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DISCOVERING DIAMONDS IN YOUR SURVEY DATA

Understanding and implementing best practices in survey creation that yields better data for more insightful decision-making.

**BY JESSICA DE PERIO WITTMAN
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Library surveys enable us to open up a dialogue with our patron base in order to uncover areas of improvement and to facilitate a better user experience for all of our patrons. Traditional survey creation has innate challenges, such as asking the right questions, properly coding the data, and addressing the proper audience. All of these challenges must be considered when drafting and designing surveys to ensure the collection of useful data for outcome-driven decision-making at your library. Additionally, librarians can also redesign their own or other open-sourced surveys to enable library administration to plan for, manage, and achieve outcomes that will drive future services, initiatives, and programs aimed at improving the entire institution.

Step 1: Identify Your Survey Goals

Libraries typically develop surveys for three reasons: to assess user satisfaction with place or services, to identify users' needs, and to gauge the reception of future services. A fourth potential reason for survey development is to gather demographic information about the library's users.

Traditional surveys have been used to collect data that often confirms what is already known. We, the authors of this article, assert that an effective survey will collect data from outcome-based questions from which answers are not already known.

Step 2: Select a Measurement Tool

Once a survey goal has been identified, librarians must determine the most appropriate measurement or survey tool. There are a myriad of tools to choose from, ranging from awareness surveys to satisfaction surveys, the traditional survey form used by most libraries.

Below is a brief description of each tool.

- **Awareness Survey:** Measures the extent to which patrons are familiar with your product or service. Is your library the first thing that comes to mind when someone wants that product or service? For example, will students think of consulting a reference librarian for research help or will they consult Google? Awareness surveys usually require two measurements: *recall*, which is your patrons' ability to remember your product or service without help, and *recognition*, which is your patrons' ability to recognize your product or service among a list of alternatives.
- **Cross-Sectional Survey:** Collects data to make inferences about a sample population at a specific point in time. Additionally, it also collects data about a specific product, service, or decision. A fresh sample of people are surveyed each time the product, service, or decision is implemented or altered. For example, changes in the research training curriculum may be made based on results collected after every research training session.
- **Interview:** Also called face-to-face surveys, these are used when a specific target population has been identified to best provide deeper and more qualitative information.

Quantitative data is not necessarily more valuable than qualitative data, but analyzing qualitative data creates more work. Most qualitative data comes from open-ended comment fields, and the data only becomes valuable once those comments are coded.

- **Longitudinal Study:** Unlike a cross-sectional survey, this survey collects data to make inferences about a sample population over time. The key to longitudinal studies is surveying the same sample population several times over a period of time.
- **Perception Survey:** This survey is most often used when one is trying to find out how patrons understand or feel about their situations or environments. It is used to assess needs, answer questions, solve problems, establish baselines, analyze trends, and select goals.
- **Post-Mortem Surveys:** Also called a post-mortem review, this survey provides an opportunity for librarians to reflect on a project after it concludes. Librarians develop a list of lessons learned so mistakes are not repeated. Reflections can also celebrate and highlight the successes of a project.
- **Questionnaire:** A set of printed or written questions with a choice of answers, devised for the purposes of a statistical study.
- **Satisfaction Survey:** The most currently used form of library survey, it is designed to determine what the library is doing well in its users' opinions and identify areas that can be improved.

Step 3: Determine If Qualitative or Quantitative Data Is Needed to Make Your Decision

Most survey questions are designed so that the answers can be easily quantified and descriptive statistical results can be presented. Quantitative data is defined as information that can be measured

and written down with numbers. In contrast, qualitative data is defined as information that is non-numerical in nature. It approximates and characterizes, but does not measure the attributes, characteristics, or properties of a thing or phenomenon. Some librarians have argued that our profession relies too heavily on quantitative surveys and that librarians should explore qualitative methods, such as focus groups, interviews, observational studies, rubrics, and other tools.

