Developing and implementing surveys

Key points

- Surveys are an evaluation method where you administer a standardised questionnaire to a sample of respondents.
- Surveys are different from other evaluation methods such as open-ended interviews and focus groups which are generally less structured. Surveys may be one part of a bigger evaluation toolkit that might also include analysis of program and activity data and documents, interviews and focus groups, case studies, direct observation and so on.
- The overall structure of a survey is an important. A logical, clear structure to a survey will keep respondents engaged and more likely to continue to completion.
- Surveys can contain different types of questions such as multiple choice, ranking a list of options and open answer.
- Sampling is the process you use to select your survey respondents.

This fact sheet points to some key considerations in developing and implementing surveys to ensure you get interesting and useful information and data.

How are surveys used?

Surveys are one of the most common methods used to gather information when evaluating arts and cultural initiatives. They can be a cost-effective and relatively simple way to gather data and feedback from a broad range of people such as attendees and participants, clients and members, peers and partners.

Depending on the scope of your evaluation process, it is preferable to use a number of methods to ensure findings are corroborated through more than one channel. Hence, surveys may be one part of a bigger evaluation toolkit that might also include analysis of program and activity data and documents, interviews and focus groups, case studies, direct observation and so on.

Types of surveys

Types of surveys include:
- Online surveys
- Phone surveys
- Face-to-face surveys

Different types of surveys will be appropriate in different contexts. The following table outlines some of the pros and cons of each.

	Pros	Cons
Online	• Cost-efficient option with minimal staff time required to administer • Efficient method of distribution • Convenient for stakeholders who are busy and want to respond in their own time • Helps reduce geographical barriers to participation • Online survey programs provide design/layout functions • Several online survey programs can be downloaded free of charge • Online survey programs collate findings and do basic analysis of quantitative data • Responses can be kept anonymous	• May be perceived as impersonal • May not result in high response rate without direct approach • Often administered after an event or activity has passed which can affect response rate • Excludes people without internet access • May not be practical or culturally appropriate for some groups • May be inappropriate for people who experience difficulties with English literacy or numeracy
Phone	• More direct approach resulting in good response rate • High survey completion/question response rate • Capacity to clarify questions with respondents to ensure proper understanding	• Time consuming to administer • Can be expensive if aiming for large sample (administration and telephone costs) • Not anonymous (though can still be non-identified) • Skills required for survey administrator e.g. to avoid bias
Face-to-face	• Most direct, personal approach resulting in good response rate • Often administered at the time an event or activity is occurring which increases response rate and captures feedback while it is fresh • High survey completion/question response rate • Capacity to clarify questions with respondents to ensure proper understanding	• Time consuming to administer • Can be expensive if aiming for large sample (administration costs) • Not anonymous (though can still be non-identified) • Skills required for survey administrator e.g. to avoid bias

Guiding principles for survey development

When developing surveys it can help to keep the following in mind as some guiding principles:

- Think about **who your respondents are** and what the most appropriate approach is for them

- Keep in mind the **outcomes you are investigating** in your evaluation and think about how your survey contributes to these

- Think about **what you really need to know** and only collect information for that purpose (e.g. what information do you need from a survey that you don't or can't collect in another way?) Avoid collecting data you will not use – this is respectful of respondents' time and also helps keep your task manageable

- Keep your survey as **short and simple** as possible, while still making sure you gather the information you need

- Think about the **type of analysis you want to conduct** and ensure your survey is geared towards that – for example, open ended information is more time-consuming to analyse; closed questions are useful in providing a snapshot but the information may not be as rich

- Think about the **potential answers you will get** from the questions you are posing – will these help you answer your evaluation questions?

- Be clear and simple and **do not assume respondents have the same knowledge** or understanding of the subject matter as you do

- Always **road-test your survey** with some pilot respondents before administering it more widely, including seeking cultural advice where relevant

- Be aware of **privacy legislation** and your obligations if you collect any personal data.

Survey structure

The overall structure of a survey is an important first consideration. A logical, clear structure will keep respondents engaged and more likely to continue to completion.

When deciding on a structure, think about the following:

- **Introduction** – what is the essential information your introduction needs to communicate to respondents? For example, purpose of the survey, how information will be used, privacy statement, anonymity/confidentiality, how long it will take, general instructions for completing it (if needed), contact for further information

- **Breakdown of sections** – depending on the length of your survey, it may be useful to break it up into sizable and logical chunks using sub-headings

- **Order of sections** – think about the order of questions or sections to achieve a logical flow to the survey. If you are collecting demographic information, there are different views about whether these questions should be placed at the front of the survey so you are starting with questions everyone can easily answer about themselves, or at the end to avoid boredom and disengagement

- **Length of survey** – as noted above, it is important to only collect data and information you really need for your analysis and this will help keep your survey to a reasonable length. Your chosen method for administering the survey will also influence the length – for example, if you plan to survey people face-to-face as they are leaving an event, you will need to keep your survey short and quick so it does not feel onerous

- **Layout and design** – it is important your survey is designed in a way which feels easy for people to complete. If you are using an online or ipad/android survey program, design capabilities are built in. If you are designing your survey in paper form, ensure there is enough white space to make the questions easy to digest and enough room for people to respond to open-ended questions

- **Cultural sensitivities** – different languages or cultural groups that may require specific protocols or may respond differently to different types of questions.

