

Designing and Using Questionnaires

This is the information age. More information has been published in the last decade than in all previous history. Everyone uses information to make decisions about the future. If our information is accurate, we have a high probability of making a good decision. If our information is inaccurate, our ability to make a correct decision is diminished. Better information usually leads to better decisions.

The following is a list of common ways to get information:

1. **A literature search** involves reviewing all readily available materials. These materials can include internal company information, medical journals, professional publications, online data bases, and any other published materials. It is a very inexpensive method of gathering information, although it generally does not yield timely information. Literature searches take between one and eight weeks.
2. **Talking with people** is a good way to get information during the initial stages of a research project. It can be used to gather information that is not publicly available, or that is too new to be found in the literature. Examples might include meetings with, customers, co-workers, other departments or other healthcare settings. In addition, seminars and association meetings would be good opportunities to gather information. Although often valuable, the information has questionable validity because it is highly subjective and might not be representative of a broad population.
3. **A focus group** is used as a preliminary research technique to explore people's ideas and attitudes. It is often used to test new approaches (such as new services, products or advertising), and to discover customer or patient concerns. A group of 6 to 20 people meet in a conference-room-like setting with a trained moderator. A professional survey research firm will host the event in a room with a one-way mirror for viewing, including audio and video capabilities. The moderator leads the group's discussion and keeps the focus on the areas you want to explore. Focus groups can be conducted within a couple of weeks. A professional research firm will charge between two and three thousand dollars. Their disadvantage is that the sample is small and may not be representative of the population in general.
4. **Personal interviews** are a way to get in-depth and comprehensive information. They involve one person interviewing another person for personal or detailed information. Personal interviews can be very expensive and time consuming. If an independent research firm is used a fee of between \$50 - \$100+ per interview may be charged because of the one-to-one nature of the interview. Typically, an interviewer will ask questions from a written questionnaire and record the answers verbatim. Sometimes, the questionnaire is simply a list of topics that the research wants to discuss with an industry expert. Personal interviews are generally used only when subjects are not likely to respond to other survey methods or very detailed information is needed.

5. **Telephone surveys** are the fastest method of gathering information from a relatively large sample (100-400 respondents). The interviewer follows a prepared script that is essentially the same as a written questionnaire. However, unlike a mail survey, the telephone survey allows the opportunity for some opinion probing. Telephone surveys generally last less than ten minutes. Typical costs are between four and six thousand dollars and they can be completed in two to four weeks.
6. **Mail surveys** are a cost effective method of gathering information. They are ideal for large sample sizes, or when the sample comes from a wide geographic area. They cost a little less than telephone interviews, however, they take over twice as long to complete (eight to twelve weeks). Because there is no interviewer, there is no possibility of interviewer bias. The main disadvantage is the inability to probe respondents for more detailed information.
7. **E-mail and internet surveys** are relatively new and little is known about the effect of sampling bias in internet surveys. However, it is a good way to gather information from a targeted list of respondents. While it is clearly the most cost effective and fastest method of distributing a survey, the demographic profile of the internet user does not represent the general population, although this is changing. Before doing an e-mail or internet survey, carefully consider the effect that this bias might have on the results. In addition, getting data out of internet surveys can be difficult if the analysis requires more than summary responses.

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References: Book