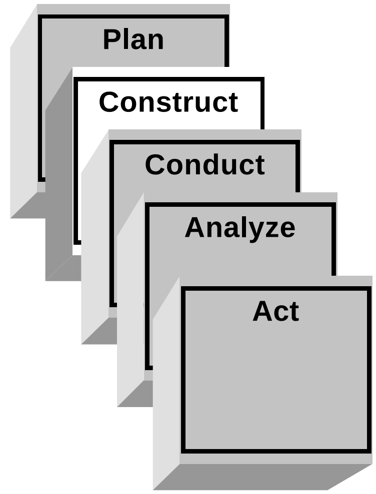
# CONSTRUCT DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES




## WHAT IS THE "BEST" APPROACH FOR ASSESSING CUSTOMER SATISFACTION?

There is no one best approach for assessing customer satisfaction. What will work best for any particular EPA program area will depend on the kind of product or service provided, the kinds of customers served, how many customers are served, the longevity and frequency of customer/supplier interactions, and what you intend to do with the results. Two very different approaches both produce meaningful and useful findings:

- Continuous assessment methods—Methods to obtain feedback from *the individual customer* at the time of product or service delivery (or shortly afterwards).

- Periodic survey approaches—Methods that obtain feedback from *groups of customers* at periodic intervals after service or product delivery They provide an occasional snapshot of customer experiences and expectations.

Understanding customers' expectations and satisfaction requires multiple inputs from customers. It is like peeling away layers of an onion—each layer reveals yet another deeper layer, closer to the core. Both method types are helpful methods to obtain customer feedback for assessing EPA's overall accomplishments, degree of success, and areas for improvement.

### *Continuous assessment*

These Guidelines focus on methods for obtaining customer feedback periodically, but it is very important to remember that you can adopt continuous assessment as a standard method for obtaining customer satisfaction information. Some ways to include continuous assessment in your work include

- Inserting a feedback card in every copy (or every $^{nth}$ copy) of any published report sent out

- Making a followup phone call to every customer (or to every fifth, or twelfth, or *n*th customer) within 1 or 2 days of interacting with that customer.

The information you obtain from continuous assessment can provide valuable and timely insight into the experiences that your customers have had with EPA.

### *Decide on data collection method*

Before considering systematic methods for collecting data, remember that informal methods for obtaining information from customers clearly produce information that is valuable. Everyone at EPA needs to recognize and use these everyday opportunities for customer feedback. Use this information to complement the more systematic forms of gathering feedback discussed here (See previous discussion, page 4.)

Many different, more formal methods can be used to collect customer feedback data. Methods frequently used to gather customer feedback include focus groups, a mail-back postcard that is included among materials sent to EPA customers, a mail survey, a telephone survey, a publication evaluation form included at the back of every copy, and a printed or in-person survey (which might include computer-assisted personal interviews or an intercept survey when you ask every *n*th customer attending a function or visiting a facility to participate). Electronic mail will become an increasingly more important means for collecting customer feedback as more people gain access to the Internet.

When you decide which method to use, you should consider several factors, such as the types and number of questions to ask. The decision will also be affected by available resources to gather customer feedback, how fast decision makers need to have the information, and how representative the findings need to be. The *response rate*—the number of customers who actually answer questions divided by the number contacted for information—is also an important consideration because it will affect the way you can use findings. A summary of different methods appears in the table on the next page.

When selecting a method for obtaining customer feedback, recognize that you need different kinds of information for different methods of obtaining customer feedback. If, for example, you choose a mail or phone survey, you will need an accurate name, address, and/or telephone number. At times it may also be critical to know which EPA programs or services the customer sought or received, as well as any demographic information available.

Note that several different practices can affect the ratings of various data collection methods:

- Focus groups and telephone and in-person surveys require trained staff to conduct proper interviews and prevent interviewer bias.
- Focus groups and telephone and in-person surveys provide EPA with the opportunity to show through direct personal contact that the agency takes customer feedback seriously.
- Telephone surveys can more readily accommodate differences in language and literacy levels than can mail surveys, but they cannot accommodate lengthy questionnaires or visuals.
- Some people are difficult to reach by or do not have a telephone, and many who do are reluctant to or simply will not participate in telephone interviews.

