Guiding Ohio Online

Level Up: Community Data Gathering

Before you begin, consider what method is the best to gather the data you'd like to collect.

1. Patron Interview. If your library is considering a particular product or service, you may consider a series of patron interviews instead of a survey. For example if you're considering purchasing eReaders for seniors to use, see if you can borrow one eReader from the vendor and have 2-4 seniors try it. Meet with each senior one-on-one. Ask polite but probing questions to see if seniors would use this service or if they would prefer a different eReader or service.
2. Focus Group. If the questions you want to ask your community are very general– for example what do you want to see the library accomplish in the next 5 years– you may consider a focus group instead of a survey. A focus group is 5-8 individuals that you invite to a neutral location to ask questions to. This method can be better for big-picture questions.
3. Survey. A survey is best to gather input from a wide range of the community. It can also be used in conjunction with either of the methods listed above.

First, form three questions that you want to answer. Examples: How many of my library patrons would use a streaming video service? Or what types of computer classes do patrons want?

1.

2.

3.

Now consider which of the three methods is the best fit for your needs: Patron Study, Focus Group or Survey.

How to Do a Patron Study

Step 1. Identify the target demographic. Who do you anticipate will use this product or service?

Step 2. Recruit members of the target demographic. Use existing organizations, social groups or library volunteers.

Step 3. Revisit your list of questions from above. Is there anything else you want to add?

Step 4. Meet with each person one-on one. Let each person know that you are grading the service or product, not the participant. Write down details of their answers.

How to Do a Focus Group

Focus groups are a great way to learn about users' preferences through group dialogue, but they can also be time-consuming and subject to limitations. Be sure to consider the following when planning focus groups.

- Focus groups should consist of at least three and no more than eight individuals.
- The setting where the focus group is conducted should be comfortable, quiet, and free of distractions. Participants should be seated at one table where they can all see each other as well as the moderator. Providing refreshments also helps establish a relaxed atmosphere for participants.
- Six questions will take approximately one hour to cover in a small focus group, so plan questions accordingly and keep track of the time during the sessions.

Step 1. Decide who should moderate the discussion. Sessions will need a person to facilitate the discussion in the groups. This moderator should be an effective communicator and someone who can encourage the focus group to speak. Consider using a facilitator who is not closely associated with the topics that will be discussed in the focus group. For example, you may want a non-library staff member to lead a focus group about a library's spaces and services. Having a facilitator removed from the issues for discussion may help the participants share honest feedback.

Assign an assistant moderator, who should take detailed notes during the sessions (noting visual cues, body language, and who is speaking when). An assistant moderator may also manage recording the session, and usually has minimal interaction with the group.

Step 2. Using your above questions, write a script that will be posed to the group.

- Questions should be structured from general to specific, starting first with a brief ice-breaking question to put the group at ease.
- Questions should be open-ended to generate discussion. Avoid "yes" and "no" questions. Starting questions with "What" or "How" will frequently encourage the most participation from the group.

Step 3. Recruit and schedule more participants than needed to account for those who do not show up or cancel at the last minute. Organize participants into similar groups, such as similar ages, gender, and the like. This makes for a more comfortable environment and can encourage people to speak more freely.

How to Do a Survey:

Step 1. Identify the target population based on your questions above: who does service this primarily effect? Who do you want to reach but are not currently reaching?

There is more than one way to give a survey. You will want to determine the method that is most appropriate for your budget and the sample population you wish to reach: email, web-based surveys, and paper-based surveys.

Step 2. Look at three other libraries' community surveys. What do you think works well about these surveys? What would you change or improve? Generally speaking, the shorter the survey, the more likely you are to get a response.

Consider an existing survey service such as the Library IMPACT survey (impactsurvey.org). Does this answer the questions you wrote in the above space? Why or why not?

Step 3. Revisit your questions above. Do they clearly define the problem? Think big picture instead of very detailed. For example try "Does the community have adequate places to meet?" rather than "Should the library add a meeting room". You want to write your questions using simple words and avoid using jargon. If it is necessary to use specialized terms or library jargon, provide definitions.

Step 4. Sit down with 2-3 patrons before launching the survey to make sure it has a natural flow and can be easily understood. Revise the survey language based on feedback.

Step 5. Distribute the survey. How will you let your community know this survey exists? Use your list from "Getting to Know Your Library: Marketing" to assist you.

Next Steps

For all types of community data gathering, there are three next steps: analyzing, communicating, and evaluating.

Analyzing:

Here is where your note taking skills will really come into play.

What did you learn? Was it what you expected?

What are the major themes?

Can you group those themes by the percent of respondents? For example, "64% of focus group respondents said that they were able to find a meeting room in the community."

Based on what your responses, what are the answers to your questions?

Communicating:

Once you've analyzed your findings, it's time to report them back to the staff, library board, and community. There are many different methods to communicate. Here are some to consider:

Media/ Venue	Why and When to Use
Project blog	Resource for posting ongoing progress and soliciting community feedback and commentary
All staff meeting	As an invitational event, can be a way to get information to everybody.
Email	Like in-person meetings, a communication tool to ensure everybody has some level of knowledge about the status of the project.
Newsletter	Longer form communication for regular project updates, often published in conjunction with other events
Twitter	Short informational updates on project status to use in an ongoing way and announce / link to longer-form communication
Website	Central information resource on the project, including background information and progress updated. May include links to planning documentation, references, blogs, wikis, etc
Library board meeting	Formal space, but can be a way to get information to important stakeholders.

Evaluating

Now that you've completed gathering your community data, it's time to reflect. Were you able to gather the data necessary to make a decision or to answer the questions you originally intended?

What worked well about the process? What would you change?