While there is a place for qualitative data, it is oftentimes anecdotal in nature and difficult to use in decision-making. Quantitative data is not necessarily more valuable than qualitative data, but analyzing qualitative data creates more work. Most qualitative data comes from open-ended comment fields, and the data only becomes valuable once those comments are coded. The data will not have any conclusive meaning without coding.

Step 3a: If Using Qualitative Data, Don't Forget to Code It

Qualitative data provides value for decision-making once the data is coded. Coding is a process that enables librarians to identify and define concepts that categorize the data and facilitate analysis. For example, if temperature control is a known concern in the library, and the survey does not address it specifically, feedback about temperature control might be assigned a lower numerical value than a previously unknown concern.

Coding open-ended comments can be revealing, but it is laborious and often uncovers statistically insignificant data points. There may not be enough

time to code the data properly to analyze the results, and there may not be enough library or institutional resources to act on the analysis in a timely manner. As a result, librarians should limit the number of survey questions that include open-ended responses.

If the survey demands a significant number of open-ended responses, librarians must consider other data collection tools that are appropriate, including focus groups and interviews.

Step 3b: Quantitative Data Is Already Coded—Proceed to Step 4

Quantitative data is analyzed more readily, lending itself to speedier decision-making. Remember that survey research is not about the individual response; it is about the aggregate.

Using the temperature control example above, responses may be set to a Likert or rating scale. Each value in the Likert scale is associated with a number. This enables the library to quickly assess the importance, for example, of whether to make a decision about temperature control needs.

Step 4: Tackle the Innate Challenges of Survey Design

Listed below are the most common challenges in survey design.

Challenge 1: Even Agents of Change Can Lack Patron Empathy

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and appreciate another person's feelings and experiences. Librarians should question what information is lacking about the patron experience. Unfortunately, obstacles to empathy exist, and often manifest in statements such as, "This is the way we do it."; "We tried to change that, and it didn't work."; "If people would just..."; and "I know this is complicated, but..."

Challenge 2: Everyone Has Bias

Bias introduces ideas or opinions into questions that will influence responses. Librarians should ensure that question order does not influence a certain type of response. Similarly, answer order is important to ensure that patrons

understand that either a positive or a negative answer is equally acceptable. Effective survey questions and answers should be randomized if there is a possibility of order bias. To get sensitive information, librarians should consider disguising the question, shifting focus away from the respondent, softening the question, or collecting correlated data. For example, instead of asking patrons whether they want 24-hour access, you could frame the question to collect data on what times patrons would most likely use or visit the library.

Challenge 3: Identify the Proper Audience

A survey can be a powerful instrument for gathering information from large populations, but it may have more value with questions written to address a specific population or need. For example, a survey that assesses how international students are using the library should only be sent to international students.

After drafting a set of questions, librarians need to ask whether the survey is relevant to at least 20 percent of the target population. If not, then the audience for the survey needs to be redefined, or the questions need to be redrafted. Likewise, 100 percent of the questions should be easy to understand by the intended audience, and the questions should be rigorously tested for clarity to eliminate library jargon. For example, "check out materials" may be used in lieu of "circulation."

Challenge 4: Build Those Relationships

Library administration must identify potential collaborators at all levels and manage their expectations when receiving unintended outcomes from these surveys. This is especially important when library space is used for more than just books and library staff. Libraries now have cafes or other eateries and also hold multiple student-facing departments, such as Information Technology Services, Student Affairs, the Registrar, Business Office, Financial Aid, etc. All parties must be willing to listen to and address unintended or unfavorable outcomes in a timely manner.

Library surveys not only enable us to open up a dialogue with our patron base, but they also enable us to facilitate a better user experience with other stakeholders. Challenges, such as a lack of patron empathy, bias, and misidentifying the survey audience, must be tackled when drafting and designing surveys. Using the processes and methods outlined above, librarians can create effective surveys from scratch or redesign already existing questionnaires that will result in outcome-driven decision-making at their law library.

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