

Learning to listen to Our Consumers
Bernie Fabry, 12/97

Consumer satisfaction surveys have long been a valued source of information and can be found in almost every evaluator's bag of tools. At the same time they also have been suspected of being biased. Satisfaction surveys generally tend to get consistently and highly positive responses. We tend to gain little useful insight from satisfaction data that does not help us discriminate good quality from poor quality in our services.

To improve the usefulness of consumer satisfaction surveys, it may be helpful to analyze consumer satisfaction from a communication perspective. A typical satisfaction survey could be classified as a response limiting style of communication. We ask for ratings and comments on a few questions of interest, but then do not provide any kind of differential reaction or feedback to the responders. In the counseling literature this kind of interaction has been found to limit what people will disclose to a counselor. When a counselor asks a question and then does not respond in any way to the client, the client reacts as if the counselor did not hear or understand, or as if the counselor really did not care or did not want to know. Consumers may be reacting the same way to satisfaction surveys. In this context, the polite answer to a survey is, "everything's fine."

If we take an *active listening* approach to surveying consumers, we may get more useful information. Briefly put, active listening is an interactive communication style in which the listener feeds back to the speaker what the listener thought the speaker meant to find out if the listener accurately heard the speaker. Active listening encourages the speaker to communicate with the listener. Extending this concept to consumer satisfaction surveys, the surveyor might poll consumers, conduct a content analysis (Dalkey and Helmer, 1963), and postulate an hypothesis about what consumers saw as strong points and/or weak points. Another possibility is to use focus groups (see for example, Krueger, 1988) as a means to identify an initial hypothesis. Then the surveyor would poll the whole consumer group to ask more pointed questions directly related to assessing agreement or disagreement with the hypothesis. A later survey would attempt to assess whether consumers saw any change or improvement in the weak areas previously identified. To make the process a continuous one, new questions might be added at each point to probe other areas or interest.

As an active listening process, a survey would not ask a set of standard questions on a repeated basis (e.g.: how satisfied are you with communication). Rather the questions would change, based on some reason to suspect an area of dissatisfaction that needs to be improved, or an area in which we want to know how well we have corrected a problem. For example, if a comment to the example question above mentioned something about staff not doing what they said they would, the surveyor might speculate that follow through might be an area needing improvement. The next survey might probe for more wide spread satisfaction with staff follow through rather than sticking with the more general statement on communication stated above. If a greater number of consumers indicated that follow through needed improvement, the service staff could then develop a targeted improvement plan. After an acceptable period of time another survey might be distributed reporting that staff had been attempting to improve their follow through, and asking consumers how well staff are doing in this area. Ongoing modification of the survey would be needed to probe for strengths and weaknesses, and for how well a problem had been

corrected.

Summary data would look a little different. There still could be a summary of overall satisfaction. This might include how many clients responded, what portion provided positive comments conveying satisfaction, and what portion provided constructive or negative comments and what those comments might suggest as areas needing improvement. More importantly though, data from ongoing surveys could be provided on areas identified as needing improvement and whether any improvement was subsequently reported by consumers.

Using consumer satisfaction surveys to actively listen to consumers may not produce pretty as pie charts, but may actually help programs understand the needs of their clients, develop targeted improvement plans, and report successes that could be shared with others.

References

Dalkey, N.C., & Helmer, O. (1963). An experimental application of the Delphi method to the use of experts. Management Science, 9, 458-467.

Krueger, R.A. (1988). Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.