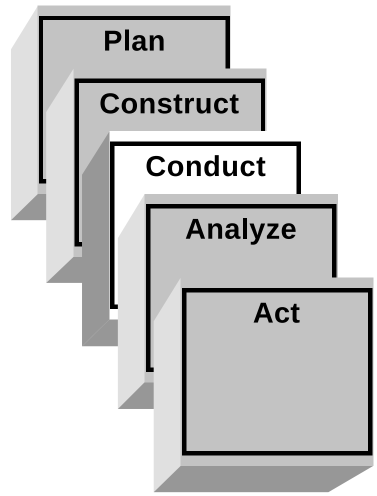
CONDUCT DATA COLLECTION

Whatever methods you choose for collecting data, adequate planning, training, quality control, and supervisory practices are essential to ensure that the data collected meet certain standards, namely that the information is



- Timely
- Accurate
- Efficient
- Useful
- Reliable
- Valid.

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group project typically involves several steps, as discussed below.

To recruit participants, you will need to compose *an effective recruitment script*. Use this tool to create dialogue between the person recruiting participants and the candidate and to qualify potential participants considering factors such as age, socioeconomic status, and race/ethnicity. Then you will invite individuals who meet requirements to participate in the group. You should recruit about twelve *qualified participants* for each focus group; allowing for last-minute change of plans and illness, the moderator should expect that about nine will attend.

Several practices can maximize the efficiency of the recruitment process:

- Well before the group meets, mail a letter to participants that confirms the date, time, and location of the group and states whether the respondents will be paid for participating. The letter thanks the participants, gives directions to the focus group facility, and repeats the general objectives of the focus group.

- Additionally, you may decide to provide *transportation* to the focus group facility for those participants who need this service.

- On the day of the focus group (or the previous day, if the group is scheduled for the morning), make a *follow-up telephone call* to the participants to remind them to attend.

Running a successful focus group also requires arranging logistical matters, such as

- Arranging for focus group facilities
- Providing videotaping and audio taping equipment or people assigned as recorders
- Providing a video hookup between the room where the focus group will meet and the room where you (or others) will observe the focus group (if this is part of the design)
- Coordinating participants' schedules.

During the focus group, it is a good idea to use both a moderator and an assistant to conduct the session. The moderator will pose questions to elicit candid opinions from the participants, keep the discussion moving, cover all topics in the discussion guide, recognize when participants bring up valuable new information, and steer the discussion in that direction if warranted. The assistant supports the moderator as needed, takes notes, and handles logistics.

MAIL SURVEYS

In setting up data collection procedures for a mail survey, a good database is important. The database should contain, for each customer, a unique identification number, the customer's characteristics relevant for the sample selection (such as geographic location, size of business, or date of last contact with EPA), name and address, mailout date(s), and the date the response is received. This database is a tracking system.

A mail survey typically involves several separate mailings, each of which they call a "wave." Send out each wave of a mail survey on the same date:

- If you use an advance letter, mail all advance letters to customers on the same day.
- About a week later, mail the first questionnaire to all customers. Attach a label with the unique identification number to each questionnaire. Include a letter in the package that refers to the advance letter, asks for cooperation, and (when possible) provides a toll-free number for customers to call if they have questions. The package should also contain a prepaid, pre-addressed envelope for the customer to use to return the completed survey.
- As completed questionnaires come in, record their return in the tracking system. Similarly, as undeliverable questionnaires come back (e.g., the customer has moved and left no forwarding address or the address is incorrect), note that they were undeliverable in the tracking system.
- About 3 weeks after mailing the first questionnaire, send out the second copy to all those who have not yet responded. The letter in this packet should note the importance of the study and

ask customers to respond. The second copy of the questionnaire should be a different color from the first version. This distinguishes between the two copies, sends a signal to customers, and aids efforts to track responses.

The following often help improve response rates:

- The advance letter (if used) should be on official letterhead, with a signature or title that is meaningful to the customer
- Any signed correspondence should use a real signature rather than a rubber stamp (scanning in the signature can work well for many letters)
- Use a "live" stamp (if possible), rather than metered or prepaid postage, to send out the survey
- Use "address correction requested" to get information on customers whose surveys cannot be delivered, then use the corrected information in the next mailout
- Use a large enough envelope so that the survey booklet does not have to be folded
- Establish, when possible, a toll-free number for the duration of the data collection period, and encourage customers to call with questions or comments
- Allow respondents to fax back the completed survey
- If the budget permits, send out a third mailing via certified mail or using an overnight delivery service (this is a last resort and may produce only minimal results).

