces between questions; don't crowd text on the page.
- Help explain the survey to motivate responses.
- Provide support those unable to read. Be careful not to bias the results!
- Manual data entry = more time and errors

Try a Flash Survey!

Get quick information (1-3 questions) using a phone or tablet! Use easily recognizable words or symbols 👍👎☺😐☹, simplified questions, and a touch screen (if possible) to get quick answers.,

SHOULD WE SURVEY?

Pros

Cheap and easy to reach a wide audience (online).
Allows respondents to answer confidentially (less bias).
Relatively easy to analyze data.

Cons

Paper can be costly, time-consuming (paper surveys).
Surveys/question types do not work for all groups.
Harder to collect and analyze qualitative data.

Common Wording Problems in Surveys[1]

PROBLEM	WHY IT MATTERS	SOLUTIONS
Unclear (vague) wording • Do you actively support home visiting programs in your community?	Hard to answer (cognitive load) • Assumes respondent knows about home visiting. • Support how? (Believe in? Participate? Fund?)	Context & definitions • King County has... [explain program]. Would you be willing or not willing to [specific action]?
Ask two questions at once • Do you favor publically funded home-visiting programs and doula services?	Hard to answer (cognitive load) • Asking about two things at one time • What if you favor one but not the other?	Break into two questions • Do you favor...home visiting programs? • Do you favor...doula services?
Built-in bias • More Americans exercise regularly now that they did 10 years ago. Do you exercise regularly, or do you not exercise regularly?	Influences (biases) the answer • Seems to say "everyone exercises" - may influence respondents's answer. • How do you define "excercises," "regularly"?	Neutral language & definitions How often do you usually exercise (such as bike, walk or swim)? A. Never, B. 1 time/wk, C. 2-4 times/wk, D. 4-6 times/wk, E. daily
Unbalanced choices • How do you feel: 1. Do not agree, 2. Agree, 3. Strongly Agree (More options on agreeing.)	Influences (biases) the answer • Skews the data to one side over the other, adding bias	Balance the choices 1. Strongly agree, 2. somewhat agree, 3. Neither agree nor disagree, 4. Somewhat disagree, 5. Strongly disagree
Difficult to remember, calculate • How many times did you buy coffee for yourself last year?	Hard to answer (cognitive load) • Time period (year) is too long to remember. • Slows down/frustrates respondent (may skip).	More usable time periods Never, 1-12 times [monthly], 13-24 times [twice monthly], 25-52 times [weekly], more than 52 times [>1 weekly]
Not mutually exclusive • Summer • Fall • Spring and Fall • Winter	Hard to answer (cognitive load) • What if your answer is fall? Which do you choose? • What if your answer is spring and not fall?	Options that don't overlap • Summer • Fall • Winter • Spring
Not exhaustive • $10 to $20 a week • $20 to $30 a week • More than $51 a week	Hard to answer (cognitive load) • What if your answer is $35 a week? What do you choose? • What do you choose?	Provide all options Make sure every person who takes the survey will be able to answer.

Sources
1. *How to Conduct Your Own Survey* (1994). Salant and Dillman.
2. *7 Factors for Choosing Survey Incentives* (2015). Sandy McKee. surveygizmo.com/resources/blog/survey-incentives-guide

We encourage you to share these resources with your organization, and other local social service organizations. PLEASE NOTE: this handout is the intellectual property of The Capacity Collective. Please do not duplicate parts, or adapt, without the express permission of The Capacity Collective. Thank you for supporting our work!