Top tips for conducting great client surveys

1 Don't ask too many questions

- The shorter the questionnaire, the more clients will complete the survey.
- Focus on the questions that will be of most value in understanding how clients experience the elements of the service that are most important to them and are under your control.
- Pilot longer questionnaires with a small number of clients. But ask enough questions to ensure the findings are useful.
- A five-minute survey could include: 10 satisfaction ratings (3 mins), 1 'why do you say that' (1 min) and 4 priority group identifiers (1 min).

2 Avoid questions that can be misinterpreted

- One in five adults can only complete very simple reading tasks, and that proportion is likely to be higher for people from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds, who represent many clients of not-for-profit legal assistance services.
- Questions should avoid technical and provider specific language and acronyms.
- Aim to use pre-tested questions or use your test interviews to explore client's understanding of the questions.

3 Don't ask more than one question at once

- Asking about more than one aspect of a service will not only make it harder to answer but also harder to interpret the findings.
- An example of what to avoid, is: "How strongly do you agree or disagree that the service you received was helpful and respectful?"
- Instead ask about how helpful the service was, and then separately ask whether the client was treated with respect.

JUSTICE METHODS

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Ask questions consistently

- Where possible, aim to use the same question wording and response options as used in other surveys and/or datasets to which client survey responses might be compared.
- For legal assistance services the Legal Assistance Data Standards Manual provides agreed response categories for most client priority characteristics and service types.
- Questions and response categories that match those of the ABS Census will allow comparisons between the socio-economic profile of clients and the local population.
- Download the Foundation’s Questions to Identify Priority Groups.

Don't ask leading questions

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- Questions that encourage respondents to give a particular response undermine the value of the survey in providing an honest depiction of client experience.
- An example of a leading question is “How strongly do you agree that the lawyer understood what you wanted?” with a response scale of: Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree.
- Instead, if interviewing in person/telephone, ask “Do you agree or disagree that the lawyer understood what you wanted?” and provide a scale of Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly disagree.
- In a self-completion survey this question would be asked as “The lawyer understood what I wanted” with the agree/disagree options listed next to the question.

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Answer options

- Avoid forcing respondents to select from a predetermined set of options unless you are sure they cover all possible responses. For closed questions you could provide one of the following response options: “Don’t know” “Can’t remember” “Too soon to say” or “Not applicable”. Some sensitive demographic questions appropriately include “Prefer not to say”. A closed question can also include an open “Other (write in)” option, which is sensible if the question hasn’t been asked before and/or the full range of potential responses is not yet known.
- Including a midpoint or neutral option on a agree/disagree type question allows clients to express a neutral opinion, which may minimise skipped questions.
- When it comes to reporting, keep in mind that the neutral option may also be used by those that don’t care about the topic or the survey and by those that have negative views but wish to give a socially desirable response.

7 Avoid questions that conflate the issues

- Not all clients will achieve the outcomes they were hoping for, and any dissatisfaction about this can be reflected in the rating of the provider if questions are not carefully designed.
- Overall satisfaction questions are known to be prone to such outcome effects.
- Instead use questions that are focused on service elements that are within the control of the provider and ask separately about satisfaction with outcome.

8 Wording and response order

- Don't change the wording of questions, their order or the response options between surveys you want to compare.
- When a survey is going to be repeated with different groups of clients or at different points in time, it is important to keep the wording and response options for questions identical. Even minor changes can undermine the comparability of responses.
- Changing the order of questions or adding in new ones will also affect comparability so any new questions should be asked at the end of an existing questionnaire to avoid having an impact on responses to questions at the beginning.
- However, if a question really isn't working, or causing offence or distress, it is probably best removed.

9 Be clear about about who is surveyed

- To be able to 'generalise' from the findings of clients surveyed to all clients it is important to know how the clients were selected to participate in the survey and what services they received.
- Any bias in how clients were selected, such as only surveying clients whose problem have resolved satisfactorily or those receiving the more intensive services, will undermine the generalisability of findings beyond those particular groups.
- If the clients surveyed received specific service types, or services delivered in a particular mode, then this should be made transparent in the reporting of the findings.

10 Reporting findings

$$\sqrt{((\sum|x-\mu|\hat{}\ 2) / (N-1))}$$

- There is nothing wrong with reporting descriptive findings of a survey, such as "80% of the surveyed clients indicated they would recommend this legal service to other people", as long as it is clear how many clients were surveyed, and how they were selected.
- But be cautious about drawing (or inadvertently appearing to draw) generalised conclusions about all clients, differences between service or client groups and/or trends over time without applying tests of statistical significance to assess whether such conclusions are justified.
- Sample sizes that are too small and methods of sampling that don't ensure representative samples will severely limit the conclusions that can validly be drawn.