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*Collecting Evaluation Data:
Surveys*

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UP FRONT PLANNING OR THINK BEFORE YOU JUMP

Too often we jump into planning and conducting a survey before we've taken time to see if a survey is warranted, appropriate for our evaluation questions and needs, likely to have buy-in and provide useful information. Conducting a valid and meaningful survey takes time, energy and resources. Devote some time up front to consider its likelihood of success.

So, before you begin planning a survey consider the following questions. These are critical to address before initiating any evaluation:

1. What is the purpose of the evaluation?

Why is this evaluation being undertaken? What is it expected to achieve or to provide insight about?

2. Who will use the information?

Is this evaluation only for your own use? Are there others who are asking for this evaluation? What are their expectations and agendas? Who else might be interested in the process and results of the evaluation?

3. How will they use the information?

What will the different users do with the evaluation results? What decisions or actions are likely to be influenced by the results?

4. What questions will the evaluation seek to answer?

What specifically do you and others want to know?

5. When are the evaluation results needed? What's your time line?

6. What are your own abilities and skills? Are there others who can help?

7. What resources do you have or can access, including time, money and people?

Deciding to undertake a survey depends not only upon the type of information you want but also upon a number of human, political and financial factors. For further assistance in planning an evaluation, see *Planning a Program Evaluation* (UW-Extension publication G3658-1)¹.

¹ All UW-Extension publications referenced in this document can be downloaded via the Internet at www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluat.html

Surveys are one of the most popular ways to collect evaluation information. Most of us have conducted a survey of one type or another. This manual is written to help community-based educators improve their practice. It is designed to provide basic information and practical tips to help you design and implement better quality surveys. It provides

- Guidelines for choosing a survey method that is appropriate to your needs
- Steps in survey planning to help ensure thoughtful, successful surveys
- Tips for implementing mail and telephone surveys
- Ways to increase response rates
- Suggestions for discussing results when response is less than expected

This manual does not cover data processing and analysis or using your survey results. Likewise, questionnaire construction and sampling, important aspects of survey design, are covered in companion UW-Extension publications. Some of the many excellent resources on survey methods are listed in the reference section for additional guidance.

WHAT IS A SURVEY?

A survey is a way to collect information directly from people in a systematic, standardized way. Surveys use questionnaires that ask the same question in the same way to all respondents. Data collected this way can then be used to make inferences about the population of interest (e.g. farmers in your county, parents who attend a parenting workshop, etc.). Information can be collected about people's opinions, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, plans and backgrounds. Surveys are used in needs assessments and opinion polls, as well as to

evaluate the process, outcomes and impacts of programs and policies.

Surveys can be carried out in a number of different ways: through the mail, over the telephone, in face-to-face interviews, as handouts, electronically (e-mail or web-based surveys) or a combination of these methods. They may be conducted at a single point in time, at repeated times or concurrently with multiple samples. Surveys may be used to collect information from a relatively small number of people or from many thousands. They may be used to collect information from all members of a particular group or from a sample of the target population.

WHEN IS A SURVEY APPROPRIATE?

A survey is most appropriate when your evaluation questions and information needs are best answered by the people themselves. Often we want people's own reports of their opinions and behaviors. Often there are things we cannot see directly, such as attitudes and beliefs. Or, we may not be able to observe people's actions, such as their daily consumption of fruits and vegetables. So, we have to ask them.

Not all information, however, is best collected through a survey. It may be more direct and useful to use another method.

A variety of alternatives exist such as:

- Observations
- Existing data, records, documentation
- Tests of abilities
- Case study

For example, it may be more useful to actually observe land management practices than to ask a participant if s/he is using the

recommendation. Or, it may be difficult for a person to know how many times s/he attended meetings of the community collaborative over the past year or the decisions and actions taken by the group. An analysis of the attendance register and the minutes of the meetings would be better sources of information.

It is most important to be clear about the information you want and need to collect. Then, you can decide if a survey is appropriate. If your purpose is to find out the percentage of individuals who think or do something, and the information is not available from existing sources, a survey is most likely appropriate.

A survey is just one of various ways to collect information to answer your evaluation questions. Ask yourself, "Is a survey the right tool for this job?"

CHOOSING A SURVEY METHOD

There are five main survey methods: mail, telephone, face-to-face, handout and electronic. Each method has advantages and disadvantages. No single method is superior to another. Each needs to be assessed in terms of the survey content, respondent characteristics, time line and available resources.

Survey Content

- What types of questions will be asked? How complex or sensitive are they?
- Would people be more likely to understand and respond to questions presented in print or orally? Anonymously or in person?