## Comparison of feedback methods

| Factor | Focus groups | Mail-back form* | Mail-out survey | Telephone survey | In-person survey | Continuous (every *n*th customer) ** | Electronic via Internet |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cost | moderate | low | moderate | moderate | high | moderate | |
| Convenience for customer to complete | moderate | high | high | moderate | moderate | moderate | high |
| Length of survey | up to 2 hours | very short | up to 12 pages | 12-15 minutes | up to 1-1/2 hours | mixed | very short |
| Size of recommended sample | n/a | large | moderate | small | small | moderate | large |
| Ability to encourage customer to participate | high | low | moderate | high | high | mixed | low |
| Ability to provide instructions or explanation to customer | high | low | low | high | high | mixed | low |
| Requires customer to initiate | no | yes | no | no | no | mixed | yes |
| Respondent's perception of anonymity | moderate | high | moderate | moderate | moderate | moderate | not anonymous |
| Types of questions | closed- and open-ended | yes/no | mostly closed-ended | closed- and open-ended | closed- and open-ended | most closed-ended | can be both |
| Opportunity to probe and ask "why" questions | very high | limited | limited | moderate to high | high | limited | limited |
| Need for accurate list of telephone numbers or addresses | no | no | yes | yes | yes | yes | no |
| Allows "branching" and skip patterns*** | yes | no | some | yes | some | some | no |
| Ability to get quick response | moderate | no | moderate | yes | moderate | moderate | high |
| Response rates | high | low | moderate to high | high | high | moderate | low |
| Extent of likely bias between customers who choose to participate and those who decline | high | high | some | low | low | mixed | |
| Ease of data entry | moderate | moderate | moderate | high | moderate | mixed | high |
| Extent of data clean-up | low | some | moderate | low | moderate | mixed | low |
| Ability to generalize results | low | low | high | high | moderate to high | | low |

* Refers to feedback forms or postcards distributed at a point of contact with the customers or included among materials sent to a customer.

** Every *n*th customer would be contacted using telephone, feedback card or survey form; therefore "mixed" appears frequently in the table.

*** "Branching" is when a particular answer to one question leads to a series of related questions. For example, if a customer cited a product as especially helpful, a series of questions might try to ascertain what, exactly, about that product led to the customer's opinion; if another customer finds a product especially irrelevant, a different series of questions might be posed. "Skip patterns" refer to instructions about which questions to answer and which to skip, depending on the particular answer given to one question.

- Mail surveys can be longer, since respondents can work at their own pace, but they have the longest response time and may not reach the intended target.

- Mail surveys allow no interviewer bias to enter in, but they offer little ability to probe or ask complex questions, and should there be any ambiguity in questions, it cannot be clarified.

- The amount of followup can dramatically influence costs, timeliness, and the ability to generalize results. Mail surveys, for example, may have several followup mailings to customers who do not initially respond. Customers who initially decline to participate in a telephone survey may be assigned to a special staff member who is charged with trying to convince the customer to answer the questions. An advance letter can increase participation and response rates for mail and telephone surveys. It can also allay customers' concerns about such matters as how they were selected, why they have been selected to participate again (if applicable), anonymity, how long it will take them to answer the questions, and how findings will be used. (See sample advance letter following.)

**Sample letter**
[on EPA letterhead]

Mr John Doe
Alpha, Beta, and Gamma Co., Inc.
555 Main Street
Anywhere, USA 12345

Dear Mr Doe:

I am writing to let you know that your name has been selected at random to participate in a survey about business owners' experiences with EPA. You are one of a small group of people we are contacting. Your feedback about your experiences can help shape our future direction.

We at EPA will take findings from the survey into consideration as we develop our plans for the next decade. We are committed to incorporating customer viewpoints and recommendations into our strategic planning, budgeting, and decision making while recognizing the need for balancing sometimes competing and conflicting interests.

I realize that we may have contacted you before to answer similar questions. We are tracking our efforts to respond to customer concerns, so it is very important to hear from you again. Your responses will be reported only in aggregate form.

You should receive the survey in the next few days. It will take less than 10 minutes for you to complete. I urge you to consider the questions carefully and let us know how we can better serve you. In the meantime, if you have any questions, please call 1-800-xxx-xxxx to speak with a staff member on EPA's survey team (or someone at YYY Consulting, the firm conducting the survey for EPA).

I thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Name and Title of highest possible EPA person

### *The sample*

If the number of customers of interest is relatively small, not more than 50, each could be contacted to obtain feedback This is the *census* approach In many cases, EPA services or products are provided to a large group of customers, one too large for a census approach In such cases, a *sampling* approach is needed, and two options are possible: 1) a *judgment* *sample*, in which you consciously select the customers that you will contact from the entire group of customers served, and 2) a *probabilistic sample*, in which customers you will contact are picked randomly from the entire group of customers served during the period of interest (i.e., the past year).

In most cases, it is better to rely on a probabilistic sample than a judgment sample. Judgment samples may be biased because of the way customers are selected for the study. If a sample is biased, it is impossible to draw inferences about the entire group of customers served. As long as the response rate is high enough, probabilistic samples are not biased, so inferences can be made about the entire group of customers that the selected ones represent.

### *Determining the sample size*

If you choose to conduct a mail, telephone, or in-person survey, you will need to decide the number of people who will be selected to participate. To determine this number—the *sample size*—several factors should be considered, such as the total number of customers served, the intended use of the results, available resources, and time.

- The larger the percentage sampled, the more certain you can be that the feedback obtained will be representative of the results that you would have obtained if you had contacted and gotten feedback from every customer.

- The smaller the percentage sampled, the greater the likelihood that feedback from those in the sample will differ significantly from those in the full list of customers.

The relationship between sample size and accuracy of findings is due to *sampling error*, a measurement that indicates the extent to which the sample of customers is different from the entire group of customers under study. In a news article that reports a politician's approval rating as 62 percent, plus or minus 5 percent, the "plus-or-minus" value is the sampling error.

To decide the size of the sample, you can either

- Determine the largest sample size that you can afford and calculate the associated sampling error

- Or determine the maximum sampling error that is acceptable and then select the sample size that will produce that level of error.

The sampling error can be estimated through a *confidence interval*. A confidence interval specifies a range of values within which the true measure is found. Typically, survey results rely on a 95 percent confidence interval, but lower levels are acceptable, depending on how you plan to use the findings. Popular media reports rarely stipulate confidence intervals, but they are implied. Using a politician's popularity rating as an example, the unstated premise is that the analyst is 95 percent certain that the politician's popularity is between 57 and 67 percent; that is, 62 percent, plus or minus 5 percentage points, the likely error.

One last point to consider in determining the sample size is the kinds of comparisons that you will want to make with survey findings. Many times, analysts are interested in comparing ways that different customers react to various services. These comparisons may involve large- versus small-sized businesses, the general public versus educators, and so forth. If these comparisons are a critical portion of the analysis, you must plan for them in the sample design so that enough of each customer type is surveyed to make the findings meaningful See **Factsheets III, IV,** and **V** for further information on sampling.

### *Develop the questions*

In deciding the questions to ask customers, it is a good idea to keep two principles in mind: 1) make sure that the questions and answers address your objectives, and 2) set limits on the length of the survey instrument.

Many sources are available to help develop questions for surveys. These include software packages such as Corporate Pulse (which is available to EPA staff through the Customer Service Program), prior surveys sponsored by EPA and other agencies, journal articles, and item banks maintained by some universities and survey organizations. When possible, it is better to use a previously tested and validated question rather than one newly created for the current survey.

***Yes/no***

*In the past 6 months, have you contacted the XYZ office?*

1 Yes 2 No

***Categories***

*In what kind of community is your business located? Would you say it's…*

1 Urban 2 Suburban 3 Rural

***Rank order***

*Of the following items, which three are most important to you? Please indicate with a "1" for the most important, a "2" for the next most important, and a "3" for the third most important.*

__ Clean air
__ Clean water
__ Hazardous waste disposal
__ A minimum level of Government regulation
__ Lower taxes

***Scale***

*Please rate your satisfaction with the service you received, using a scale of 1 to 6 "6" means you are very satisfied, and "1" means you are very dissatisfied.*

1 2 3 4 5 6

Survey questions are generally of two types: open-ended and closed-ended. In open-ended questions, the customer creates his or her own answers. The following are examples of open-ended questions:

- Do you have any suggestions for improving service? [IF YES], What are they?
- How could EPA be more responsive to your concerns?
- Could you please describe the most satisfying experience you've had with EPA?

Closed-ended questions limit the responses a customer can provide. They may include yes/no answers, categories of responses, rank-ordered responses, or scales. The following are examples of each type:

With closed-ended questions, it is relatively easy to record and analyze responses, and you will not receive irrelevant or unintelligible responses. However, you risk "missing the boat." To illustrate, suppose you ask the closed-ended questions, "What was the main reason for your visit?" giving several possible answers, and 30 percent of your respondents mark "other." Drawing valid conclusions about why customers visited would be hard. If you decide to use closed-ended questions, pretest them to identify all the likeliest responses to your questions.

