

Conducting Surveys on a Shoestring Budget

USC staffers garner invaluable library-user information for less than \$250 by **Susanna Eng and Susan Gardner**

Excitement is in the air at the University of Southern California's Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Library in Los Angeles. Librarians and student workers hawk their wares like carnival stall owners, as clipboards, slips of paper, and pencils exchange hands during a 36-hour period. One sign advertises a raffle—that contest between the individual and fate—while another sign points to free candy treats. Even those who fail to win a coveted prize won't walk away empty-handed. The lines grow, the signs compel, and lingering observers stop to join the fun and lend themselves to the success of a spring 2003 library-user survey.

What triggered this scene? It was a growing need for user assessment at our library, as no such survey had been conducted for seven years. The staff needed to know: How is our library holding up in its quest to be an innovative, user-oriented library and computing center? Who are our current users? Why do they come to the library? How satisfied are they with our services, and what alternative places do they go to get the same services we provide?

We needed answers, but having a limited budget with which to devise a more personal, cheaper alternative to a commercial-review survey instrument than the generic LIBQual, we decided to design our own simple, paper-based survey consisting of eight questions on one sheet of paper.

Starting from scratch

How do you design a library-user survey from scratch? If you're smart, you don't. We examined other published library surveys as a starting point and then molded some of the questions to fit our specific needs. The proposed questions were both performance (asking for the behavior of the patron regarding specific services) and perception (asking for personal satisfaction levels or opinions) based. After formulating a rough draft, we solicited feedback from colleagues in other departments. Based on their input, we added some services and pretested the survey on a small group of our target population (in our

case, undergraduates), who helped us clarify the language and provided ideas on how to make it more accessible.

When should you schedule your survey and for how long? Choose the date carefully and avoid proximity to holidays, breaks, or exams. Our survey was open for 36 continuous hours in the hopes of obtaining a sampling of responses from students who used the library on different days of the week. Over the course of two days, we nearly doubled our original projected number of responses—the goal was 1,000 and we ended with 1,982—so, in hindsight, the second day of surveying became unnecessary. It's also important to consider where to conduct the survey—outside, in the lobby area, by the stairway or elevator, or near the computers. The most obvious location in our case was the lobby area; the library's one entrance afforded us the opportunity to encounter every person who entered and left the building.

Finally, who will administer your survey? We had two students working the survey table most of the time with more than 60 time slots to fill. One person acted as the aggressive salesperson who solicited participants, while the other ran the table, collected surveys, and replenished supplies. We provided explicit instructions for our student workers, who were recruited from different departments and allowed by their supervisors to provide as many hours as they could spare. They were energetic and because they were often classmates of the survey takers, they tended to make respondents feel more comfortable. Our colleagues also pitched in, and we worked many shifts ourselves.

Solving budgetary woes with ingenuity

Once you have decided exactly what resources you need to implement the survey, how do you procure the necessary funding? We were able to minimize the cost by drawing on already-existing resources and the generosity of other departments. Since this was a paper-based survey, we made 2,000 free copies using our departmental photocopy machine, saving us approximately \$200 at Kinko's.

We purchased a box of small golf pencils (\$14 for 144 pencils) and seven clipboards (99 cents each), and also spent \$120 for candy, which was offered to all participants. Several signs, created with our departmental color printer, were posted in front of the library and on the survey table.

A raffle, which cost us \$5 at a party store for the roll of tickets, was held to help attract participants. Trying to gear

SUSANNA ENG is assistant instructional services coordinator and reference librarian and SUSAN GARDNER is collection development and reference/instruction librarian, at the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Library at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles.

raffle prizes toward our target population, we decided on two \$25 USC bookstore gift certificates, two Leavey Library T-shirts we already had on hand, and \$130 in zip disks donated by the university's Information Services Division.

Student workers logged in a total of 47 hours; all but six were during their normal work schedules. Although they were kept from other tasks, almost no extra money was spent: The six extra hours only cost us \$47.04 in wages. We spent a total of \$243 on the survey, which was so reasonable that the administration agreed to cover the full cost.

Number-crunching time

Once our survey was concluded, we congratulated ourselves on finishing what we thought was the hard part. But now we had 1,982 completed surveys and had to figure out what to do with the results. Because neither of us had worked with surveys before, we enlisted the assistance of our resident Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) expert, who gave us detailed instructions: Give each survey a unique number, code each question-and-answer choice, and input the information into Excel spreadsheets. When this was done, the information was manipulated into SPSS, which provided tables, frequencies, and statistics. If you do not have an SPSS-type expert, try consulting

one of the many guidebooks on the subject, such as Julie Pallant's *SPSS Survival Manual* (Open University Press, 2004). In-

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putting the data ourselves was an arduous process; next time, we might consider recruiting students or staff to help. We also might consider conducting an online survey, which lends itself to automatic tabulation.

We compiled a report of the findings for our supervisor and colleagues once the information was massaged, including raw percentages for each question and cross-tabulations with other significant variables. We also summarized interesting trends and areas in need of improvement as well as positive areas that garnered high satisfaction ratings.

The survey allowed us to take a hard look at our library services and answer the important questions: Are students satisfied with our services? Are we achieving our goals? Fortunately, we were able to brag that all services ranked above average on the satisfaction scale, despite some areas in definite need of improvement.

Today's libraries are faced with increasingly shrinking budgets, but must somehow keep apprised of the latest patron demands without the luxury of an abundance of available resources—like time and money. Clearly, the implementation of a cost-effective user survey is a common need. The approach we used for Leavey Library worked as a means of gathering useful data at a minimal cost, without external facilitators. ♦

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