Question types

There are many different types of questions you can choose from for your survey. Some common examples include:

- **Multiple choice questions which ask for one response** from a set list. For example:

    Would you attend this event again?

    ☐ Yes

    ☐ No

    ☐ Maybe

- **Multiple choice questions which allow for more than one response** from a set list. For example:

    Which of our services have you accessed in the past 12 months?(Select all that apply)

    ☐ Face-to-face training workshop

    ☐ Online seminar

    ☐ Individual consultation session

- Questions which ask respondents to **rank a set list of options in order of priority** or importance. For example:

    The following list identifies a number of possible topics for future training workshops. Please rank them from 1 to 3, with 1 being the topic you are most interested in.

    ☐ Digital skills development

    ☐ Attracting private investment

    ☐ Evaluating outcomes

- Questions which ask respondents to select from a range of responses to **indicate the degree or intensity of their feelings** about a particular statement/item. For example:

Please indicate the extent to which agree or disagree with the following statements by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I felt engaged in the activity					
The activity met my expectations					

- Questions which ask for a **number response**. For example:

  How much do you think you will spend on a daily basis as part of this trip?

  $..............

- Questions which ask for **open-ended comments** or feedback. For example:

  What did you like most about the workshop today? Please respond in the space below.

Tips for wording questions

Your survey will only be effective if the questions you ask are succinct, clear, logical and feel relevant for your respondents.

The table below addresses some of the common pitfalls to avoid when designing survey questions.

Tip	Poor question design	Good question design
Keep questions simple – only ask one thing at a time	Do you think the performance was good quality and accessible? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know Problem: What do people tick if they think the quality was good but it wasn't accessible?	Do you think the performance was good quality? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know Do you think the performance was accessible? ☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Don't know

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Tip	Poor question design	Good question design
If you are asking respondents to select one option from a set list, make sure the options are mutually exclusive	How old are you? ☐ 15-20 years old ☐ 20-25 years old ☐ 25-30 years old Problem: Does someone who is 20 years of age tick the first or second box?	How old are you? ☐ 15-19 years old ☐ 20-24 years old ☐ 25-30 years old
If you are asking respondents to select one option from a set list, make sure the options relate to the question you have asked	How relevant was the workshop for you? ☐ Relevant ☐ Interesting ☐ Not relevant Problem: 'Interesting' option does not clearly relate to the question which is about 'relevance'	How relevant was the workshop for you? ☐ Very relevant ☐ Quite relevant ☐ Not relevant
If you are using a scaled response, make sure there is balance across the response options	How would you rate this event? ☐ Excellent ☐ Very good ☐ Good ☐ Poor Problem: The first three responses are all positive, with only one option for a negative response. Also, 'excellent' and 'very good' are similar options people may not easily distinguish between.	How would you rate this event? ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor
Make sure you cover all possible answer choices	How did you first hear about this festival? ☐ On the internet ☐ Poster ☐ Word of mouth Problem: What if someone heard about it on the radio or television?	How did you first hear about this festival? ☐ On the internet ☐ Poster ☐ Word of mouth ☐ Other (please specify:)
Keep your questions neutral so you do not bias the response	How would you rate the keynote speech from leading expert on tourism, David Smith? ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor Problem: The suggestion David Smith is a 'leading expert' encourages a positive response.	How would you rate the keynote speech on tourism by David Smith? ☐ Excellent ☐ Good ☐ Average ☐ Poor ☐ Very poor
Use plain English and avoid jargon not everyone will understand	Do you think cultural tourism is important for our community? Problem: Not everyone in the community will understand a term like 'cultural tourism'.	Do you think the arts help bring tourists to our community?

Selecting survey respondents

Sampling is the process you use to select your survey respondents. It is an important consideration when thinking about how representative your survey findings are.

Sometimes the entire population (the total number of people who experienced the event or activity) is sufficiently small, so the entire population can be included in the survey – for example, if you are surveying participants at a small workshop about their experience of the activity. If you are conducting an online survey, it may be possible to send the survey to every person within a given population if you have their contact details – of course this does not guarantee every person will necessarily respond and that you will end up with a representative sample.

In many cases the population will be too large for you to survey every member or invite every member to participate and you will need to select a sample of respondents.

In the ideal research world, respondents are selected using a **probability sampling** approach which relies on random selection and ensures every person in the population has a chance of being selected. Examples include:

- **Simple random sampling** – each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the survey and selection is undertaken using a table of random numbers or a computer-based random number generator

- **Systematic sampling** – every 'nth' person (e.g. 5th or 10th) from a randomised list of population members is selected to participate in the survey

- **Stratified sampling** – relevant stratums or sub-sets of the population are identified for inclusion in the survey, to ensure the sample is reflective of the characteristics of the overall population (such as age, gender and so on). Random sampling is then used to select a sufficient number of respondents from each stratum identified.

