

Are A Lot Of Satisfied Participants Enough?

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Family life programs commonly collect data about who uses their services and participant satisfaction. In my opinion, program designers have been discouraged in recent years from collecting this information, however, because they have been criticized for not being able to say anything about whether a program changed knowledge or behavior. Although demonstrating change in behavior is important, knowing whom you are serving and how people feel about your program is also important. In this article, I will talk about collecting utilization, satisfaction, and demographic data, and making decisions based on this data.

UTILIZATION DATA:

Utilization data describes who participates in your programs and services. These data are fundamental, and most programs routinely collect it. Program designers keep records of how many phone calls they receive, how many brochures they pass out, how many people attend their programs, and so forth. More detailed utilization data may include how much time is spent by staff in various activities and how much money is spent on services.

A program about stress management that targeted low-income women illustrates the usefulness of utilization data. The stress management program was multi-session-and in multi-session programs, programmers are always concerned about how many people attend each session and if they are the same people each time. These particular providers simply kept basic attendance records over the course of several workshops in various locations. They were then able to determine participation consistency and share this information with other program designers. In a parenting program, educators found that parents attended, on average, four sessions out of a ten-week program. Based on this information, they revised the program schedule to two four-session periods.

Another example of how utilization data improve services comes from a human resource office in a major company. The company was a pioneer in developing a "family-friendly" workplace and had established a child care support account to assist with child care needs. During the first year, however, few employees took advantage of this program. This prompted the human resource staff to interview employees and inquire why they weren't using the program. From these interviews, the human resource staff learned that many employees were not aware of the program, and others did not understand how to use it. As a result, the company conducted awareness seminars, which led to an immediate increase in program participation. By monitoring utilization data, a problem was identified and remedied.

In addition to providing feedback about the design of a program, utilization and cost data are useful for considering the appropriateness of various program investments. For example, is it

better use of resources to mail a newsletter to 500 people or conduct a seminar for 50 people if the costs are similar? (Remember to include staff time when estimating cost.) These kinds of questions don't necessarily have clear answers; they do, however, enable staff to monitor their efforts and weigh alternatives.

SATISFACTION DATA:

Another helpful type of feedback is how participants in programs and services feel about the experience-the central question being, "Are they satisfied?" Again, providers commonly assess reactions, asking participants, for example, to fill out a brief questionnaire at the conclusion of a training session. Likewise, many service agencies ask their clients to rate the timeliness and appropriateness of their services. These consumer's satisfaction data provide valuable insights into whether or not clients' needs are being met and what difficulties are being encountered.

Larsen's and his colleagues' brief questionnaire serves as a useful example when developing a satisfaction assessment tool. This eight-item scale can be easily adapted to training programs and services, and will enable you to compare client satisfaction across programs, sites, or other circumstances.

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA:

In addition to utilization and satisfaction data, program designers need demographic data about clients. This seems to be a common oversight, perhaps because people are sometimes reluctant to ask questions about personal matters, such as income and education. Companies involved in marketing and researchers do not hesitate to ask these questions, however; program and service providers should also consider obtaining these data. At a minimum, the following data should be collected: age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, income, educational level, family type, and number and ages of children.

With this information at hand, along with utilization and satisfaction data, program designers can consider more questions about how the program is working. For example, an afterschool enrichment program had a goal of reaching a cross section of school children. By collecting utilization data-including age, ethnicity, and income of the parents-the program designers found that they were not reaching all parts of the student population. By making changes in transportation and types of activities, they were able to attract a broader group. In addition, they found out what types of activities attracted different groups of children and expanded their outreach to this group as well.

Another example of the usefulness of program utilization data is in studies of marriage enrichment programs. A summary of these programs found that they attracted mainly college educated people. This information has been useful in redesigning these programs to attract people with less education, and in knowing in what areas these programs have been successful.

SUMMARY:

While having a lot of satisfied participants is not enough, knowing whether your programs and services are actually reaching anyone and what these participants' reactions are is important. This information is vital to understanding whether you are serving clients well or not, and whom you are not serving at all. This type of evaluation data provides useful feedback for making solid programming decisions.

Reference:

Larsen, D. L., Atkinson, C. C., Hargreaves, W. A., & Nguyen, T. D. (1979). Assessment of client satisfaction: Development of a general scale. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 2, 197-207.