Respondent Characteristics

- From whom do you want to collect information?
- What is the easiest way to reach them?
- Do they have certain characteristics that rule out one method over another (e.g., literacy skills, no telephone, etc.)?

Time Line

- How quickly do you need results?

Available Resources

- Who will work on the survey?
- Will you have help from outside experts in planning and managing the survey?
- What facilities will you use?
- How much money do you have to spend?



Hand Out Surveys

Hand out surveys are often used at the end of a program for immediate evaluative feedback. Hand out surveys are a good choice when:

- You want to capitalize on having respondents available (e.g. already convened at a conference, attending a fair, etc.)
- You need or want immediate feedback
- You have limited resources
- You may not be able to reach the people again (e.g. mobile populations)

When using hand out surveys, you can personally convey the purpose and importance of the survey to respondents. Most people are likely to consent to completing a survey when asked in person. You are also available to answer questions respondents may have.



Mail Surveys

Mail surveys are most appropriate when you are working under the following conditions:

- You have a complete and accurate mailing list
- The people you are surveying have some interest in the survey topic and are likely to respond
- Your targeted respondents have adequate reading and writing skills
- You want to give respondents time to consider their answers or other information when completing the survey
- You want to give respondents privacy when completing the survey
- You need to survey a relatively large number of respondents
- You have limited resources

Mail surveys present several challenges. To ensure that your survey reaches the intended respondents, you need a complete and accurate mailing list. Mail surveys are also vulnerable to low response rate. That is why mail surveys are more effective when potential respondents have some interest or stake in the survey topic and are likely to complete it. Finally, respondents fill out surveys privately, without assistance, prompts or clarification. You have no way of knowing who is actually filling out the survey. Respondents may skip parts of the survey or have someone else assist them in completing it. Because of this, you have less control over mail surveys than hand out or telephone surveys.



Telephone surveys

Telephone surveys are the most appropriate method to use when:

- You need results relatively quickly
- Your target audience has telephones
- Members of your target audience would have difficulty completing a written questionnaire (e.g. respondents have low literacy rates or poor eyesight)
- Your survey questions are clear and easily comprehensible
- The survey is relatively short
- Staff is available to do the calling

Approximately 95 percent of U.S. homes have telephones. However, those households without telephones tend to be occupied by people with lower income and less education than the general population. In addition, people living in rural areas, younger heads of households and ethnic minorities are less likely to own telephones than the general population (Lavrakas, 1998). Obtaining information from these groups may present a challenge if you use the telephone survey method.

Telephone surveys can be completed in a relatively short period of time and give you more control over the process. Callers can provide additional information and clarification (in a standardized manner for each respondent), probe for more information from respondents and encourage them to answer all questions. Callers can be more sure that the person completing the survey is the one intended to complete it. It is usually easier to get higher response rates for telephone surveys than for mail surveys.



Face-to-Face Surveys

Face-to-face surveys often yield the best results but they tend to be time consuming and expensive to implement. They are well suited to situations where you do not have an address or phone list or when respondents are not likely to answer willingly or accurately by phone or mail. Because a face-to-face survey is actually an interview, the person conducting the survey needs to have sound interviewing skills. This may mean investing additional resources for training staff in these skills.

Face-to-face surveys are appropriate when:

- There is no list for the population being surveyed
- People do not have a telephone or cannot be reached by mail or telephone
- There is concern that people will not respond willingly or accurately
- The questions are complex and may need in-person explanation
- The budget is not an issue

While face-to-face surveys may be costly, they have certain strengths. You can be more certain that the person who you want to respond actually is the one who answers the survey. You can personally explain the importance of the survey and assure the respondent of confidentiality. Flash cards or other aids can be used to help people understand the questions and answer choices. The personal approach of the face-to-face survey helps put the person at ease and may increase willingness to participate.



Electronic Surveys

Electronic surveys use computers and the Internet to distribute and collect information. For simple surveys, you can use e-mail to communicate with respondents. Web-based surveys use more advanced technology and allow you to create complex instruments using multimedia and interactive features.

E-mail surveys are appropriate to use when:

- Members of your target audience are reachable via e-mail
- Your survey is short and simple
- You need results quickly

Web-based surveys are a better choice when:

- Members of your target audience are regular Internet users
- Your survey is more complex (e.g. responses to each question determine which questions are answered next, etc.)
- You have access to the services of a consultant who can help you with the technological aspects of Web survey design

PLANNING A SURVEY

Once you've decided to conduct a survey, take time to plan it well in order to save time and expense later. There are a number of things to consider as you plan your survey. This is not an ordered step-by-step process. Many of the following factors will be considered simultaneously as you plan a meaningful survey.

