Writing Quality Final Evaluation Reports

Robin Kipke, Evaluation Associate

At the end of every funding cycle, California tobacco control projects are required to submit a final evaluation report for each primary objective to their funder, the state Tobacco Control Program. Many find this task nerve-racking or, at the very least, onerous. So why must you go to all that trouble? What is the purpose of a final evaluation report and how can it be useful to the program?

A well-written final evaluation report provides an opportunity for a project to examine the effectiveness of its intervention approach. The report does this by summarizing information collected from intervention and evaluation activities, interpreting the data for possible meanings, and concluding how the findings might shape subsequent activities or campaigns. Of course, this should be an ongoing process throughout the project, not just a reflection on accomplishments and lessons learned at the end of a funding cycle.

Final evaluation reports are submitted to TCP to be rated by the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center according to the guidelines identified in Tell Your Story. Project directors are notified when reports have been scored. The rating sheet can either be viewed online (if the report was submitted in OTIS) or can be requested as a hard copy from TCEC. Our hope is that project staff and evaluators will use the feedback to strengthen future evaluation design, methods and reporting.

Final reports are also useful as a means to document project history, inform and influence stakeholders, allies and policymakers, or even serve as a basis for obtaining outside funding. High quality reports worthy of sharing are made available through TECC on the ROVER system so that other tobacco control projects can view them to garner ideas for specific intervention strategies and look for recommendations and lessons learned.

So what makes a report “high quality”? Here are some recommendations from the scoring team at TCEC based on patterns we’ve seen in the reports that we’ve rated so far:

**ABSTRACT**
The abstract should be a concise overview of the project, covering each of the components of the report briefly, yet with enough detail for the reader to understand what the project attempted to achieve and how the process and/or outcome was assessed.

**PROJECT DESCRIPTION & BACKGROUND INFORMATION**
The project description section provides the context of the problem, the rationale for the objective, and a summary of the intervention activities. Often in the background section, reports describe the size of the area, the number of cities or the prevalent economic activities in the county. These can be useful elements if they help explain the nature and dimension of the problem. However, what’s often lacking is an account of the circumstances surrounding the specific...
tobacco control issue – demographic statistics about the population, who is particularly affected by the tobacco control issue and the social norms/attitudes about tobacco use. These all should be included in order to demonstrate the need for intervention.

Background information should be chosen to support the rationale for why this particular objective (out of all the possible objectives) seemed the best way to address the problem. Merely stating that the objective was the result of a CX process is not a sufficient rationale. Explain what data or experiences led to this choice.

**INTERVENTION**

For the intervention, summarize what was done, which segment of the population was targeted, where activities occurred, when (giving dates for each phase is sufficient) and most of all, why – how each type of activity supported the objective. Don’t just list all of the activities in the intervention (or even worse, paste in the activities list from your plan!).

**EVALUATION METHODS & RESULTS**

The evaluation section is one of the most important parts of the final report because it helps show whether your findings have merit and were not the result of faulty evaluation design, sampling, data collection or analysis. However, in most of the reports we’ve read, the evaluation methods section was the weakest. Often, not enough detail is provided for readers to ascertain the logic of the evaluation design, how the sample was selected, how data was collected, how data collectors were trained or what methods were used to analyze the data. Attaching data collection instruments as appendices helps readers assess the quality of your data collection. This also gives TCEC the opportunity to collect your surveys, observations, key informant interview and focus group guides for its repository for other tobacco control programs to access.

Evaluation results should be presented and interpreted in an objective manner, discussing the positive along with the negative. Make it easy for readers to arrive at your conclusions by summarizing information in tables, graphs, pie charts, etc. Use the narrative to discuss possible meanings of the data. You need to interpret the results and provide justification for your interpretation.

**CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS**

The conclusion and recommendations section is the heart of the report. It is here that you have an opportunity to state what your project learned from the whole process of doing intervention and evaluation activities on this objective. Don’t just repeat suggestions from key informant interviews or focus groups; you need to weigh the merit of those comments and draw your own conclusions. Here, too, is where you draw the roadmap for future efforts on similar objectives – either for your own project or those across the state. How should approaches, strategies and activities differ the next time around in order to have a greater impact?