In developing questions and answers for closed-ended items, the advisability of including response options such as "don't know" and "no opinion" should be carefully considered. While customers should not be forced into providing responses when they really do not have answers, it is better to find ways to encourage a response than to let customers default to a neutral position In mail surveys, this encouragement can be accomplished through

**On developing questions**

Whatever type of feedback method you choose, allow plenty of time and resources for developing your questions This process involves several cycles of writing, testing (using actual customers served), and rewriting Remember, what you are looking for is actionable information for managers, so ask yourself, "What action could I take with this kind of answer?"

Questions that are too vague can mean different things to different people The best thing to do is be specific For example, you may have identified an issue such as, "What do our customers think of our new application form?" That's pretty bland Go on to questions like

- What do our customers like or dislike about our new application form?
- Do our customers find the instructions on the new application form helpful or confusing?
- Is the new form easier or harder to understand than the old form?
- Do customers spend less time filling out the application?
- Do front line staff spend less time answering questions about the form?

Specific questions will be more likely to give you information you can act on to improve your program And asking front line staff for their input is always a good thing to do, as well.

instructions; in telephone and in-person surveys, it can be fostered by *not* offering “don’t know” and “no opinion” as response options. On the other hand, including “not applicable” as a response is important in mail surveys, so that customers are able to indicate this when they have not had a particular experience. In asking questions about a past event, consider giving a “don’t remember” option. Keep the survey to a reasonable length by asking only the questions you need to address the issues of concern that prompted your survey; leave out the “nice-to-know” questions.

Recognize that open-ended questions will provide a richness of data that can complicate analysis. Reducing responses to a few categories that can be coded, entered into a database, and analyzed can be difficult. It is probably best to use a mix of questions, both closed and open, in most customer feedback questionnaires.

If you are planning an ongoing or periodically repeated survey, identify a few key program goals that are unlikely to change very soon, and focus your questions on them. Develop questions that will indicate how well customers think the goals are being met. These key questions need not be elaborate or profound, but should be very basic to your program. To effectively compare results over time, you need to use essentially the same core questions in your survey upon each iteration You will need to avoid making any major changes to these key questions, whether in wording, scaling, or placement, so be sure to ask the right questions from the beginning.

Questions that are relevant to customers should be developed to fulfill the purposes and the objectives of the specific customer feedback activity being conducted. Although this may seem obvious, it is important to remember throughout the development of questions. Be particularly wary of questions that may be interesting to ask, but may only add time and cost while not producing useful information. These questions could be

- Extraneous questions that do not address the stipulated purposes and objectives of the feedback activity.
- Questions that are subject to misinterpretation These may have vague words, use unfamiliar jargon, or could be understood differently by different types of customers.
- Double-barreled questions that embed more than one item, such as “On a scale of 1 to 6, please indicate how *clear and useful* the materials are.” The customer may have one opinion about clarity and another about usefulness, but is not given an opportunity to distinguish between them in his or her response.
- Questions that may upset some respondents Some that customers may perceive to be intrusive, such as household income, are best when worded neutrally (such as by asking whether the customer’s household income falls above or below a certain level) and placed at the end of the survey.

- Questions on matters that customer may consider to be sensitive or offensive, especially about cultural, ethnic, gender, and socioeconomic considerations.

- Questions that do not elicit responses that point to specific remedying actions.

If you do not ask the right questions in the right way relatively soon after the service experience, feedback will not be as useful as it might have been. Also, remember that to effectively compare results over time you will need to avoid making major changes to key questions, whether in wording, scale, or order in the questionnaire.

There is no single correct scale to use. However, there are several important issues to consider:

- Whenever possible, the same scale should be used throughout a given questionnaire to help ensure that different responses within a questionnaire can be validly compared.

- Different survey efforts within an organization should use the same scale To this end, we recommend that when using the core questions described above, you consistently use the same scale of one to six (1–6).

### *Construct the questionnaire*

No matter what method you use to collect data, all questionnaires follow a similar format:

- Introduction—sets forth the purpose of the survey and guides the customer through the questions

- Customer experience—establishes the customer’s level of knowledge regarding various parts of the questionnaire

- Measurement— asks the person surveyed to characterize his or her experiences, needs, and desires as an EPA customer

- Customer information—gathers data that will be used to classify respondents.