1. Decide who should be involved in the process

Involving intended users and key stakeholders in the survey leads to greater commitment and helps ensure the survey is relevant and is used. Key people might be involved in the planning, questionnaire construction, data collection or analysis and interpretation. They might serve in an advisory role, be 'helpers', be involved in or manage one aspect of the survey or be fully involved throughout survey implementation.

Who has a vested interest in the survey? Who else might be interested in the process or the results? How might they best be engaged? As you lay out the tasks that need to be done, you may delegate certain responsibilities.

2. Define survey content

Clarifying the specific content and topics of the survey is difficult but necessary; otherwise it is possible to include a lot of questions that do not answer your needs. Defining the survey content means setting boundaries so you can write the correct questions. Begin by determining what you want to know and defining any terms that may be vague or ambiguous. For instance, you may want to know if youth who participate in a leadership development program actually improve their leadership skills. Leadership

can be expressed in various ways. What does leadership mean in this program? What aspects of leadership are you interested in? What would improved leadership look like among this group of participants?

Second, focus on your priority information needs. Make a distinction between what it would be nice to know and what you need to know.

Third, ensure that the potential survey respondents can actually provide the information. Sometimes people are reluctant to respond to certain topics or are not able to respond. That is, they may have forgotten, may not know or don't have enough information to respond accurately. In such cases, it is better to seek another source of information, remove the topic from the survey or wait until the respondents are able to answer.

Finally, don't include topics in your survey that you are not able to act upon or do anything about.

3. Identify your respondents

From whom will you collect information? With relatively small programs, you may need to include all participants in the survey to have enough data. Or, there may be cases where political considerations demand that all people in the district or city be included. Often, however, surveys collect information from a sample, a subset of a larger population, to save time and money. If you use a sample, you will need to determine a sample size and sampling method. For help with this, see another Extension publication, *Sampling* (UW-Extension publication G3658-3).

4. Decide on the survey method

Choose a survey method that best suits your topic, respondent characteristics, time line,

experience and resource availability. As indicated in the previous section, one survey method is not better than another. However, one method may be more suitable than others depending upon the situation.

5. Develop the questionnaire

All surveys use questionnaires. However, the number and type of questions, the format of questions and the layout of the questionnaire vary depending on the type of survey you choose. Questionnaire development is more an art than a science and it always takes longer than you expect. Plan on writing several draft questionnaires. In your planning, include adequate time to develop a clear, comprehensible questionnaire that elicits the information you need. Working with others often helps build a better questionnaire.

When you are developing the questionnaire, review the specific content and topics of the survey in order to keep your questions directed to what you want and need to know. Be sure that you cover the complete content that you identified as important to the survey. Often it is good to write more questions than you will use and then discard the extras.

There are many ways to write questions and format a questionnaire. The quality of your questionnaire largely determines the usefulness of your survey results. For more information on questionnaire development, see *Questionnaire Design: Asking Questions with a Purpose* (UW-Extension publication G3658-2).

6. Pilot test the questionnaire and other materials

Pilot testing is another key step along the path to ensuring a good quality survey. Plan

for when and with whom you will conduct the pilot test. The pilot test should be done with a small number of respondents who are as similar as possible to your potential respondents. Pilot testing helps you answer the following questions:

- Do respondents understand the questions?
- Do the words you use mean the same thing to all respondents?
- Do the questions elicit the type of information you want?
- Do respondents seem to understand the instructions?
- How long does it take to complete the survey?

Sometimes we need to pilot test several times before arriving at a satisfactory questionnaire. Consequently, you may wish to plan a bit of extra time for the questionnaire development and pilot testing steps. Remember that the pilot test data is not included with the survey data, and the respondents who participated in the pilot test do not complete the actual survey.

7. Think about analysis

Often it is useful to construct a hypothetical report before you even start to collect data. This helps you focus on what you need to know, what you want to be able to say, and what analyses you will need in order to say it. Your data analysis needs should be considered at the same time you are choosing your sample size and sampling method.

Do you only need frequencies and percentages? Will you have sufficient data to compute anything more than averages? Do you need to be able to talk about subgroups within the respondent population? Will you use hand tabulation or is the data set so large that a computer program is needed? What resources and capabilities do you have?

Often our analysis abilities and resources determine what our survey looks like.

8. Communicate about your survey and its results

Plan for communications. When and how will you communicate with stakeholders? Some may want regular updates as the survey is being planned and carried out while others may only want to know when results are available. Who will need and want to know about the results? When will the results be released? In what format? To whom? Some up front planning with responsibilities laid out will help ensure that your survey is used.

