

Listening

To The

Public

TIPS for Conducting
CITIZEN SURVEYS
to Develop
Government Performance
Measures and Reports

National Center for Civic Innovation
Center on Government Performance
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Introduction

The purpose of the citizen surveys we describe here is to enable local, county and state governments to produce performance measures and performance reports that are aligned with the public's perspectives and needs.

These citizen surveys are different from political polling and simple satisfaction surveys. Their purposes are different. The information collected in the citizen survey is used for developing better indicators of government service, improving the delivery of government services, evaluating government performance and related matters. And the process of administering and analyzing citizen surveys can be an effective way of improving/increasing citizen involvement in a productive way.

Citizen surveys, as discussed in this guide, are surveys structured not only to find out the public's opinion, but also to uncover, as best as one can in a survey instrument, *why* the opinions are held. Knowing that the public rates an agency's performance poorly or highly does not provide enough information to create performance measures or to sustain or correct agency actions. Knowing why the public came to a particular rating can provide the information from which a relevant performance measure can be developed.

By contrast, political polling or simple satisfaction surveys are often head counts: how many people favor one candidate over another or one ballot initiative or another or a political position, or like living in a particular city. Political polling is meant to help get someone elected or something passed. Simple satisfaction surveys are often conducted for similar reasons: to ascertain how many people are happy or unhappy with an administration or a particular office holder, or to promote new business development; they do not explore the reasons for the satisfaction ratings. They do not tell you about how the public evaluates government or how to improve services provided.

These tips have been developed to provide a frame of reference, some guidelines and standards for governments starting the process of listening to their public for the purposes of creating measures and reports that reflect the public's perspective and engaging the public in the performance measurement process.

The recommendations here are for governments that are interested in finding out what the members of their public are thinking about their government: how they come to assess the services and other aspects of government performance, what they want, need and expect from

government including information, and how they would like government to communicate with them.

The tips emerged in part from the experiences of 24 local, county and state governments that were recipients in a three-year government performance reporting demonstration grant program run by the Center on Government Performance (CGP) of the National Center for Civic Innovation, funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. The tips also derive from the 12-year experience of CGP's work in *Listening to the Public*, as detailed in our book of the same name.

Survey research can be costly, requires careful preparation, expert consultation and government involvement throughout. Some governments have mistakenly expected to use these citizen surveys to confirm and advertise previous beliefs and practices. This subverts its intention and usefulness. *An open mind—putting aside any lurking cynical views and already formed opinions about the public—an ability to listen to the public in new ways that are not confrontational or adversarial, and a willingness to consider new approaches to performance measurement and reporting practices are necessary. Good faith is essential.* You will be surprised at the important information that is revealed.

Note: We use the term “citizen” here in the most general way, meaning all members of a community, since this is how these surveys are usually named. Clearly, they are not meant to be confined to citizens in the legal sense of the term.

1. Using Citizen Surveys: When and Why

- ❑ Use citizen surveys when you need to know “how many.”
- ❑ When done correctly, citizen surveys will help governments learn how many people use which services, how they rate them and why, how satisfied or dissatisfied they are, and their opinions about government’s performance report.
- ❑ Data from complaint systems are not a substitute for citizen surveys or focus group research. You need information about the views of the widest possible spectrum of people in your jurisdiction, not just from those who registered complaints or just about where there was a perceived problem.
- ❑ The information obtained at a public hearing or public meeting is not a substitute for a citizen survey. Usually public hearings are convened about a specific proposal or condition. Attendees and speakers at these sessions often have strong opinions about the issue at hand, but may not reflect the diversity of views of the population at large.

People who go to hearings and call in complaints are, by definition, not representative of the full community. They are, at best, the sharpest expression of a point of view or, at worst, a distortion of community sentiment. They cannot be considered as stand-ins for examining the full range of views across the community in a random, representative way.

- ❑ It is best to use citizen surveys after focus group research. The focus group analysis will help you determine what to measure in the survey—usually, what outcomes to measure—from the public’s perspective and what to track over time.
- ❑ If you conduct a citizen survey before focus groups, use the focus groups to get a better understanding of what the survey results mean—why citizens responded the way they did—and what to track over time.
 - For example:
 - * Why did people say that they feel unsafe downtown at night – what conditions, information, perceptions make them feel unsafe?
 - * Why did they say they are satisfied with government’s performance? Or dissatisfied?
 - * Why did they rate one service better than another?