In reality, probability sampling is rarely appropriate for surveys undertaken as part of arts and cultural project evaluations. It requires you to have access to contact details for every member of the population concerned (e.g. every person who attended an event if you are conducting an event satisfaction survey) and it also requires significant expertise and budget to administer. It is often used in an arts context where a general population survey is undertaken using the services of a market research company.

More commonly, survey research in the arts uses **non-probability sampling** methods, meaning survey respondents are selected in a non-random manner. Examples include:

- **Purposive or judgment sampling** – respondents are selected based on judgment. For example, if you are surveying people as they leave a performance, you might make a conscious effort to ensure you ask a diversity of respondents to participate in the survey (e.g. with respect to age and gender).

- **Quota sampling** – this is a non-probability equivalent to stratified sampling above. In a similar way, relevant stratums or sub-sets of the population are identified for inclusion the survey. However rather than selecting people randomly, judgment sampling is used to identify those who meet the criteria for each stratum.

- **Snowball sampling** – used when members of a special population are difficult to locate. It relies on referrals from initial respondents to identify additional respondents.

In the case of non-probability sampling, it is important to always acknowledge the potential bias in your survey sample and not generalise findings to the entire population.

Although it significantly increases your chances, even a random sampling technique does not guarantee your findings will be representative of the population or allow you to make assumptions that the sample responded in exactly the same way as the entire population would. Additional statistical tests are required to reach this level of confidence.

As a general rule, the more people you can get to answer your survey, the better!

What is a good response rate?

There are two ways to think about response rates:

1. **The number of respondents you need to achieve an adequate sample**
   For surveys based on probability sampling, there are calculators available online which indicate how many responses you will need to minimise the margin of error and increase the validity of your results. For example, if your total population is 500 people and you want to achieve a 95% confidence level in your results and a margin of error no greater than 5%, then you will need to survey 218 people; for a population of 5000, you will need to survey 357 people; and so on.

   These same tools are not available for non-probability sampling as the non-random selection of respondents means you cannot generalise findings to the overall population. However, it is logical that the more people you survey, the more reliable and useful your results.

2. **The percentage of people who complete the survey when asked**
   Response rates vary depending on the type of survey you administer. As a very general guide:
   - Telephone and face-to-face surveys: 70% response rate is average, 80% response rate is good
   - Online surveys: 30% response rate is average, 40% is good
   - Surveys sent by email: 40% response rate is average, 50% is good.

How do you encourage people to respond?

In a world of market research and telephone polling, 'survey fatigue' is a common experience so you need to think of ways to encourage people to respond. Here are some pointers:

- Your **introduction is critical**, whether it be a cover email for an online survey or a direct approach to someone for a face-to-face or telephone survey. Be clear about the purpose of the survey, how long it will take and how the findings will be used. Let people know their feedback is valuable but be careful not to pressure people to respond.

- For online surveys, **don't make the due date too distant** otherwise people may delay it indefinitely. As a rough guide, give people no more than two weeks. Send a reminder a few days before the survey is due to close.

- For face-to-face and telephone surveys, **maintain your neutrality** and do not show any reaction to the responses people give, whether positive or negative. This will ensure people feel free to answer honestly and are more willing complete the survey.

- For face-to-face surveys, **give people the option to fill it out themselves** if the layout is easy to use. There are several ipad/android survey applications available which make self-completion simple for those comfortable with technology.

- If a range of people are administering your face-to-face or telephone survey, make sure you **hold a briefing session to ensure everyone is confident with the questions** and clear about how to approach people.

- Sometimes **prizes are used as an incentive** for encouraging people to respond. Reiterate that people's contact details are only being collected for the purpose of drawing the prize and that their names will not be associated with their responses to the survey questions. Some people still may not want to provide their contact details, so clearly state participation in the prize draw is optional. It is advisable to select a prize of moderate value to limit the risk of inducing people to only give positive responses. If you have any concern your particular respondents may be influenced by the existence a prize, it is best not to offer one.

Analysing results

Once you have completed your survey, the next step is to analyse results.

There are several free or low-cost online survey tools available which enable you to enter your survey results and generate a report of collated findings presented in a range of formats such as graphs and tables. This is a particularly efficient way of analysing quantitative data. If you have administered your survey online, then the online program will automatically collate results for you. However, even if you have administered the survey in paper form, you can still use an online program in the analysis phase – it will just require you to create an online version of your survey and manually enter each survey response.

Analysing qualitative data requires a little more time to read through each response and order or code it according to emerging themes. There are online tools available to support qualitative analysis, including programs that generate 'word clouds' which visually illustrate the frequency with which particular words are used by survey respondents.

Once you have collated and analysed your findings, you are ready to:
- Summarise key learnings
- Explore what the findings mean for your ongoing practice
- Share your findings with others who may be interested
- Identify areas for further research and investigation

As part of your analysis, it is also worth doing a mini-review of the survey itself. Did you get the data and information you needed from your survey? Which questions worked best? Which questions could be improved? Which questions could be dropped or replaced? What else would you ask next time? Which questions are worth repeating in the future so you can monitor trends over time?