Data from mail surveys must be key-entered or scanned. It is usually most cost-efficient to wait until you have a sizable batch of completed surveys before beginning data entry procedures. Be sure to do a periodic quality check to uncover data-entry errors.

TELEPHONE SURVEYS

Whether using computer-assisted telephone interviewing technology (CATI) or a traditional paper-based technique, you must train telephone interviewers specifically on the study's questionnaire and data collection procedures. The following are topics to cover during interviewer training sessions:

- ***Background and scope of the survey.*** A project leader gives interviewers general information about the background and scope of the project. She/he explains the types of information to be collected and the ways in which that information will be used.

- ***Review of the questionnaire.*** A person responsible for data collection goes through the questionnaire and leads an item-by-item discussion.

- ***Dealing with uncooperative respondents.*** Experienced staff lead discussions about ways to start off the interview right, enlist cooperation, build rapport, and minimize breakoffs and nonresponses. The interviewers will also review strategies for ways to manage challenging situations.

- ***Answering customers' questions.*** Some frequent questions are

  - How was I selected?
  - What is the survey about?
  - Who is conducting the survey?
  - Who wants to know these answers?
  - How will the information be used?
  - How long will this take?
  - Will I be identified?
  - How do I know you are who you say you are?

- ***Quality control procedures***. Project leaders monitor matters such as posing questions accurately, tone, courteousness, and responsiveness to customers' concerns throughout the survey, and they review these procedures with interviewers. Telephone interviews for any sizable study are usually conducted using CATI technology. CATI systems use computers to facilitate the interviews, which is a vast improvement over traditional paper-based systems because CATI

  - Greatly reduces the possibility of mistakes
  - Ensures accurate recording of the survey response
  - Instantly establishes a tracking system and a record of each call
  - Provides significant improvements in quality control and efficiency
  - Allows complex branching and skip patterns.

When using CATI, the computer automatically handles tasks such as controlling pace, organizing which questions are to be asked and which are to be skipped, rejecting invalid or unlikely responses, and recording closed-ended and open-ended responses. This enables the interviewer to focus on smooth delivery and good interviewing skills. It also eliminates the need to enter data after the survey is completed. The net result is a higher-quality interview and more reliable information.

ELECTRONIC FEEDBACK

Internet surveys use a web-based form that the user completes online at a designated web address. The survey manager should only consider this method of data collection if the potential respondents have access to the Internet.

To administer an Internet survey, the survey manager must have a method of contacting the people selected for the sample, preferably via e-mail addresses. After compiling the sample list, the survey manager then sends an e-mail alert that will lead potential respondents to the survey website. Upon entering the website, respondents can then log-in and take the survey. Internet surveys have several advantages:

- The Internet survey is interactive, like a telephone survey, allowing programmed skip patterns and links to more detailed survey instructions. Unlike a telephone survey, respondents can see what they are answering.
- Respondents can complete the questionnaire at a time convenient to them.
- There are no calling or mailing costs associated with Internet surveys.

E-mail surveys are one of the fastest and least intrusive means for gathering customer feedback. Up to 50 percent of the responses are received within 24 hours. They are also cheaper to conduct since you pay no interviewers or printing and distribution costs. In addition, the survey will definitely get to the right individual; they will usually not be intercepted and routed to another person. However, there are also some disadvantages. For example, it is difficult to format an e-mail message to be clear and concise. It is also likely that respondents will have no perception of anonymity. Finally, as e-mail use increases, people are becoming less patient with the many messages that can be received.

Online Focus Groups

Online focus group research is an exciting new potential of online conferencing. Traditional focus groups require:

- The rental of a physical facility, transportation for participants, snacks, recording facilities for transcription purposes, and time spent in setup and cleanup
- The recruitment of participants from the immediate local area
- Travel costs for moderators who must be located at the same site as the participants

Online focus groups overcome many of these limitations. Features of online focus groups include:

- The ability to restrict access to pre-authorized participants
- Automatic production of instant word-for-word transcripts
- Use of online fill-in survey forms without leaving the focus group
- Use of online participant profiles filled out in advance (reduces the need for “get acquainted” activities)
- Elaborate electronic moderator discussion controls
- Display (with no action needed by participants) of discussion materials such as PowerPoint slides, Excel charts and spreadsheets, concept papers and other text materials, photographs and other visuals, live websites and their contents, live pictures from web cameras, and even streaming audio and video
- The ability to continue discussion on a split screen while viewing materials such as those described above.

Conduct ✓ Checklist

___Choose an approach
___Design the sample
___Decide method for collecting the data
___Develop the questions
___Construct the questionnaire
___Conduct a pretest
___Prepare OMB Clearance package

“Statistics are no substitute for judgment.”
Henry Clay