- The answers can help you create sharper outcome measures and improve your performance.
- ☐ It is best to conduct citizen surveys at a neutral time of the year, avoiding a period in the midst of a local election, for example, or around holidays when people are distracted by other obligations or during typical vacation times when many people are out of town.
 - Be sensitive to religious and ethnic differences when setting dates.
 - Plan your own time so that you will be available and involved during all phases of the process.
- ☐ Support from the top is essential. Elected and appointed officials and staff need to see the usefulness of learning about the public's point of view.

2. Do Some Homework First

If you are not trained in, or forgot basic statistics and sampling, bone up on it. There are a number of technical concepts and terms involved in sample surveys—validity, reliability, confidence levels, response rates, sampling frame, etc. You need to be able to understand them as you start considering the design of your citizen survey.

3. Bring In The Experts

- ☐ Professional, technical expertise at planning, organizing and conducting citizen surveys and tabulating the results is strongly recommended.
 - Results coming from an impartial, expert group are more likely to have the respect and credibility with the public than if they come from government itself.
 - Typically, governments do not have the experience and expertise to conduct these surveys.
- ☐ Choose an impartial, experienced, skilled professional research organization.
 - The *Green Book: Worldwide Directory of Marketing Research Companies and Services*, published by New York American Marketing Association (www.greenbook.org) is a good source for finding firms that specialize in survey research.

- ❑ Do not use a firm that is associated with political polling in your area; any connection to political motivation is to be avoided.

4. Designing Citizen Surveys

- ❑ Start by setting objectives.
 - What information are you seeking?
 - Surveys can give you, among other things:
 - * Satisfaction ratings—overall and for specific services, e.g., police, fire, public hospitals, garbage collection, public works, parks, recreation, social services
 - * Information on who uses which services (which demographic groups)
- ❑ Determine who should be surveyed.
 - Make sure the specifications for the citizen survey are inclusive and representative of the population in your jurisdiction, based on solid demographic or other analysis. If the survey targets a sub-group of your population—for example, users of a specific government service—explain that in the methodology.
 - Consider your neighborhoods, precincts, wards; ethnic and racial groups; income and adult age groups; family composition, education level, marital status; religious orientations; long-term residents and more recent arrivals; small business owners, merchants, etc.
 - Think carefully about how your sample is going to be selected. Your professional consultant will know how to get a representative sample.
 - * Voter registration lists, for example, will bias your sample from the get-go by excluding non-citizens and non-voters.
- ❑ Discuss with your research consultant:
 - The various types of surveys, their advantages and disadvantages, and their costs:
 - * Mail questionnaires, telephone surveys, internet surveys, on site interviews
 - * With or without prior notification
 - * The entire population or user surveys only
 - * With or without comment cards at various agency sites

- How many respondents you need in order to give you statistically reliable findings and at what confidence level and at what level of aggregation: Citywide only? By neighborhood? Population characteristic? Other?
 - How large the sample needs to be to give you the minimal responses you need
 - Typical response rates in your area and special outreach that may be necessary to reach some groups so that you will have a representative sample
 - How many and what type of attempts will be made to reach the non-responders
 - What information will be available about non-responders, what can be inferred about them and what biases can be deduced about the results of the survey, given the non-responders and non-response rate
 - How you want the data to be tabulated—by which demographic groups: men/women, ethnicity and race, income, age, neighborhoods
 - Your role throughout
- The wording of questions in the survey is very important.
- Avoid leading questions.
 - Avoid asking questions that confine the responses to very narrow possibilities, e.g.: “What are the two or three services that you care about most?” And avoid asking participants to respond to a short list of issues or services that you think are important. By doing so, you will be suggesting answers to the participant instead of giving them the opportunity to tell you how they see things. (You may want to probe about some issues after you have some feedback from them.)
 - Allow for open-ended responses (Why did you rate....?) so that you do not come to erroneous assumptions, and hence develop the wrong solutions for resolving poor ratings or curtail practices that resulted in good ratings.
- Tell people in advance of the survey? This could be successfully argued either way. If you decide to announce the survey in advance, be sure that the same announcement will reach the entire population so that you do not inadvertently introduce bias by encouraging some groups to participate, but not others. This may involve announcements in different languages and many different modes.
- You must stay involved throughout the entire process, from planning and execution to data tabulation, analysis and final report production and release.
- Decide how often to conduct citizen surveys.
- Frequency depends on how much change is taking place and what you can afford.

