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ABSTRACT

Tips are offered for using the needs/interest survey process to provide continuing and community education programmers with information for setting goals and establishing program objectives. Some of the 50 tips include using only those questions essential to programming, restricting the length, targeting the survey, getting input on topics included, programming based on findings, keeping the instrument simple, asking for identification of a contact person, asking for a commitment, avoiding educational jargon, securing administrative support for the study, eliciting support from important people inside and outside one's agency, giving directions on how to answer questions, avoiding generalizing information, being careful to program based on "consumer" rather than "planner" needs, and including cooperative planning with other agencies to validly determine needs. Other tips are predetermining who, when, and why others can use the data; preparing for unanticipated responses; preparing a clear, thorough, and unbiased report; pretesting the study; thanking participants; analyzing data again and again; protecting results; including program information to generate interest; getting involved with the community; including the name and telephone number of a contact person; and grouping questions. (YLB)

TECHNIQUES

Fifty Tips for Using the Needs/Interest Survey Process

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Continuing and community education programmers are continually challenged to identify suitable program ideas. To avoid programming based upon "hearsay" from a few participants, faculty, or acquaintances, or upon what some refer to as "gut-level" feelings, program directors may find that needs/interest assessments can provide fundamental information for setting goals and for establishing program objectives. The results of needs assessment activities can provide descriptions about the clients and clients' needs, which programmers can use to implement positive changes in programs, to understand the changing patterns in the educational needs of clients, and to set priorities in terms of selecting new programs, expending money or hiring faculty.

Before embarking on any needs assessment, planners need to make certain decisions about what information is needed, why each particular piece of information is needed, what is the best format to collect data so that it can be useful, and what is the plan to implement the findings. By analyzing the various components of a local community, programmers learn the extent to which they are able to serve the various subgroups.

One overriding characteristic of needs is that they are continually changing; therefore, the process of diagnosing needs is a continuing task. In order to market programs, it is essential that participants see the programs as directly related to their needs and interests. The needs/interest survey process can be a helpful tool for program planners. The following tips for using the survey process may help practitioners to avoid some potential pitfalls.

1. Never include any question that is not essential to programming; don't ask age, for example, unless it will make a difference in your data analysis.

2. Try to restrict the length (front and back is preferable to two separate pages). Four pages is generally the maximum.

3. Target the survey—don't try to assess various groups on a single instrument. In fact, try to cosponsor with some agency close to the desired respondents.

4. Get input on topics included; know the current "buzz" topics and don't get "cutesy" so respondents don't know what the topic is.

5. Program based on findings and let people know why you're offering the program—then it's a promotion tool.

6. Keep the instrument simple; don't ask respondents to prioritize.

7. Follow up is generally not necessary—you've gotten mileage out of asking for input.

8. Ask for identification of a contact person to notify about subsequent program offerings.

9. Ask for a commitment—"Would you come?" or "How many from your office would attend?"

10. Avoid educational jargon; speak the respondents' language.

11. Avoid the tendency to create or maintain a market rather than to respond to new learner needs.

12. Designate one person to be responsible for the survey process.

HOW TO USE TECHNIQUES

Techniques can be reproduced without permission for use in workshops or general dissemination to staff. If you have an idea for Techniques, write for guidelines.

13. Secure administrative support for the study so that resources are available to do the job and so that a commitment to implement findings is made.

14. Elicit support from important people inside and outside your agency, who also might benefit from the outcome.

15. Choose a variety of ways to ask the question to require respondents to answer without mimicking what they've heard others say. Also ask the questions of a variety of people to obtain independent views.

16. Specify exactly what you want to know and give directions about how to answer questions.

17. Consider the limitations of those you are asking to respond, such constraints as time, limited information or experience, for example.

18. Avoid asking for information you cannot use.

19. Wherever possible, use already existing data rather than asking again, which keeps your study to a moderate length.

20. Avoid the tendency to generalize information gathered in one geographic area to program recipients in another. (For example, metropolitan responses will not be valid to use in programming statewide or in rural areas.)

21. Avoid the danger of programming based on "in vogue" topics to bring in large numbers of participants; instead, try to improve their professional competence by meeting genuine needs.

22. Carefully consider before programming using only the available resources rather than finding the best resources to meet the learner needs.

23. Target the survey and subsequent program offerings in such a way that employeers will know who should answer the assessment and whom to send to programs.

24. Protect yourself from accusations that your program is touted as need-oriented when the real basis is to make money; here you can quickly lose program credibility if you are not needs based.

25. Be careful that you are not programming based on "planner" needs rather than "consumer" needs when using advisors.

26. Don't use the needs of a given sector as the basis for planning for an entire population (hospital nurses to plan for all nurses, for example).

27. Include cooperative planning with other agencies, groups, or representatives to validly determine needs.

28. Know that people are expecting something to happen with their responses; [illegible] looking to see the things they thought important reflected in your program.

29. Predetermine who, when, and for what purpose others can use your data.

30. Prepare for unanticipated responses.

31. Prepare a report which is clear, thorough, and unbiased; you might be called on to defend it if you've been sloppy. Be sure to share the report with people who have played important roles during the process.

32. Know that some answers will be ambiguous, or omitted and that you cannot ask all the questions you'd like.

33. Pretest your study or at least recruit some "sounding boards" to test the wording and to plan your analyses before collecting data.

34. Thank those who participate in the study; they may be tomorrow's program participants.

35. Analyze data again and again to garner all the insights you can.

36. Protect your results until they have fulfilled their usefulness to you. Others will take your findings for credit programming, or outside agencies will beat you to the offering, or promoters will steal your contacts from the respondent list to add to their own lists.

37. Sometimes it is a good idea to go beyond a single approach. Consider, for example, factory supervisors; in addition to asking what they need to learn, ask the personnel managers, or consult job descriptions or personnel reviews if you or a hired consultant has access to those records.

38. If the questionnaire you plan to use to collect data is too long, you can split it and send it to two random samples.

39. Ideally, questions should ask "To what extent . . ." rather than "Yes/No" responses.

40. Avoid the tendency for the assessment process to become just a data gathering exercise without determining "why" the data are found.

41. Surveys are promotional devices; they generate names and addresses and information about prospective particip r desired programs, schedules, etc. You can also include a schedule of classes or a fact s enerate interest in your program.

42. Surveys can get your agency staff out of the office and involved with the communi on-to-person contacts are important to recruitment.

43. The process of asking makes the statement that "We are interested in you and responsive to your needs/interests."

44. Don't overlook your own agency or institution employees as potential students and survey participants.

45. You should have one goal for every question asked.

46. The cover letter should be short.

47. If planning a follow-up, include a code number and explain it in the cover letter "to protect respondents from unnecessary follow-up."

48. Include the name and phone number of a contact person so that if they've any questions about the study, respondents can ask.

49. The ease of answering is more important than the number of questions you ask.

50. Group questions rather than include a long list of questions.

Although the needs/interest survey process will not guarantee droves of new program participants, it does provide a sound basis for making program decisions. These tips for administering the needs/survey process may prove helpful in taining the best results.