Eeney Meeney Miney Moe:
Choosing the Right Evaluation Activities for Your Plan

by Robin Kipke

I admit it. I have a hard time choosing from a menu of items. I'm afraid I'll miss out on something better. Then there are those people who always order the same thing because that's what they know. It can be easy to fall into either of those mindsets when it comes to selecting data collection methods for your plan. But there's a better way.

It all boils down to doing a little end-use strategizing. Figuring out what information you'll need to move your objective along, who will need to be informed or persuaded by the data, what amount and type of data will be convincing or complete enough to these audiences, who is the best source of this information, and what amount of time, resources, and data collectors you will have to do this work. Matching these factors to the characteristics of the various data collection methods will ensure that your hard work will produce the evidence you need to make your case or elucidate next steps.

Here is a breakdown of some of the ways data can be gathered:

Public Opinion Poll (often done as a public intercept survey). The most common evaluation activity within tobacco control, surveying is a good way to find out how a community or population feels about an issue. Surveys work well with yes/no and multiple choice questions when you already know enough already about the topic to identify what the range of response choices should consist of. Surveys are **not** the best option for capturing what you don't know or ***why*** and ***how*** people think or feel about something, though. That's best left for smaller scale face-to-face data collection methods.

Photo: Robert Thivierge

Survey data is easy to analyze and results can indicate whether it's time to move ahead or whether more educational outreach is needed before people are ready to favor your position. Data from large, representative samples can serve as a means of convincing decision makers that a majority of their constituents, patrons, tenants or clients support a policy direction you are promoting. Just make sure your sample is appropriately targeted and sized to be effective. (See recorded presentation)

Focus Groups. When you need to explore a topic in more depth and find out the various viewpoints, motivations, and thought processes of different segments of a population, focus group discussions are the way to go. This methodology is ideal when you need to get insights about a new cultural community, how things work, which options are likely to work best, reactions to resource materials, etc. The trick is to keep the discussion questions narrowly focused on one topic so you have adequate time for discussion to warm up, transition into the issue, dig deeper and follow up with clarifying questions.

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Focus groups **<u>are meant to happen in a series</u>** (repeated ideally until you stop hearing anything new) so that results can be compared **across** groups as well as within them. Participants for each group should be carefully selected to have some shared characteristics so they feel a sense of affinity for each other, which encourages frank discussion. Facilitating group discussions is an art, so make sure to have skilled people to lead and scribe (take notes) the sessions. (See *T&T #4* and recorded webinar)

Key Informant Interviews. Sometimes you don't need to know what <u>everyone</u> thinks, just a few key players who can give you the scoop about how a certain population or body of decision makers think, how things work, or ways you could approach your work. In this case, interviews with a number of strategically chosen insiders is what you need. Depending on how many different viewpoints and/or pieces of the puzzle you require in order to get a fairly complete picture of the situation, you might conduct anywhere from 2-15 interviews.

Mind you, this is **NOT** a survey, but a semi-structured conversation of open-ended questions where you try to find out the why's and wherefore's of how people think or operate. These interviews are opportunities to establish or build relationships with thought leaders that you may need to work with for a long time, so typically this activity is conducted by project directors or staff members rather than volunteers. (See recorded presentation)

Observations. Observations are great ways to document the scope of a problem (e.g., as tobacco litter) or to confirm if a policy has been implemented (e.g., signage). Often done as pre-/post comparisons, observations can indicate the need for a policy or better enforcement, the amount of change after certain actions have been taken, or fluctuations over time. Coupled with photo, video or physical evidence collection, observations can provide indisputable proof to decision makers for the need to take action. Because they are somewhat labor and time-intensive, formulating a strategic (and valid) sample is crucial. Youth volunteers are great partners to involve in this type of data collection activity. (See recorded presentation)

Youth Tobacco Purchase Survey. YTPS sting operations are done to monitor rates of illegal tobacco sales to minors. Often these are done annually to compare rates over time, or before and after tobacco retailer education and outreach efforts. In addition to the buy attempts, youth decoys also record information about type of retail outlet, types of products sold, self-serve access, product placement, price promotions, STAKE act signage, and tobacco advertising. Youth and adult volunteers are recruited to data collection teams. (See recent webinar)

Media Activity Record. If you've got any media activities in your intervention plan, you'll need a media activity record component in your evaluation plan. When you generate press releases or hold media events, it's important to track whether these efforts are yielding the kind of coverage you hoped for. It can also be useful to monitor the media to see what information the public is getting about an issue, if there is a need to correct any misconceptions, or whether public sentiment is leaning positively or negatively. A media activity record allows you to track and note this data for a specific period in some kind of a log, and based on content analysis of the data you can be better informed about the timing and direction of next steps. (See recorded webinar)

Policy Record. Monitoring policy records is somewhat similar to media activity records in that you will need to review, track and make note of written evidence that indicates policy adoption and/or implementation. Sources you might look at for information related to legislated policy could include city council or board of supervisor meeting notes, voting records of members, the posted bios of officials, agency websites, etc. For voluntary policies, you may be reviewing apartment leases, mission statements and sponsorship declarations of venues, health care facilities, businesses or faith-based organizations. Content analysis of the documentation is used to determine outcomes and whether further action is needed. (See recorded presentation)

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Data Collection Training. Every time you plan to send out a team of people to collect data, you need to have a data collector training activity. Whether it is two people or 20, it's important to take the time to ensure that each data collector understands what to do in

exactly the same way as you intend. Every training should include two components: 1) adequate time to go over the data collection instrument and protocol to create shared understanding of exactly what each question or data field means and does not mean, and 2) the opportunity to practice using the data collection instrument and following the specified processes. Practice should include exercises to test inter-rater reliability (whether everyone is implementing the instrument in the same way) as well as a field test of your team. Without these elements, you are likely to end up with a lot of variation in how data collectors go about gathering information. And variability diminished the validity of your data! So be sure to allow enough time to do a thorough job of training your teams!! (See recorded webinar)

Education/Participant Survey. A good trainer is always interested in assessing whether the training was effective. One way to do this is to ask participants to rate various aspects of the training and to provide feedback on what they learned, missed or still have questions about.

Other. There are lots of other evaluation methods that don't fall under the categories found in OTIS, such as photovoice, monitoring social media chatter, community resource mapping, coalition surveys, etc. You are free to use them. Just select the "other" category from the OTIS menu and explain what you intend to do and how it will support your objective.

Evaluation Report. Every objective requires an evaluation reporting component. At the conclusion of the Bridge Year, projects will write a brief evaluation report that summarizes how and why these particular intervention and evaluation activities were employed to address the objective and what was learned and accomplished as a result of this effort. In the plan, state how the report will be disseminated and used. (See past training materials on writing evaluation reports)

We have a handy chart that compares the uses and benefits of a number of evaluation methods on our website. For answers to any questions about evaluation activities, appropriate sample sizes, and analysis, check out sample plans, method-specific resources on the Tobacco Control Evaluation Center website or contact us directly for individual consultation at tobaccoeval@ucdavis.edu.

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