- You can intersperse targeted surveys and focus groups with full-scale citizen surveys.
 - Keep some consistent questions from survey to survey so that you can make valid comparisons, otherwise known as tracking. For example, if you use a 10-point scale to answer a question in one survey, use the same wording and 10-point scale in subsequent surveys so that you will be able to see and report how the ratings have changed.
- Keep a journal.
Start a journal to record and document on-going decisions and developments—the objectives, methodological specifications, questionnaire design—so that you will be able to replicate the survey and track results.
- Bring the market research firm into the process from the beginning.

5. Pre-Testing

- Have diverse members of your population test the questionnaire before you implement it on a large scale.
- Notice in the pre-test if:
- The entire questionnaire is too long or otherwise burdensome and people lose their concentration or interest before they finish
 - Some wording is confusing
 - There is anything insensitive about the questions
- Make appropriate changes and consider testing those too before you start the main survey.

6. Analyzing And Reporting The Results

- Analysis of survey results flows directly from the survey design and purpose. If the survey is designed to obtain information about what people see as desired outcomes, you will have outcome results to measure and track over time. (How many people felt that they were treated with courtesy and respect at office? How many people considered the

waiting time at to be excessive? How long did they have to wait?) A satisfaction score without context will be of little use for the purposes of performance measurement and reporting, as well as for understanding.

- Numerical differences in responses within the same survey or over time must be interpreted and reported in terms of their statistical significance (Are the differences due to sampling error? What is the margin of error?) Usually the survey research consultant provides the findings from the survey and guidance on how to interpret the numbers. You will be able to add the broader context.

- In your report, include a description of the methodology used. People—your policy makers, managers, legislators and the public at large—need to be able to understand how the conclusions and findings were derived.

7. Using Your Survey To Compare Results With Other Jurisdictions

If you want to use your survey to compare its results with those of other jurisdictions, note significant differences and similarities among the jurisdictions that may explain comparative responses—demographic, geographic, meteorological, governmental structure, etc. Be sure:

- The questions are the same or parallel

- The survey design is comparable

8. Citizen Surveys And Performance Measures

Citizen surveys can be designed to yield outcomes of government activities. Outcomes are important measures of government performance. Indeed, some people, including most members of the public, would argue that outcome measures are the most important performance measures.

Surveys that provide yes/no answers to questions like “On the whole are you satisfied with the way is working?” or “On a scale of ____ how do you rate the way theDepartment is delivering its services?” will not help you produce citizen-based performance measures. If you ask the further question of “Why?” allowing for open-ended responses, you should then

get productive responses for developing citizen-based performance measures. If you follow up the survey with some focus groups to find out why, you will obtain even greater insight.

If the survey you are considering will give you only yes/no or numerical rating responses with no further insight, consider if it is worth the effort and cost.

9. Using Citizen Surveys to Get Suggestions About Your Existing Performance Report: Some Questions to Ask

Find out in your citizen survey if respondents:

- Know that you produce a performance report

- Have seen one
 - Where?
 - When?

- Know how to obtain one

- What they like about it
 - Understandable?
 - Easy to read?

- What they don't like about it

- If the report is informative
 - Relevant to their lives, needs and interests?

- What they would like to see in the future

10. Learn from Others and Read More About It

Check with other governments that have conducted surveys. Find out how their surveys were designed and if they yielded performance measures. If they did not, use a model that does.

There are many articles and books about surveys, among them, a comprehensive 183-page book distributed by ICMA: *Citizen Surveys: How to Do Them, How to Use Them, What They Mean*; this volume is currently available in its Second Edition.



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