



Assessing Community Needs Through Attitude Surveys

Objectives:

- ✓ Describe and predict the use of an attitude survey
- ✓ Demonstrate the use an attitude survey to generate needs assessment data

Advance Preparation:

- ✓ Prepare a summary of the advisory member's interpretations of the community existing data (Application part of previous lesson) and title it "Existing Data Summary"
- ✓ Secure the numbers of people involved in your Extension programs last year and the existing data showing the actual number of people in your community or county
- ✓ Chalkboard and chalk or flipchart and marker

Materials Needed:

- ✓ One copy of "Existing Data Summary" for each participant (Teacher Prepares)
- ✓ [One copy of Handout "Example Phone or Interview Survey" for each participant](#)

Time Needed: minimum of 2 hours

BACKGROUND

The use of existing data to investigate community needs is not only smart but necessary. However, with this type of data you can explore only the statistics and trends. This leaves many gaps in the information needed to plan Extension programs and allocate limited resources. Another method for gathering information to merge with the existing data is the use of an attitude survey.

Attitude surveys are used to gather information that is not only based on the outward facts, but also on how residents' opinions, desires and

observations. Using existing data from the population based on race, age, occupation and other demographic characteristics, a representative sample is selected to survey. A survey goes out to this representative sample using a variety of mechanisms and information is gathered about different issues related to the community's well being. This survey can be done in many ways. Data are collected by means of personal interviews, telephone surveys, hand-delivered questionnaires or mail questionnaires. Seevers, Graham, Gamon and Conklin (1997) suggest the following tips for constructing questionnaires:

- Use the same scale for all questions; people find it easier to respond.
- Scales with five or more points allow more insight into the responses than yes or no answers
- Put questions about age, gender and income at the end. A first question needs to be more interesting than "How old are you?"
- Take out any unneeded questions
- Shorten, shorten and shorten again. People have limited time and interest.
- If a question is asking about two things, divide it into two questions
- Choose words and phrases with very clear meanings.
- "Test drive" your survey before taking it to your intended audience. Are any parts confusing? Do you say what you mean to say? Are there errors or omissions?

INTEREST APPROACH

- Initiate a discussion about the never-ending calls from telemarketers trying to sell you a product or service. Use the following scenario to stimulate discussion (or make up your own - we all have true stories here...):
"You just walk in from work, there is nothing planned for dinner and the family is hungry. The pets need to be fed, there is laundry to do and bills to pay. The phone is ringing when you walk in; you decide to just let it ring - they'll leave a message if it is important. Twenty minutes later, the phone rings again. Thinking it is probably your family, you answer. After hearing a slight click, someone asks to speak to you (and they mispronounce your name). You realize that you are being targeting with a telemarketer, what do you do...?"
- After the group has time to tell a few of their own stories in this area, discuss the following questions:
 - What if they indicate they just want your opinion? Does it change how you respond to them?
 - What if they let you know right away that they are local?
 - How is local and wanting your opinion different from local and wanting you to buy something

- differently?
- How do you respond to receiving questionnaires in the mail?
- Do you respond differently to questionnaires when there is nothing to buy? When the organization or company is local? When they just want your opinion?
- Share with the group the number of people in the county who were involved in your Extension programs last year. Write this on a chalkboard or flipchart. Now share the total number of the population of your potential audience (for your community, county or state). Indicate that it is not reasonable to assume that Extension programs will include the entire population. Nonetheless, it is important to attempt to align limited program resources with the actual wants, needs and issues of the population.
- Indicate that the advisory members have been asked to serve for a variety of reasons. However, one thing that is common to them all is that we need their input and their help in securing others input. One of the ways they can help Extension better plan worthwhile programs is through their many relationships and insights into the communities.
- One common method for securing community input is the attitude survey. The advisory members will help formulate an action plan for generating a survey and taking it to the community.

LESSON

- Distribute one copy of "Existing Data Summary" to each participant. Remind them that this is the data you worked on at the last meeting to get a picture of "Where We Are".
- From this data, have the group help decide how many people will be surveyed from each segment of the population.
- Next, discuss how the surveys will be done. Ask them to recall the previous pitfalls of phone or mail surveys. Place an emphasis on how to get information from clientele that are currently using the Extension Service as well as residents who are not currently participating. While this is to be the group's decision, some of the following suggestions may stimulate discussion:
 - Will our current clientele respond to a mail or phone survey? If so, who will do it? Ask for volunteers from the advisory group members. If not, how should we reach them?
 - Would current clientele and non-users respond to an email survey? If so, how will we secure the email addresses?
 - How will we reach residents who do not currently

use Extension services? If we can secure some phone numbers for a representative sample, would they answer our questions? Would they return our mail or email survey?

- Could we do a mass mailing to all postal customers? Is that feasible? Worth the money it will cost in printing and postage?
- Could we get volunteers to take the surveys to local interest groups, libraries or grocery stores to do personal interviews and solicit opinions and information from our non-users?

Should we look for others who play key social roles in each segment of the population and encourage them to help us solicit this information?

- Now that who and how we will seek this needs data are decided, we need to define what type of information we want to find out.
 - Distribute a copy of "Example Phone or Interview Survey" (may depend on how they decided to attempt to secure the information from the public). The example survey can be modified for use as a phone or mail survey or a personal interview guide can be used in multiple ways as well. **While it serves as a tool, it needs to be modified to address local needs and issues and may need other refining as well.** For example- there are some questions on the example that address public recognition/evaluation of programs - is that the information you are looking for or are you more interested in their help in identifying issues??
 - After the advisory members have examined the example, ask for suggestions and changes to the format and/or questions. Some things that may need to be considered are:
 - What local non-formal educational issues exist?
 - Are the issues different for different areas of the community/county/state?
 - What programs have the widest public recognition? Why?
 - Are some programs based on history or are they practical in today's society?

APPLICATION

- Assign advisory members to their roles in the attitude survey process. Recognize that the Extension employees will have to make a significant effort to help pull together this survey and coordinate the effort. However, keep members of the advisory council involved in their roles (conducting the phone interviews,

doing the personal interviews...). This way it is the whole team's project to assess the community needs and issues, not just yours. The advisory council will feel a viable and necessary part of the team and their input will be invaluable to you.

- Remind the advisory members that they have an opportunity to probe further if conducting phone surveys or personal interviews. Take the extra time to find out more and record their input.
- **Do it!** Then create a summary titled "Attitude Survey Summary".

REFERENCES

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