9. Develop a budget, time line and management process

Undertaking a survey is not without costs. There are costs associated with staff time, equipment and materials (phone charges, envelopes, printing, computer, etc.) and postage costs for mail surveys to name a few. Each survey method has a different price tag attached. While costs of surveys are hard to estimate and can differ substantially depending upon sample size, wage rates and the amount of volunteered time and supplies, in general, mail surveys are the least expensive and face-to-face surveys are the most expensive. In any event, it is important to consider your resources, identify all expected costs and develop a budget accordingly.

A management plan helps you structure time, resources and responsibilities. A simple work sheet, as seen in Figure 1, can be used to list tasks, estimated time needed for each task, who is responsible and resources needed to accomplish the task.

Often we have a deadline for evaluation

results before we even begin the planning. If that is the case, you may work backwards from the finish date, estimating the amount of time associated with each task and adjusting when possible to be able to meet the deadline. In other cases, you work forward from the project beginning data and may have more flexibility about time lines. Figure 2 shows an example of a Gantt chart useful in planning and managing time lines in a survey project. It lists activities, when they are expected to begin and how long each will continue. The time frames illustrated in the chart are merely suggestive since each survey differs depending upon its size and scope.

As we plan a survey, trade-offs always exist. Expediency and resource constraints more often determine how a survey gets implemented than any grand plan. However, good planning can help us use our resources more thoughtfully and effectively.

IMPLEMENTING A SURVEY OR GETTING IT DONE

The following section list the steps involved in completing mail and telephone surveys. Many of these tasks are similar to what you would do for other types of surveys with minor adaptations.



Mail Surveys

Develop the questionnaire

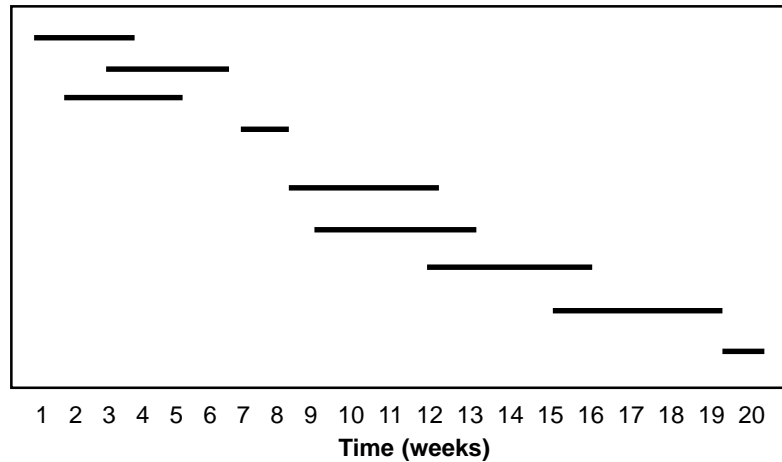
In addition to coming up with specific questions, you need to design the questionnaire to “fit” the survey method. The important thing to remember when designing a mail survey is that the questionnaire should be visually appealing, easy to read and complete. This increases the likelihood that

Figure 1. Example Management Planning Work Sheet (small-scale mail survey)

Task	Begin-end date	Person responsible	Resources needed
1. Talk with committee members about their involvement in the survey; purpose and expectations of the survey; uses of the survey; time frame	May 15 th mtg	Sue, Chad	
2. Determine specific information needs; prioritize information needs; seek consensus among key stakeholders	May 16- May 30	Sue, Chad, Ron, Mary	
3. Share knowledge about the respondents; seek additional information if necessary; determine sample and procedures	May 16-May 30	Sue, Chad, Ron, Mary	Demographic profiles
4. Discuss pros/cons of various survey methods – make decision	May 16-May 30	Sue, Chad, Ron, Mary	Survey design info
5. Develop questionnaire. Share final questionnaire with committee and key stakeholders	1 st draft: June 5 2 nd draft: June 15 3 rd draft: June 25 Final draft: July 15	Sue. Everyone will draft questions; Sue will put it together, circulate drafts for review & finalize	Help with formatting questionnaire; graphics support
6. Pilot test. Make revisions.	July 15- Aug 30	Mary to organize and supervise	Help with identifying individuals
7. Develop cover letter, materials, mailing lists	July 15- Aug 30	Sue	Clerical support
8. Administer the survey	Sept – Oct	Sue	Printing, postage, envelopes, clerical support
9. Update committee and other key stakeholders on survey progress	Oct 1	Sue, Chad	
10. Process and analyze the data	November	Chad	Computer software; clerical support
11. Report and communicate	Report due: December 1	Ron, Chad, Sue, Mary: review	Printing; slide preparation; clerical support

