

Surveys



Description

Surveys are used to obtain information about consumer needs, opinions, priorities and experiences. Each consumer is asked a standard set of questions, and responses are recorded. The results are analysed and reported back in a useable form. This information can then be used to guide, and to be seen to guide, both ongoing quality improvement and future service planning.

How it works

Many agencies have regular survey processes for obtaining information from consumers about satisfaction with services. This may occur on a cyclical (e.g. annual) basis and/or at the completion of a discrete aspect of service provision. Typical examples include exit surveys and feedback surveys.

The most common form of survey is a sample survey. This saves the cost and time involved in surveying the whole population of consumers (a census). It gathers information that can be inferred to a wider population. Guaranteed confidentiality and informed consent are essential parts of the process.

Surveys collect information by means of questionnaires. These can be administered by interviewers face-to-face or by telephone, or they can be 'self-administered' by the respondent. Surveys can include questions where the choice of answers is limited (closed) or where the respondent is able to provide more detail (open-ended). Surveys can gather quantitative data that measures the issue in question, or qualitative data that describes the issue.

Pilot surveys are used to test the questionnaire and survey design and are essential to ensure that there are no flaws in the survey plan, that the questionnaire obtains the information being sought, and that information obtained can be analysed.

Analysis

Analysis of the information collected takes time and a degree of skill. Commonly available computer software, for example Excel and Access, can be used to assist analysis. Analysis using computers involves three steps: coding the answers, data entry into the computer, and sorting and filtering the data to get usable information.

Reporting back

It is important that the information obtained from consumers is presented back to them, as well as to the wider organisation. This can be done in a number of ways, including publication in newsletters, poster

presentations in the waiting area, at meetings etc. Consumers should also be advised how the results of the survey have been reflected on, and informed of any recommendations for change that have arisen as a result.

Degree of participation

Information seeking.

Timeframe

Short to medium term.

Resource level required

Medium to high.

Effective surveys are designed, administered and analysed by people with research skills and experience. They require good planning and preparation. Time is required to recruit a sample, apply the questionnaire and record responses, code and enter the data and analyse the results.

Consumers may expect reimbursement if the survey takes more than 15 minutes and is administered one-on-one. Some form of acknowledgement is recommended.

Strengths

A survey is often the only way of obtaining quantitative information about a population when it is not available from an existing source. Surveys can provide an understanding of the extent of the problem or issue, or the number of people with a particular point of view.

Surveying consumers is a good way to monitor service delivery and evaluation. Such surveys can contribute to the development and maintenance of quality services and programs (Van Tosh 1993 in Glasser 1998).

Weaknesses

Surveys do not have the advantage of engaging consumers in a group. Participation should be social as well as effective for the organisation.

There is a risk that the survey can be ineffective if careful attention is not paid to ensure the questions provide answers that inform the purpose. Organisations need to be clear on what they want to know to design an effective survey.

A survey may not be the right way to find out what

the organisation wants to know. Surveys are designed to measure rather than explore; they do not increase understanding of the underlying causes of problems. For this reason they are best used alongside qualitative research.

Surveys can have a very low response rate at times, especially where questionnaires are sent out in the mail to all the organisation's consumers without personal contact.

Taking part in a survey can sometimes be a frustrating experience for the respondent, especially when the choice of answers is restricted and more fundamental concerns are unable to be aired or recorded. Surveys can be intrusive or impersonal depending on the type of information being sought, the way the questions are phrased and the method (face to face, mail or telephone) being used.

Examples

When a survey of carers was piloted, a community worker pointed out that the list of answers to one question about their work was entirely negative. In the final questionnaire a question was included about job satisfaction which was answered overwhelmingly in positive terms. If this had been omitted, the research would have found a very different view of caring.

HomeGround Services, a Melbourne-based homelessness organisation, uses client feedback surveys to gather consumer views on service quality, service focus, accessibility and protection of consumer rights. The Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS) provides feedback on survey design.

A sample of clients is surveyed from across all HomeGround programs. Surveys are done in an interview format; each interview lasts between 20 minutes to an hour depending on the depth of feedback provided by the consumer. Interviewers are volunteers from the HAS Peer Educator Support Program, who are reimbursed for their involvement. As people who have experienced homelessness themselves, they are able to encourage consumers to provide honest feedback on services. Consumers are reimbursed for the time involved in participating in interviews.

Results are analysed by HomeGround's Service Development staff and a report is produced and made available to the organisation and stakeholders, including consumers.

Tips

Surveys involving more than 100 people are best suited to collecting factual or uncomplicated attitudinal data. If detailed information on attitudes, values and beliefs are required, qualitative approaches are likely to be more rewarding.

- ☞ A lot of care is required in questionnaire design. Because the information being sought is to be quantified, surveys require specific, clearly worded questions. People cannot provide answers to questions that are not asked.
- ☞ Involve consumers in the design of the survey, collecting the data, interpreting the input and providing feedback on the development of initiatives that result from the input.
- ☞ To improve response rates, use face-to-face methods (e.g. peer interviews). Publicise the survey, provide reminders, appropriate reimbursement and (where relevant) a self-addressed envelope.



For more information...

- <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse/#I>. "IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH CONSUMER PARTICIPATION: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ORGANISATIONS". p.35. Viewed November 2007.