Now that the secrets to writing a quality final evaluation report are demystified, the scoring team is expecting great things from you! Remember to follow the guidelines laid out in Tell Your Story (downloadable at the TCEC website) or contact TCEC with any questions you might have.
SAMPLE EXCERPTS FROM WELL-WRITTEN REPORTS

To illustrate what the various components of a well-written final evaluation report might look like, we’ve pulled a few excerpts from the reports of local lead agencies that we recently scored.

Project Description – Background. Excerpt from: Reducing Youth Access to Tobacco in San Diego County

The objective was to reduce the illegal sales rates of tobacco to minors. In addition to describing the physical borders of the area, the size and characteristics of the population in the county and its major cities, the section provided a description of the target population (immigrant convenience store and gas station owners). It also outlined the context of retail licensing efforts:

The city of El Cajon has a history of leadership in tobacco control. After a youth purchase survey revealed that 40% of El Cajon’s retailers were selling tobacco to minors, City Council showed immediate interest in addressing the issue. Consultations with the City Attorney and TALC regarding a model ordinance resulted in a draft ordinance for the city that was championed by an influential Councilmember. In June 2004, just prior to the start of the grant term, the Council adopted a TRL ordinance for its approximately 125 tobacco retailers and imposed an annual licensing fee of $511.

The section went on to describe further details of the problem and the climate for policy adoption. What this example shows is that the specifics included in the background should provide a context and a framework for the rationale for choosing this objective.

Project Description – Intervention. Excerpt from: Inyo County’s report Youth Access to Tobacco

The intervention for this objective consisted of four phases: 1) planning of collaboration with local officials, 2) merchant and community education regarding illegal tobacco sales, 3) training of local law enforcement, and 4) enforcement of PC 308(a). Collaboration planning (the first phase) began with lengthy discussions between Inyo County TCP staff and elected and appointed officials to ascertain opinions and beliefs of these officials regarding illegal sales to minors and the importance of enforcing existing tobacco laws. Meetings were held with the two local Superior Court judges, the District Attorney and his staff, and the Chief of Probation. These meetings were also important in soliciting support for increased enforcement of PC 308(a) by local law enforcement…

Once key officials were supportive of increased enforcement, research was conducted to determine how tobacco citations and violations were handled in Inyo County and similar communities throughout California. The purpose was to identify the most efficient manner for these violation cases to traverse the court system.

Notice how this description of intervention activities begins with a succinct summary of each phase. This is followed by a narrative that outlines key program activities, their outcomes AND how each moved the work forward to achieving the objective. It is much more than a mere listing of activities that took place. The only element missing are the dates.

Evaluation Methods – Sample. Excerpt from: Santa Barbara’s report on Outdoor Dining

The section describes the sampling, data collection and analysis by each evaluation activity. Observational Survey: A comprehensive list of all food-serving establishments was obtained from the Environmental Health Services of the Public Health Department. The initial list included all food-serving locations in Santa Barbara City regardless of patio status (n=349). A series of telephone contacts were made to determine the outdoor dining status of each restaurant, and the list was culled to exclude: establishments without outdoor dining areas, those with a patio reported as 100% smoke-free, those not located in Santa Barbara City, those that had since closed, those that could not be reached via telephone (such that their status and inclusion criteria could not be verified). Thus the final sample for inclusion in the study was 230.

What is excellent in this example is that it clearly describes HOW the sample was derived. Any reader can tell that this process was well-planned and the sample was valid.
Conclusions and Recommendations. Excerpt from: Solano County’s report Reducing Signage on Store Windows

This report has an incredible wealth of detail which described the challenges encountered, the limitations of the intervention and evaluation activities, as well as wonderfully specific recommendations for future actions by this or other projects. While TCEC does not require this level of detail, you can easily see how a report like this becomes a resource for other projects working on similar objectives because of this detail.

Conclusions. Without a champion among the city staff, TPEP and the Reducing Advertising Committee members were not privy to crucial information about relationships within the city government or how various processes worked. This led to an underestimation of the role the Planning Division and Planning Commission both play in preparing the way for the City Council to consider proposed changes to a legislated policy.

Recommendations. Do as complete and thorough an assessment of the political environment and the required processes and players involved as early in the project as possible. Aim for capturing the support of a champion inside the system that sees merit in the project and who has influence over those who may guard the status quo….Ensure that survey instruments and procedures are NOT pilot tested on stores selected in the sample….Begin drafting the final report soon after the intervention begins and keep updating it.