Figure 2. Example of a Gantt Chart

1. Develop questionnaire
2. Pilot test questionnaire
3. Develop other materials
4. Assemble all needed materials
5. Collect data
6. Code and enter data
7. Analyze and interpret data
8. Write reports
9. Publicize findings



respondents fill it out. Keep the following tips in mind:

- Order questions logically.
- Use plenty of white space.
- Give brief instructions on how to complete the questionnaire exactly where they are needed.
- Use a type size large enough to be easily readable (at least 10 point).
- Separate different components of the questionnaire by using different type styles. For example, put questions in bold and response choices in regular typeface (Figure 3).
- Use arrows to show people where to go next (Figure 3).
- Don't include information for internal use only, e.g. data entry instructions.

Figure 3. Example of formatting

1. Do you own or rent the place you live in?

a. Own → GO TO QUESTION 10

b. Rent

↓

2. What is your monthly rent?

Pilot test the questionnaire

When pilot-testing a mail survey, you can have respondents complete the questionnaires in person rather than receiving them through the mail. This way, you can see how people fill out the questionnaire and where problems may exist. Ask the pilot test group to fill out the surveys; then “debrief” the participants to get their feedback.

Decide if responses are to be anonymous or confidential¹

Respondents may feel more comfortable knowing their individual responses can't be identified (anonymous). However, this increases your survey costs. You have to send follow-up mailings to all respondents since you don't know who has already responded.

Develop a cover letter to send with the survey (Appendix A). Personalize it as much as possible

- Include information about the purpose and importance of the survey.
- Identify the survey sponsor.

¹ Anonymous means individuals' responses **can't** be identified. Confidential means individuals' responses **won't** be identified.

- Explain your involvement with the project. Use letterhead, if appropriate.
- Explain why the respondent was selected to participate.
- Explain how the respondent will benefit from completing the survey.
- Assure respondents of anonymity or confidentiality.
- Explain how results will be used and give instructions for requesting a copy of results.
- Give instructions for returning the survey.
- Supply contact information.
- Hand-sign the letter.

Develop advance notice materials for respondents

These may be in the form of a letter (Appendix A), a postcard or a brief phone call. The advance notice alerts respondents that they will be receiving a survey and may have them “on the lookout” for the materials in the mail.

Develop follow-up postcards to remind respondents to return the survey

Alternately, you may develop a brief phone script to use if you choose to follow up with a phone call (Appendix A).

Prepare mailing materials

In addition to the survey, cover letter and follow-up postcards, you also need mailing labels, outgoing envelopes and return envelopes. The idea is to personalize these materials as much as possible.

- Mailing labels: print out enough sets of mailing labels to correspond with the number of mailings you plan to do. If you plan to track responses to your survey, print an extra set to use as a master list and number each label on this set sequentially.

- Outgoing envelopes: experts recommend using stamped envelopes rather than metered mail or indicia.

- Return envelopes: always include a self-addressed, stamped envelope (SASE). Again, experts recommend using stamped envelopes rather than business-reply envelopes.

Do advance notice about one week before you begin the survey

Send out advance notice letters or postcards or make phone calls to your target audience.

Assemble mailing materials and send first mailing

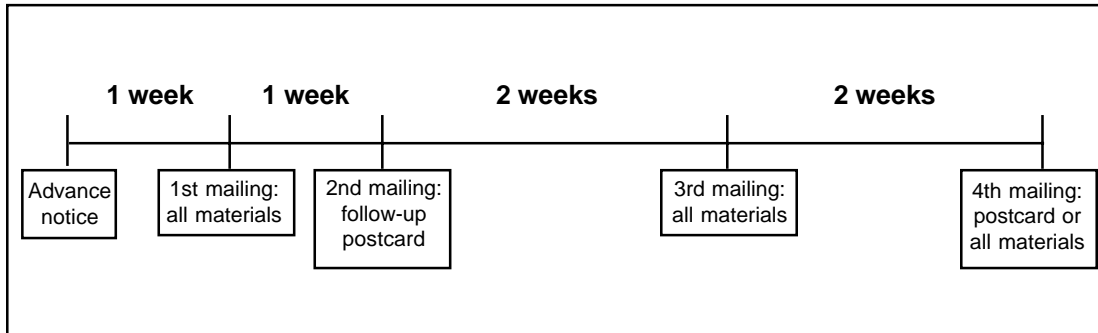
If you plan to track responses to your survey, number each one sequentially to correspond with the mailing labels. Make sure to match the numbers on mailing labels with the numbered surveys when you put the materials in the envelopes. (If you don't plan to track survey responses, this is not necessary.) The first mailing includes the cover letter, survey and SASE.

