

Tools of the Trade:

WHY SURVEY?

If an organization/individual has a need for information, especially a large volume or special type, surveying may be the answer. Or is it? If you find yourself without the data you need and surveying comes to mind, ask yourself some questions before you actually consider the survey process.

1. What are your objectives?

Be specific. Exactly what are you trying to find out?

An objective such as determining the health status of a community is a very general objective. An example of a specific objective would be something along the lines of determining the health insurance status of all adults 18-64 in your county.

What will you do with the results?

A survey is a means of gathering information--it is not an end product. Will the information provide the means to take action, e.g., prepare a grant proposal, develop a new policy in your organization, and target a population for specific services? If the data collected cannot be used soon for some type of action/decision, should you really conduct a survey, considering the expense and time involved?

2. Is the information already available?

Check out all existing sources of data. You may be surprised with what you discover.

There are obvious sources of local and state data, e.g. vital records (births, deaths, marriages, and divorces), cancer incidence records, the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, and hospital discharge records. Data not specific to a local area are even more abundant. Information from the National Health Interview Survey, the U.S. Census, other federal and state studies, and special research done by universities are just a few possible sources. Contact staff of the Bureau of Health Statistics. We may be able to steer you in the right direction.

An extensive review of available data may end up providing you with your data needs. If not, it will, at least, enable you to further refine your objective and define the precise questions and population you will be studying.

3. Are the data collectible?

Do not expect "The Man on the Street" to give you precise medical diagnoses or his nicotine intake in milligrams.

There are types of questions people are sensitive about and may be hesitant to answer correctly or at all. These include the areas of alcohol/drug use, HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, family planning, intimate partner violence, and mental problems.

4. Do you have the necessary resources?

TIME - Will results be available before the deadline to make that decision? Surveys are very time-consuming. The planning, collecting, processing, and analyzing usually takes 9-12 months for a personal interview type survey and 4-6 months for a telephone interview type. Also, the time of the year can be important. The worst possible time to interview is between Thanksgiving and New Year's. Summer is also a difficult time to interview. Early fall and late spring are best.

PEOPLE - Do you have the staff to do everything yourselves? Do you have to contract out with an experienced survey organization, hire temporary staff or technical consultants? If you have the staff to collect the data, you may still need a statistician to analyze the results or an EDP firm to process the information.

MONEY - Surveying is expensive. A number of years ago, the National Health Interview Survey was estimated to cost \$100 per personal interview and \$70 per telephone interview. Costs can be held down by relying on in-house staff. However, if you want sound, statistically valid results, it costs money.

If you have answered all of the above and have decided to survey, more decisions have to be made. What type of survey should you conduct--personal interview, telephone or mail--and should the survey be population or sample size? See "Types of Surveys" and "Entire Population and Sample Size Surveys."