



# Principles and ethics

**While consumer participation activities can potentially be empowering** for consumers and beneficial for organisations, there are also risks associated with implementing such activities, especially where vulnerable consumer populations are involved. It is therefore important to ensure that organisations' consumer participation strategies are based on a firm foundation of values and principles that will support good practice.

The following principles are suggested as a basis for inclusive, meaningful and effective consumer participation strategies:<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Make it timely

Participation should not be so late in the life of an issue that it is tokenistic or merely confirms decisions already made. Consultation should occur when consumers have the best chance of influencing outcomes. People should be given enough time to express their views.

## 2. Make it inclusive

Consumer participants should be selected in a way that is not open to manipulation and should include a cross-section of the organisation's consumer population. Random selection might be considered to achieve this.

## 3. Make it consumer focused

Ask participants not what they want personally or what is in their self-interest, but to consider what is appropriate for all consumers.

## 4. Make it interactive and deliberative

Avoid reducing questions to a simplistic either/or response. Allow consideration of the bigger picture, so people can become fully engaged.

## 5. Make it effective

Be clear on how decisions will be made so that participants know and understand the impact of their involvement. Make sure all participants have time to become well-informed about and to understand material they are unlikely to have a prior familiarity with.

## 6. Make it matter

It is important that there is a strong likelihood that any recommendations which emerge from the process will be adopted. If they are not, it is important that an explanation is provided. Faith in the process is important for both the power holders in the organisation and the consumers.

## 7. Make it well facilitated

A skilled and flexible facilitator with no vested interest in the outcome is essential in order to

give the process credibility.

## 8. Make it flexible, open and fair

A variety of participation strategies exist. Choose those that best suit the circumstances, including the target group and the degree of participation offered. Think how to reach all your consumers, including those with special needs. Feedback to consumers afterwards is essential.

## 9. Make it cost effective

Costs will vary and are adaptable, but the process must be properly resourced.

## 10. Make it subject to evaluation

Decide how the 'success' of the strategy will be measured. Include factors beyond the adoption of the recommendations. Evaluation questions should be formulated in advance.

## Research ethics

Whenever you gather information about consumers – for example, whenever you conduct a survey or hold a focus group – you are conducting research, and it is important to ensure you do so ethically.

Research ethics are important for a variety of reasons; they help to promote the aims of quality research, promote values essential to collaborative work, help to ensure that researchers can be held accountable, and ensure that the research process is consistent with other important moral and social values, such as social responsibility and human rights. In the context of consumer participation, research ethics also help to prevent exploitation of consumers.

The following ethical principles guide the collection of information about and from consumers:<sup>2</sup>

### Honesty

Strive for honesty in all communications. Ensure participants are fully informed of the purpose of the research and how the results will be used and made public.

### Confidentiality

Protect confidential communications, personnel records and consumer records. Ensure participants are not identifiable in any reports of the research.

### Objectivity

Strive to avoid bias in design of the research, data analysis, data interpretation, peer review, and other aspects of research where objectivity is expected or required.

### Integrity

Keep your promises and agreements; act with sin-

cerity; strive for consistency of thought and action.

### **Carefulness**

Carefully and critically examine your own work and the work of others. Keep good records of research activities, such as data collection, research design, and correspondence.

### **Safety**

Minimize harms and risks and maximize benefits to participants; take special precautions with vulnerable populations.

### **Respect for consumers and colleagues**

Respect your colleagues and consumers and treat them fairly. Respect human dignity, privacy, and autonomy. Ensure any costs incurred by participants are covered and that they feel comfortable and safe during the process.

### **Social Responsibility**

Strive to promote social good and prevent or mitigate social harms through research, public education, and advocacy.

### **Non-Discrimination**

Avoid discrimination on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, or other factors that are not related to competence and integrity.

### **Competence**

Maintain and improve your own professional competence and expertise through lifelong education and learning; take steps to promote competence in your area of expertise as a whole.

## **Endnotes**

1. Adapted from Carson & Gelber (2001) *Ideas for Community Consultation*. NSW Department of Urban Affairs and Planning.
2. Adapted from Shamoo, A and Resnik, D (2003). *Responsible Conduct of Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.