

Do's and Don'ts of Community Surveys

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Why conduct a survey? Municipalities or organizations should conduct surveys when their information needs and existing data are insufficient. However, one should ask, "Can the required information ever be collected by a survey?" Conducting surveys can help elected officials understand the opinions and attitudes of citizens beyond those of vocal citizens or special interest groups. Citizens appreciate being asked their opinions.

Identify the objective of the survey. If you decide to do a survey lay out the objectives of the investigation. The objectives of a survey should be as specific, clear-cut, and unambiguous as possible. Trade-offs typically exist and sometimes this only becomes apparent during the planning process.

Choose the appropriate method to conduct the survey. Decide on the mode of data collection. There are advantages and disadvantages to each method.

- Mail surveys can be relatively low in cost. Problems exist in their use when insufficient attention is given to getting high levels of cooperation.
- Telephone interviews are an efficient method of collecting some types of data. They lend themselves well to situations where timeliness is a factor and the length of the survey is limited.
- In-person interviews in a respondent's home are more expensive than mail or telephone surveys. They may be necessary when complex information is to be collected.
- Drop off and pick up survey allow for rapid dissemination and collection.

Identify who needs to be surveyed and draw a sample.

A critical element in any survey is to locate (or "cover") all the members of the population being studied so that they have an equal chance to be sampled. In a bona fide survey, the sample is not selected haphazardly or only from persons who volunteer to participate. It is

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scientifically chosen so that each person in the population will have an equal chance of selection.

Use a Standardized Questionnaire. Information is collected by means of standardized procedures so that every individual is asked the same question in more or less the same way. A survey's intent is not to describe the particular individuals who, by chance, are part of the sample but to obtain a composite profile of the sample and population.

Use various types of questions:

Closed-Ended Questions

1. Response categories should be exhaustive. They should include all responses that might reasonably be expected of those completing the survey.
2. Response categories should be mutually exclusive. The respondent should not feel compelled to select more than one.
3. Response categories may be some type of scale or ranking. When ranking questions are used the items to be ranked should be limited.

Open-Ended Questions

1. Used to understand why people feel the way they do.
2. Open-ended category (Other _____.) is often used so people can respond if they have additional answers not addressed by the researchers.

Make items clear. Questionnaire items should be precise so the respondents know exactly what the researcher wants an answer to. Surveys should be logically organized and instructions provided on how to fill out the survey. (i.e., circle your response; write in your answer, etc.)

Use a consistent format. Be consistent. If a question has a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree, then have other scales aligned in the same direction. Don't switch and have 5 represent strongly disagree or 1 represent strongly agree later on in the same survey.

Avoid Double-Barreled Questions. As a general rule, whenever the word *and* appears in a question or statement, you should check whether you are asking a double-barreled question.

Use relevant questions. Short items are best. In general, you should assume the respondents will read items quickly and give quick answers: therefore, you should provide clear, short items that will not be misinterpreted under those conditions.

Avoid questions using negative terms. A sizeable portion of respondents will read over the word "not".

Underestimate the time needed to do a survey. Don't expect to do a community survey overnight. The majority of time devoted to doing a survey is in developing the appropriate survey instrument.

Use a long questionnaire. Long questionnaires are apt to induce respondent fatigue and errors arising from inattention, refusals, and incomplete answers.

Use biased questions. Questions that encourage respondents to answer in particular ways are called biased. Avoid leading or highly inflammatory words.

Haphazardly distribute the survey. Don't hand surveys out at the grocery store or place them in a city newsletter, or attach them to the utility bill and expect

Avoid this term. The word "not" also makes interpreting responses more confusing.

Pretest the survey. Have people who were not involved in designing the survey review it and/or complete it prior to distributing it to your sample. Did they understand the questions?...The response categories?...Was it simple to complete?...Were there any questions that they left blank, skipped, or could not answer?

Provide confidentiality.

1. Use only number codes to link the respondent to a questionnaire and store the name-to-code linkage information separately from the questionnaire.
2. Refuse to give the names and addresses of survey respondents to anyone outside the survey organization, including clients. (In case of municipal surveys, don't give the names of the people to be or who were surveyed to the Mayor, City Council, Planning Commission, etc.)
3. Present statistical tabulations in broad enough categories so individual respondents cannot be single out.

DON'T

to get back opinions and views that are representative of the entire community.

Use SLOPS. Most call-in inquiries or magazine write-in "polls" or on-line polls are highly suspect. These and other "self selected opinion polls (SLOPS)" may be misleading since participants have not been scientifically selected. Typically, in SLOPS persons with strong opinions (often negative) are more likely to respond.