

County Wide Mail Survey

A mail survey makes it possible to involve a relatively large number of people in the identification of county concerns and assets. The information obtained gives a picture from the perspective of the respondents at a particular point in time.

The county oversight committee and county Extension office staff select the county residents to be the survey sample. The county office staff designs the questionnaire. Finally, the county faculty and staff and local oversight committee tabulate and review the survey results. County needs and concerns are identified. Based on the results, a second survey may be designed and mailed out for the purpose of prioritizing the identified issues. Another option is for the oversight committee to prioritize the concerns that are identified on the first survey.

Description of the Process

1. The county office staff along with the oversight committee forms a design team. They establish a clear purpose for the survey. They design the survey questionnaire. They choose questions to solicit the information they seek. Questions may be worded reflecting the UW-Extension programming areas, or general questions may be used to gain a broad overview of issues and concerns facing the county.
2. Some counties use the arbitrary number of 100 citizens to participate in the mail survey. The number depends upon the size of the county, purpose of the survey and resources available. A random, systematic or purposeful sample may be employed. As with any data collection process, whom you ask determines what you hear. All effort should be made to select a representative cross-section of the county population. (See the UW-Extension publication on sampling for help with size and type of sample to use; available on the Internet at <http://www.uwex.edu/ces/pdande/evaluat.html>)
3. Participants are called or sent a letter explaining the Extension planning process and soliciting their participation.
4. Mailing labels are prepared.
5. Surveys are mailed to participants allowing for a one-week return time. A return addressed stamped envelope is included. A reminder post card is mailed after one week to enhance the response rate. Often, a second mailing of the original questionnaire is necessary in order to get an adequate return.
6. *Option 1:* The design team reviews the responses, creates groupings and designs a second questionnaire. This is mailed to the same group of respondents asking them now to prioritize the issues that were identified in the first questionnaire (a Delphi approach). Follow-up may be necessary to ensure an ad-

Case Example provided by Arlen Albrecht, Taylor County.

equate return. Once these questionnaires are returned, the Extension office team tabulates the results for presentation and discussion with the oversight committee.

7. *Option 2:* The oversight committee reviews the results (after step 5) and prioritizes the identified concerns.

Involvement of Oversight Committee

Typically the Agriculture and Extension Education Committee members make up the oversight committee. These members are involved in the selection of citizens to be surveyed, help design the survey questionnaire and review the survey results. They may be involved in the prioritization of the identified concerns.

Plan for Addressing County Issues

After the final compilation is complete yielding a list of prioritized issues for the county, the design team reviews the list and makes recommendations regarding the Extension educational response.

Areas for Consideration

Advantages of using a mail survey:

- Savings of money and time (personal interviews consume considerable staff time)
- No personal or night meetings
- The questionnaire may be completed at the respondent's convenience
- Greater assurance of anonymity
- Standardized wording
- No interview bias
- Accessibility to wider county population

Disadvantages of using a mailed survey:

- Lack of flexibility
- Low response rate
- Written communication only
- No control over the environment
- Questions may remain unanswered or answered incompletely
- Additional or unexpected comments are not captured

County office staff involvement in the survey process is vital. The office team works with the oversight committee as a design team to identify the sample of participants. They design and test the questionnaire(s). Office staff makes confirmation phone calls to the survey respondents and manage the survey distribution and returns. The county Extension office team tabulates and analyses the responses. Finally, the design team meets to determine the issues Extension will address and assign responsibilities. The entire process requires two to three months for design, response time, analysis and prioritizing.

Resources Needed

Postage, envelopes, printed questionnaires and cover letters, postcards, faculty and staff time.

Level of Oversight Committee Involvement

Help select survey participants, help design survey questions, review preliminary results, review final results and select priority issues the local UWEX office will work on.

NOTE: (1) Response rates in mail surveys depend upon the number of contacts that are made. The more contacts you make the higher the response rate. Repeated and well-timed contacts in a pleasant manner encourage response. (2) Mail surveys require advance planning, professional looking materials and adequate help. (3) Of utmost importance is the look and feel of the questionnaire. Make sure the questionnaire is attractive, easy to follow and understand. (Salant and Dillman, 1994. *How to Conduct Your Own Survey*, John Wiley and Sons)

Sample Advance Confirmation Phone Call

Hello. (Verify who is on the line.)

This is _____ (name). I am the _____ (position) with _____ (organization).

Within the next few days, you will receive a survey in the mail asking you to help identify the needs and assets of _____ County as well as to look to the future. The UW-Extension Office is in the process of identifying concerns facing people in our county and throughout the state in order to set programming direction and allocate resources.

It is a short questionnaire that will take only a few minutes to complete. Your input is important for ensuring that the University serves the needs of the county. Results will be widely shared. May we count on your participation?

Thank you in advance for your help.

Goodbye . . .

Sample Cover Letter

Date

Dear _____;

As a resident of _____ County, you know about concerns and issues facing the people of our county. Knowing how people view their county—its current needs and strengths, and how they would like the county to be in the future—is vital to those who make decisions about the programs and services that are available.

You are one of a small number of people who are being asked to give their opinion about the current situation in _____ County and your vision of the future. Your name was [drawn randomly from a list of all registered voters; identified by _____]. In order that the results of this survey truly represent the thinking of the people of _____ County, it is important that you fully complete the enclosed questionnaire and return it in the envelope provided.

You may be assured of complete confidentiality. The questionnaire has an identification number for mailing purposes only. This is so that we may check your name off the mailing list when your questionnaire is returned. Your name will never be placed on the questionnaire. No individual responses will be reported. A summary of the results will be mailed to you when completed.

If you have any questions about this survey, please contact us. Thank you very much for your help in this important endeavor.

Sincerely,

County Office Department Head, Chairperson of Oversight Committee

Sample Follow-Up Post Card

Last week, a questionnaire was mailed to you seeking your opinions about the concerns facing people in our county and what you would like the county to be like in five years. Your name was selected _____ [indicate process used to select sample].

If you have already completed and returned the questionnaire, thank you very much. If not, please do so today. We appreciate your help because we know how useful your ideas will be in setting direction for the county.

If you did not receive a questionnaire, or if it was misplaced, please call us at _____ (phone number) and we will get another one in the mail to you immediately.

Sincerely,

County Office Department Head, Chairperson of Oversight Committee

Sample Follow-Up Cover Letter in Second Mailing

Date

Dear _____;

About three weeks ago, we sent you a questionnaire seeking your opinions about the issues facing _____ County. As of today, we have not received your completed questionnaire. We realize that you may not have had time to complete it. However, we would genuinely appreciate hearing from you.

This survey is being conducted so those residents like you can affect the type of programs and services available in _____ County. We are writing to you again because the usefulness of what we learn depends upon receiving input from each respondent. Your name was drawn _____ (indicate process used to select sample). In order for the information from this survey to be representative of the county concerns, it is essential that each person in our sample returns the questionnaire.

In the event that your questionnaire has been misplaced, a replacement is enclosed. We would be happy to answer any questions you might have about this survey and the use of the results. Please contact us at _____ (phone number or address).

Sincerely,

County Office Department Head, Chairperson of Oversight Committee