Track survey responses

As surveys are returned, remove mailing labels from the master list so that duplicate mailings are not sent. (Again, if you are conducting an anonymous survey, this step is not necessary.)

Send follow-up postcards

This postcard should remind respondents that they received the survey and emphasize how much their input is valued. Send this one week after the first mailing.

Figure 4. Time line for sending mail survey materials**Send second complete set of materials**

Do this about two weeks after you have mailed the reminder postcard. You may also change the tone of the cover letter to place

more emphasis on the importance of the nonrespondents' contribution and to again ensure confidentiality or anonymity.

Send final mailing

This can be either another complete set of materials or a final reminder postcard. Establish a deadline for responding. Do this about two weeks after the last mailing. Figure 4 illustrates a time line for sending mail survey materials.

**Mail survey checklist**

- Complete planning process
- Develop the questionnaire
- Pilot test the questionnaire
- Decide if survey is anonymous or confidential
- Develop a cover letter
- Develop advance notice material
- Develop follow-up postcards
- Prepare mailing materials
- Do advance notice
- Send 1st mailing
- Track survey responses
- Send follow-up postcard
- Send 2nd mailing
- Send final mailing
- Process data
- Analyze and interpret data
- Write reports
- Communicate findings

**Telephone surveys****Develop the questionnaire**

Telephone surveys are designed to make it easy for the caller to ask questions over the phone and for the respondent to understand and respond to those questions. Keep the following recommendations in mind:

- Develop a brief introduction to use when first contacting the respondent (Appendix B). Include:
 - The caller's name
 - The organizational sponsor
 - A procedure for making sure the correct respondent is on the telephone
 - The purpose and importance of the survey

- An assurance of confidentiality or anonymity
- The option for the respondent to participate now or to schedule a more convenient time
- Make the first question close-ended with only a few response choices (e.g. yes or no) to get the respondent used to answering questions over the telephone.
- Keep questions short and simple with a minimum of answer choices.
- Use a consistent format. For example, use bold for words to be read, italics for words sometimes read (e.g. probes for more information) and all caps for caller instructions (Salant and Dillman, 1994).

Anticipate questions respondents may have

Develop a list of answers to frequently asked questions so that you can provide consistent responses.

Develop call logs

Call logs (Appendix B) for each telephone number to be contacted help keep track of the number of calls made and the outcome of each (e.g. survey completed, no answer, reschedule interview, etc.).

Establish guidelines for handling “no” answers, hesitant participants, etc.

Establish a maximum number of times each number is called before it is considered a “no response.” Set guidelines for handling respondents who are hesitant to participate. Should they be called back at another time? Should they be given additional information (such as emphasizing the brevity of the survey)?

Pilot test the questionnaire and procedures

It is important to conduct the pilot test(s) exactly as you would the actual survey. All respondents should receive all the information as they would in the actual survey, and all procedures should be carried out exactly as planned. Pilot testing allows you to determine how easily both respondents and the caller(s) can follow the procedures and questionnaire.

Develop advance notice materials for respondents

This may be in the form of a letter (Appendix A) or a postcard. The advance notice alerts respondents that they will be contacted and “paves the way” for the caller to establish credibility and rapport with them.

Arrange for facilities and hire callers if necessary

Based on your pilot test of the telephone survey, you have an idea of the amount of time it takes to complete an interview as well as the number of interviews completed per hour. Use this information to estimate the number of telephones and callers you need to collect information by your target date. Arrange for telephones and hire callers if needed.

Assemble all needed materials

Write a telephone number for each respondent on a questionnaire and attach a call log.

Train the caller(s) if necessary

The purpose of training is to make sure the caller(s) know how to administer the questionnaire consistently to all respondents. It is important to read questions as written, to provide consistent answers when respondents ask questions and to probe for more

information when necessary in a non-leading fashion. Do not skip asking a question even if you think you already know the respondent's answer.

Do advance notice about a week before you begin the survey

Send out the advance notice letter or post card to members of the target audience.

Schedule interviews and collect data

Think about when the respondents are likely to be available. Usually the best time to reach people at home is between 4 and 9 P.M. weekdays and 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. on Saturdays.