***Mail surveys.*** The mail survey has to do everything you would do if you were with the customer. It has to the visually appealing, have a pleasant tone, and be clear. The survey instrument is under the direct control of the customer. Its physical look will affect the customer’s willingness to respond; the clarity of the instructions and questions will affect the customer’s ability to interpret their meaning correctly.

Single-page questionnaires and comment cards should be attractive and easy to read. Longer questionnaires should be printed in booklet form, on 11" x 17" paper that is folded in half and stapled in the middle to produce a standard 8 ½" x 11" page. The cover should be visually appealing and use a logo or other graphic design to interest the customer, and no questions should appear on the cover. Use of color ink and high-quality paper will add only minor costs to the survey, but can substantially improve response rates and reduce the cost of followup correspondence and telephone work by staff or contractors. The cover should give the title of the survey activity and indicate who is conducting the work. For its surveys, the Social Security Administration uses brightly colored paper, desktop publishing to allow more flexibility in design, and larger print to accommodate the needs of its elderly and disabled customers. The methods used to construct the questionnaire are different, depending on the mode of data collection that will be used to obtain customer feedback In the next section we present methods for constructing questionnaires for focus groups, mail surveys, and telephone surveys—the most frequently used forms of data collection in periodic surveys to obtain customer feedback.

***Focus groups.*** As knowledge about customer surveys has expanded and entered the public domain, more people claim to be conducting focus groups. It is important to distinguish between focus groups—which are based on scientific procedures and understanding of human interactions—and more casual discussions among people who share a common interest or concern. Both approaches provide potentially useful information, but analysts should recognize the difference between data from focus groups and data from more informal gatherings (See pages 27-28.)

The key instrument for a focus group is the moderator's guide. This is a series of questions, probes, and discussion topics that are arrayed in a logical order. The moderator uses the guide to elicit opinions and experiences from participants, and to ensure that discussions stay focused as much as possible on the critical issues around which the group was formed. A sample moderator's guide appears on the next page.

Typically, a moderator's guide is organized as follows:

- Introductions by moderator and participants
- Review of ground rules, such as
  1. You have been asked here to offer your views and opinions; everyone's participation is important; the conversation does not need to flow through the moderator, although the moderator will manage the group
  2. Speak one at a time (avoid side conversations)
  3. Note videotaping, audiotaping, and observers (as applicable)
  4. There are no right or wrong answers; consensus is not required
  5. Okay to be critical; if you don't like something, say so
  6. All answers are confidential, so feel free to speak your mind
- Brief explanation of the focus group purpose and introduction of the topic
- Definitions
- Questions, probes, discussion topics
- Closing and thanks.

Survey questions should be presented in a logical sequence. Many survey experts believe that the first question on the survey, more than any other, will determine whether your customer completes or discards the questionnaire. Starting with a fairly simple question is a good idea because it suggests to the customer that completing the survey will be neither difficult nor time-consuming It is also advisable to ask a fairly interesting question to gain the customer's interest.

The next set of questions should focus on matters that the customer is most likely to judge as useful or salient. This continues the process of drawing the customer in so that he or she becomes engaged with thinking about the questions being asked and becomes invested in completing the survey. Grouping questions together that share common themes makes sense because the customer then focuses on that particular area of inquiry. To the extent practical, group questions together that have similar types of response options. For example, questions that have yes/no responses should be together and questions that have scale responses should be together.

The order of questions should also mirror the thought processes that customers are likely to follow. For example, questions about particular experiences with onsite inspections should precede questions about suggestions to improve those inspections.

The final set of questions should center on those most likely to be sensitive or offensive. These may include questions about personal characteristics (e.g., race, age, income) and unsuitable behaviors.

The final page of the booklet should not have any survey questions Instead, it should invite the customer's comments or suggestions about anything raised in the survey or other issues and concerns important to the respondent It should also indicate the address for returning the questionnaire (in case the survey gets separated from the reply envelope) and, when possible, a toll-free number set up exclusively to receive inquiries about the survey.

***Telephone surveys.*** Because customers have no questionnaire in front of them during a telephone survey, concerns about visual appeal are not applicable for this form of data collection. Issues regarding ordering and clarity of questions are important, and the same principles apply as with mail surveys.

