Ten Tips for Developing Program Surveys

1. Before you start writing survey questions, get clear on the purpose of the survey. Write an overarching question (a "learning question") to guide you. If you want, expand the learning question with two to four related sub-topics to ensure the survey includes specific questions about those topics.

2. Identify the indicators of success, or indicators of progress toward your intended outcomes. These become the base for developing your survey questions.

3. Think about the types of data needed to answer your learning question (#1 above). Quantitative, countable data can answer "What happened?" and "How much?" Qualitative, narrative data is needed to answer questions "How did this happen?" and "Why?"

4. Fewer, focused questions answered by more respondents may give you higher quality, more reliable data than a more complicated survey with fewer respondents. It is better to have fewer high-quality data points than more low-quality data points.

5. Make a list of all related data that you already have, for example demographic data on participant or records of past participation. Think about how that data might help answer your question(s).

6. Assess your capacity to collect, manage and analyze the data you will collect. Only collect data that you will use. Ask yourself: Will the results of this evaluation – the learning – be worth the effort it will take?

7. Don't develop and administer a survey by yourself. Multiple perspectives are useful when writing survey questions; they are essential for setting timelines and analyzing the data. Engage the people who will be affected by the results of the data. If you will need program affiliates or partners to distribute surveys and do follow up, plan adequate time to develop overall buy-in for the survey purpose.

8. Surveys that will be done on a smartphone need a streamlined design. Draft your 10 priority questions, then whittle the list down to 8! For response options, use check boxes and ratings. Include no more than two open-end questions. You can ask if respondents would be willing to do a 10-minute interview in addition to the survey, and to provide a phone number for that purpose.

9. Pilot test your online surveys -- before the survey goes out to your participants ask some co-workers and friends to take the final version and help you find any broken links or confusing language.

10. Can the data from your survey be compared with other data, for example participant attitudes or knowledge at two points in time? Year to year comparisons? Benchmarked with other programs similar to yours? When the time comes for analysis, comparative data is powerful – don't be afraid to use it to advance your learning.