Telephone survey checklist

- Complete planning process
- Develop the questionnaire
- Anticipate respondent questions
- Develop call logs
- Establish guidelines for no answers, hesitant participants, etc.
- Pilot test the questionnaire & procedures
- Develop advance notice material
- Arrange for facilities & callers if necessary
- Assemble materials
- Train callers if necessary
- Do advance notice
- Schedule interviews
- Collect data
- Process data
- Analyze and interpret data
- Write reports
- Communicate findings

GETTING A GOOD RESPONSE TO YOUR SURVEY

A high response rate promotes confidence in your results. Response rate is the proportion of people in the particular sample that participate in the survey. It is calculated by dividing the number of returned surveys by the total number of surveys distributed. There is no standard response rate. In some cases, 80 percent and above may be expected. In other cases, 60 percent may be adequate. Lower response rates increase the likelihood of biased results. How do we know that our results represent everyone in the survey or represent the response of a select group?

It is useful to discuss and establish an acceptable response rate with your stakeholders before beginning the survey. Consider the target audience, level of response you might expect, past experience with surveys of this type and any other relevant factors. What is considered an acceptable response rate?

Low response rates introduces the problem of nonresponse error. According to Salant and Dillman (1994) anything under 60 percent should be a warning. If this happens, find out whether the people who didn't respond are different than those who did in ways that matter to your study. You may be able to figure this out through your own knowledge of the sample, from information on the mailing list or from comparing respondents to a larger set of data that describes the population. Sometimes it is possible to telephone nonrespondents and see how they compare on a few key characteristics with the respondent group. If both groups appear to be the same on key attributes of relevance to your study (e.g., farm size, years of residence, family type, etc.), then a low response rate may not be a problem. However, if these groups differ, it

is important to indicate how they differ when reporting results. Qualify your findings to state who is and who is not represented in the findings.

There are various things you can do to increase your survey response rate. Consider these specific tips:

Get positive publicity for your survey.

Announce the survey at a gathering where respondents are likely to be present. Consider press releases or other ways to promote the survey (see Appendix C).

Oversample. If you know the number of people you need responses from and the expected response rate, increase the sample size accordingly. For example, if you expect 75 percent of the people to respond and want at least 75 responses, use a sample size of 100. (Divide the number of completed surveys you want by the expected response rate to calculate the required sample size.)

Help respondents see the value of participating in the survey. Tell them “what’s in it for them.”

Use a combination of different methods.

Use the least costly method first to reach the greatest number of respondents (e.g. mail or e-mail). Then follow up with phone calls to nonrespondents. Be aware that responses may be influenced by the type of method used to collect information (known as the “method effect”).

With mail and e-mail surveys, the greater number of follow-up contacts, the higher the response rate. For mail surveys, a good rule of thumb is that each contact will return 50 percent of the response to the previous mailing (Mangione, 1995). With effort, initial response rates of 20 percent have been raised to 70 or even 80 percent (Fink, 1995).

Use incentives. For mail surveys, even small amounts of money (\$1 - \$2) have been shown to increase response rates by 5 – 8 percent (James & Bollstein, 1990). Giving the incentive up front is more effective than requiring the respondent to complete the survey first. With handout surveys, you might hold a raffle and draw the winner using completed surveys to encourage participation.

With mail surveys, use 2-day priority mail for the final mailing of the questionnaire. This lets those who haven’t yet responded know how important their response is.

At conferences or workshops where handout surveys are used, include time within the program for participants to complete the survey. Don’t expect participants to fill out questionnaires after the closing.

With Internet-based surveys, make it as easy as possible for respondents to participate. Send them an e-mail announcing the survey and include the URL as a hyperlink directly to the survey.

INTERPRETING RESULTS WHEN YOUR RESPONSE RATE IS LOW

Sometimes, despite careful planning and implementation, you receive a poor response to your survey. In these cases, you may still use your results, but interpret them with caution.

- When analyzing and interpreting data, use simple descriptive statistics (counts, percents, averages). Do not attempt more complex statistical analyses like correlations when response rates are low.
- Use language in your reporting that is suggestive rather than decisive. For example, use phrases like “it seems,” “it appears,” “the data suggest” rather than “these data show,” “we can conclude that.”
- Do not generalize findings to the entire group. Report results in terms of “these respondents” rather than general terms like “parents in this county.”
- Clearly describe whom the results represent. Give as much specific information about the demographic and other characteristics of respondents as you have available.

SUMMARY

A survey is a systematic, standardized way of collecting information from people using questionnaires. There are many different ways of conducting a survey. Use the method that best fits your purpose, survey topic, target audience and resources. Spend adequate time planning your survey project to make sure all aspects are well thought out. Use the tips in this booklet to help you get a good response to your survey and collect useful information that meets your needs.

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APPENDIX A. SAMPLE MAIL SURVEY MATERIALS

Sample Advance Notice Letter

Date

Dear _____:

Within the next few days, you will be receiving a questionnaire in the mail. You have been selected as one of a small number of people asked to give their opinion about the needs, strengths, and direction of Badger County. Your input will be used to help county officials plan for the future of our community.