The difference between mail and telephone surveys is that spoken language is very different from written language, and customers must be able to respond to questions based only on the information they hear. So it is critical that you ensure that your interviewers speak clearly and are well trained. Additionally, the interviewer acts as an intermediary between the customer and the questions posed. With this in mind, the following principles apply to telephone surveys:

- The introduction the customer hears will probably determine whether the interview is conducted or the customer hangs up. The introduction should be concise, state the purpose of the call, estimate the length of the call, and assure confidentiality. This is a sample:

*Hello, my name is [fill in], and I'm with the Environmental Protection Agency [or XXX Consulting]. We're conducting a survey of people who have received materials from the EPA to learn about their experiences and opinions. Let me assure you that this is <u>not</u> a sales call, and that we will keep all information about you and your responses private. We will use the information you provide <u>only</u> to help improve EPA's services. The survey will take less than 15 minutes to complete and is purely voluntary. Is this a convenient time, or would you like to set up a better time for me to call you back?*

- Because customers will rely on verbal cues and instructions, rather than written ones, questions should have a limited number of responses (about three or four).

- Because customers will rely on verbal questions, each question should be relatively short.

- Avoid questions that ask the customer to look up information or check with others.

- In constructing the questionnaire, be sure to read the questions aloud to others to see if they sound clear and are understandable. Remember, what works for the written word does not always work for the spoken word.

- Complex *skip patterns* and *branching* are easily accommodated through computer-assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) systems. *Skip patterns* occur when a particular answer to one question means the respondent is *not* asked certain questions that would otherwise follow; *branching* occurs when a particular answer to one question leads to a series of questions that are customized to that particular answer.

- Rank-order questions are subject to error in telephone interviews in a way that they are not for mail or in-person surveys. Rather than asking a customer to rank-order a list of, say, eight items, it is better to ask that person questions in a series of pairs ("Which is more important to you, X or Y?") or break up the list into a series of separate scaled items ("On a scale of 1 to 6, where 1 is extremely important and 6 is not at all important, how do you feel about X? On a scale of 1 to 6, how do you feel about Y? How about Z?").

- When changing subjects, telephone surveys should cue the customer with transitional language Statements such as, "Now, I'd like to turn to your experiences with…" accomplish this shift.

- Instructions for the interviewer must be perfectly clear, and the same format should be used throughout the survey. For example, interviewer instructions are typically written inside brackets, in all capital letters.

- For a sizable telephone survey (of say, more than 50 people), use of CATI should be considered. For large studies, CATI will be more cost-effective and produce more reliable information.

***Other methods for obtaining feedback.*** While many customer feedback activities at EPA are likely to rely on focus groups, mail surveys, and telephone surveys, remember there are other methods for obtaining customer feedback. These include prepaid postcards attached to materials EPA distributes, asking recipients to complete a couple of questions and return the card. They also include questions asked of Internet users; in-person interviews that make use of a semistructured list of questions; continuous feedback obtained by calling every fifth, tenth, or *n*th customer a few days after product or service delivery; and any other formal or informal opportunity for listening to customers.

### *Pretest*

A pretest is a small-scale trial of the instrument and data collection methods. Conducting a pretest is extremely important because the results will provide opportunities for refining the instrument and methods before the comprehensive data collection activity begins.

It may seem that a pretest is unnecessary if a survey has been carefully researched and designed. However, even the best plans cannot anticipate all real-world circumstances.

Results from a pretest can tell the analyst

- Whether the flow of questions is logical and orderly
- Whether questions seem relevant and appropriate to the customers
- If customers were able to easily understand and respond to questions
- If response categories are adequate
- Whether questions truly reflect the issue that is intended to be measured.

One of the best ways to conduct a pretest is to randomly select individuals from the target group of customers served, have them complete the survey according to the method planned for the overall effort, and then participate in a focus group session to review their opinions. If, for example, you intend to conduct a telephone survey, customers should be recruited, come to a central location where they can be interviewed by telephone, then meet as a group to go over the draft questionnaire and their experiences in answering the questions. Those who are involved in the pretest should not be included in the sample selected for the actual survey

A pretest is helpful for cost projections, and also provides information about actual burden (that is, the amount of time to complete the survey), which is essential for Office of Management and Budget clearance (required for Federal agencies, their contractors, and cooperative agreement partners performing surveys of direct benefit to the sponsoring agency). A pretest that involves more than nine people who are not Federal employees also requires OMB clearance.