We would greatly appreciate your time in filling out and returning the questionnaire. Thank you in advance for your help.

Sincerely,

Badger County Office Department Head, Chairperson of Oversight Committee

Sample Cover Letter

Date

Dear _____:

As a resident of Badger County, you know about concerns and issues facing the people of our county. Knowing how people view their county--its current needs and strengths, and how they would like the county to be in the future--is vital to those who make decisions about the programs and services that are available.

You are one of a small number of people who are being asked to give their opinion about the current situation in Badger County and your vision of the future. Your name was drawn randomly from a list of all registered voters. In order for the results of this survey to truly represent the thinking of the people of Badger County, it is important that you fully complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it in the postage-paid envelope provided.

You may be assured of complete confidentiality. The questionnaire has an identification number for mailing purposes only. This is so that we may check your name off the mailing list when your questionnaire is returned. Your name will never be placed on the questionnaire. No individual responses will be reported. A summary of the results will be mailed to you when completed.

When you have completed your survey, please return it in the enclosed, postage paid envelope. If you have any questions about this survey, please contact me at (phone number). Thank you very much for your help in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

Badger County Office Department Head, Chairperson of Oversight Committee

Sample Follow-Up Post Card

Last week, a questionnaire was mailed to you seeking your opinions about the concerns facing people in our county and what you would like the county to be like in five years. Your name was selected randomly from a list of registered voters.

If you have already completed and returned the questionnaire, thank you very much. If not, please do so today. We appreciate your help because we know how useful your ideas will be in setting direction for the county.

If you did not receive a questionnaire, or if it was misplaced, please call us at (phone number) and we will get another one in the mail to you immediately.

Sincerely,

Badger County Office Department Head, Chairperson of Oversight Committee

APPENDIX B. SAMPLE TELEPHONE SURVEY MATERIALS

Sample Telephone Survey Introduction

Hello, my name is _____ and I'm calling from the University of Wisconsin-Cooperative Extension. We are assessing our work in parenting education and I'd like to talk with you about a program you participated in last spring. This survey is completely voluntary and confidential. The questions will take about 5 minutes of your time. Do you have a few minutes now? (If yes, proceed with interview. If no, ask for date and time to call back. Record date and time on call log in comments section.)

Sample Call Log

Phone number: _____

Call date	Time	Result code	Comments

Result codes:

CS = completed survey
 CB = respondent contacted; call back at scheduled time
 NA = no answer
 LM = left message; call back
 RF = refusal

APPENDIX C. SAMPLE PRESS RELEASES

Contact: Bob Agent

Badger County Extension

Phone 123-456-7890

Fax 1 -823-456-7890

12345 Main Street

Your Town, WI 55555



News Release

BADGER COUNTY RESIDENTS ENGAGED IN COUNTY SURVEY

Your Town, WI, September 23, 2001: Badger County residents have a chance to voice their opinions about county needs, concerns and strengths. A mail survey is being distributed Monday to about 200 households by the Badger County Extension Office. Households were randomly selected to participate to represent public opinion across the county.

Residents selected for the survey are urged to complete the brief survey within one week and return it in the accompanying stamped envelope. This survey will give direction to the county Extension office and other service agencies and organizations who provide education and services in Badger County. This is an opportunity for local citizens to provide input to identify issues to be addressed through local and state resources. All responses to the survey are confidential.

The results will only be representative if there is a high rate of return. "Only a high return will give an accurate view of our concerns," says County Board Chairperson, Jane Chair. A steering committee of local residents helped design the survey.

For more information on the survey and the Extension statewide planning effort, contact Bob Agent at 456-7890.

Contact: Bob Agent
Badger County Extension
Phone 123-456-7890
Fax 123-456-7890
12345 Main Street
Your Town, WI 55555



News Release

COUNTY SURVEY ACHIEVES RECORD SETTING 90% RETURN

Your Town, WI, December 28, 2001: The Badger County Assessment of Concerns and Strengths conducted by Badger County UW-Extension Office in conjunction with the County Board of Supervisors has set a new record. Of the 200 households randomly sampled to participate in this survey, 90 percent returned their surveys.

“We can feel confident that these results represent the opinions and feelings of our county population,” exclaimed Pete Person, Chairperson of the Extension Education Committee of the County Board of Supervisors. “This is a very real statement about the commitment of our county citizens to be involved in the future of Badger County.”

The results are being analyzed and will be shared at the next meeting of the Extension Committee on _____ at _____. This countywide assessment was designed to provide direction for the programs and activities to be delivered by the UW-County Extension Office and other agencies in the county during the next four years.



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