### *OMB clearance*

Under the Paperwork Reduction Act of 1995, the U.S. Office of Management and Budget must approve any federally-sponsored collection of information that asks the same question of more than 9 nonfederal respondents. Typically referred to as OMB Clearance, the process is an exacting one and demands strict adherence to OMB requirements. For example, if a customer feedback activity is subject to OMB clearance, the cover of the data collection instrument must contain standard language and the date on which the clearance expires.

EPA has obtained OMB approval of a generic Information Collection Request (ICR) to conduct customer satisfaction work. Under this authority, the clearance process is streamlined and the time for clearance is reduced from as long as 6 months to between 10 and 15 days. This generic ICR is available only for strictly voluntary collections of opinions from customers who have experience with the existing product or service that is the subject of each particular feedback instrument

**Factsheet VI** explains the streamlined process and provides several examples of cleared survey instruments. You may request the factsheet as a separate electronic document from Patricia Bonner, Director of EPA's Customer Service Program (Mail Code 2161). You may also send her survey instruments for quick review to ensure that questions are worded to address customer satisfaction issues, not focused on program or outreach effectiveness In some cases, another information collection request may be more appropriate to use than the customer service generic clearance mechanism.

Proposed EPA survey packages should be sent for final review to Barbara Willis of the Regulatory Information Division (2137), at Headquarters. She will check the package for compliance with OMB regulations regarding use of the generic clearance for customer satisfaction surveys and review the burden placed on the public, State officials, tribes, and other nonfederal government customers. She will forward to OMB all survey instruments and the required clearance package.

See **Factsheet VI** for more information about specific procedures to follow, forms to complete, and general information about EPA Customer Feedback OMB Clearance. EPA personnel listed below may be able to provide additional information:

**Barbara Willis**
202-260-9453
202-260-9322 (fax)
Barbara Willis (EPA internal e-mail)
willis.barbara@epamail.epa.gov

**Pat Bonner**
202-260-0599
202-260-4968 (fax)
Patricia Bonner (EPA internal e-mail)
bonner.patricia@epamial.epa.gov

### *Additional resources*

The EPA Customer Service Program collects copies of survey instruments, reports, and resulting plans. These materials are a resource for other EPA offices and staff who want to learn more about their customers.

### *Contingency for nonresponse*

**Effective questions *checklist***

__Use short statements or questions
__Use simple words
__Avoid jargon
__Be clear and easy to understand
__Arrange questions in logical order
__Use appropriate response choices (include all possible answers and minimize overlap among the answers)
__Do not use double negatives
__Be upbeat and interesting
__Write to the appropriate reading level (9th grade or less for general public; several word-processing software packages incorporate a feature that determines reading level)
__ Use questions pretested in other surveys whenever possible
__Leave out the questions that are "nice to know" but not vital to the success of the program /product/service

Occasionally, regardless of planning, there will be times when response rates are simply too low for you to make inferences and recommend action. In these cases, it is important to have a contingency plan for nonresponse. The plan will need to include the potential additional steps you will take to increase the level of participant response. Some potential steps include

- ***Reminder calls or postcards.*** If these steps were not included in the original survey plan, they should be considered if the response is low. If they were included in the original plan, it may be advantageous for you to repeat them.

- ***Followup contact with nonrespondents.*** You may need to make telephone calls or other types of personal contact to nonrespondents to identify the reasons for their nonresponse. You may want to learn if they understood the intent of the survey and the questions, if the questions were relevant to them, and if there were specific factors that caused their reluctance to respond.

- ***Improve contact information.*** It may be that many addresses or phone numbers of the target group are incorrect or out-of-date. Improving this information would very likely improve the response rate. Places to check include the Internet, credit bureaus, and business directories.

- ***Revision of survey instrument.*** In some instances, some of the survey questions may make respondents feel uncomfortable or unable to respond, so you may need to revise the instrument. NOTE: If you change the survey instrument significantly, you may not be able to compare the results received before the change with those received after the change. You will need to carefully consider the tradeoff of response rate versus data validity.

Some of these steps may require a great deal of effort, time, and money. The group or individual in charge of the survey will need to carefully consider the various options. If the response rate remains too low, you may need to wait for a better time and a different customer base, or may wish to rely on direct conversations with customers.

**Construct** ***checklist***

__Design the sample
__Decide method for collecting data
__Choose an approach
__Develop the questions
__Construct the questionnaire
__Pretest
__Prepare OMB clearance package