Wilder
Research

Reporting research findings

Evaluation resources from Wilder Research

Once you have obtained, entered, and analyzed the data from a survey, the next step is to share the results. You may have several different intended audiences or stakeholders, each with unique interests in the evaluation. When possible and appropriate, remember to share the results with those who participated in the evaluation. They are often interested in learning more about the evaluation in which they participated.

This document is intended to help guide report writing. The numbers in the examples that follow are fictional and used solely to provide examples. The sample formats can be used as a template for similar questions. Just be sure to change the numbers and wording to reflect your data. These examples are not exhaustive, but do address the fundamental components that should be included in reporting results.

Things to keep in mind

Know your audience

Keep in mind that different audiences will have different interests in the evaluation findings. Some audiences will have a solid background in the evaluation and will want to know specific things about the findings. Other audiences will be more interested in an overview of the findings, rather than specifics. Determine if each audience is interested in 'hard facts' or a more anecdotal narrative of the evaluation findings.

Get input

It is always a good idea to review results of an evaluation with colleagues and other staff before finalizing an evaluation report. Having this conversation in advance can provide you with additional viewpoints regarding the meaning of the data. For example, your colleagues can discuss and help interpret any findings that are puzzling or surprising.

There may be political considerations as well. It may be a good idea to brief important stakeholders before a report is released publicly. The briefing could give key stakeholders time to digest the findings and to think about the broader implications. It may also provide them with an opportunity to prepare a response if they so desire. Through this process, you will also learn what appear to be the most important findings from the perspective of the groups that will use them.

Formatting

Using consistent formatting is a relatively easy strategy for making reports easy to read and understandable. Keeping the report visually interesting, but not too "busy," can help keep readers engaged in the report. Consider the following tips when formatting your report:

- Leave "white space" – do not crowd the page.
- Avoid using more than 2-3 fonts within one document.
- Use an 11-12 point font size – make sure that it is legible and easy to read.
- Use headings to break up large blocks of text and help guide the reader in locating the information most interesting to them.
- Use features such as bold, italic, and underline sparingly and consistently throughout the report.
- Consider using bullets or sidebars to emphasize key information.

Use straightforward and interesting language

In addition to writing a report that is easy to read, also keep in mind your audience and their level of understanding of your program. Generally, it is a good idea to keep the language clear and straightforward.

- Avoid jargon and acronyms, especially those terms which might be common within your field of work but might be lost on the general public.
- Use clear and concise writing, and include charts and graphs where appropriate.
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Delete unnecessary words and phrases.
- Use active verbs as much as possible.

Get creative

Be creative and innovative in reporting evaluation findings. Use a variety of techniques such as visual displays, oral presentations, summary statements, interim reports, and informal conversations, keeping in mind that different audiences learn information in different ways. Additional ideas include:

- Sharing your results with the media, through a press release and/or press conference.
- Making presentations to select groups, such as community partners or potential funders.
- Making a short video presenting the results, for use in analysis sessions and discussions.
- Staging a debate or advocate-adversary analysis of the findings, in which opposing points of view can be fully aired.

Presenting evaluation results

If you have a lot of information to report, it can be easy for readers to lose track of your main findings and conclusions. Make your key findings stand out, so that your audience can easily find them and determine their significance and usefulness. The following are examples of standard reporting practices that will help your audiences understand and follow the findings.

1. **Be as specific as possible** about who is reporting and what they are reporting on. Try to use wording that is as similar to the question asked as possible. For instance:

> Fifty percent of coalition members "agree" or "strongly agree" that there is a lot of flexibility when decisions are made.
>
> The majority (65%) of teachers implementing Project Northland believe that the content of the curriculum was very appropriate for their students.

2. **Report results from largest to smallest** for multiple questions related to one another. This is generally the easiest way to read this information. For instance:

> Seventy percent of participants of the responsible beverage server training reported that they felt the overall quality of the training was high. Sixty percent reported that the training will be beneficial to them in performing their job.

3. **Know when to report in percentages and when to report in numbers**. In general, we recommend using percentages to report information for samples with more than 10 participants. For samples with less than 10 participants, use numbers. For instance:

> Of the 12 coalition members who took the survey in December, 78 percent report that they feel strongly committed to the coalition. Of the eight members who participated in August, seven "strongly agree" or "agree" that they feel strongly committed to the coalition.

4. **Keep tables and graphs as clear and simple as possible**. This narrative and table might look like the following:

> Most of the Youth Staff participants like the job they were assigned and had fun at their job. Participants reported being unclear about the program rules though (see Table 1).

1. Coalition community environment questions (N=20)

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
The community climate seems to be "right" for this coalition accomplishing its goals.	5%	25%	40%	30%
In the community, there is a big need for ATOD prevention programs and services.	10%	10%	30%	50%

Reporting multiple choice questions

Because most of the questions on the surveys included in your evaluation plan use scales such as "Strongly agree," "Agree," "Disagree," and "Strongly disagree," the agreement and disagreement categories can be combined to simplify the reporting of findings. That is, "Strongly agree" and "Agree" numbers or percentages can be added together, while "Disagree" and "Strongly disagree" numbers or percentages can be added together. For example, if 20 percent of participants "strongly agreed" and 40 percent "agreed" that responsible beverage server training should be required for all alcohol beverage servers, you might report that:

> Sixty percent of responsible beverage server training participants believe that the training should be required for all alcohol beverage servers.

Other examples include:

> Most of the teachers who taught Class Action (78%) were comfortable teaching the curriculum.
>
> Of the 15 teachers implementing Class Action, 62 percent think that their students were interested in the information.
>
> When asked whether they would recommend the curriculum to other teachers, 72 percent of teachers using Project Northland agreed, while 28 percent of teachers using Reconnecting Youth agreed.
>
> Coalition members tend to believe that other members want the coalition to succeed (80%), have a high level of commitment (76%), and communicate openly with one another (64%).

Reporting continuous data

Another form of data that may be reported is continuous data (e.g., months, years, hours, and numbers of participants). You will know you are working with continuous data if the data summary provided in your Excel file includes a minimum, maximum, and average score rather than counts for each response option. Here are some suggestions for reporting this type of information:

> Coalition members reported being involved with the coalition for between six months and five years (average = 2 years).
>
> Coalition members reported spending an average of four hours a month on coalition related activities outside of meetings.
>
> Sixty percent of members report that they have been involved with the coalition for less than one year, while 40 percent reported more than one year of involvement.

Reporting open-ended questions

Some surveys also include open-ended questions, such as questions eliciting suggestions for improvement or level of interest in participating in an activity. Often open-ended data is used to support other quantitative data. For instance:

> Eighty percent of participants in the responsible beverage server training felt that this training will be beneficial to them in performing their jobs. When asked what they will do differently as a server as a result of this training, one participant stated, "I will know what to say when I feel someone is too drunk for another drink" while another said, "I will be more invested in checking IDs from everyone in the bar."

Open-ended data may be presented with a verbatim list of responses or you may choose to code the responses. However, you may decide that your open-ended responses are more appropriate for internal use than external reporting and not report them. It is up to you and the requirements for your reports.

1. Verbatim list

Open-ended responses can be reported as stand-alone data in the form of a list of verbatim responses. This is especially useful if you have less than 10 responses to any particular question. If you list responses verbatim, be sure to 'de-identify' the responses by removing any words or phrases within the response that could identify the respondent and replacing the identifying information with a general reference in brackets. For instance:

Coalition members were asked about their initial reason for deciding to participate in the coalition. Their responses include:

> "I saw too many kids drinking at parties and I wanted to do something."
>
> "I joined because [another member] told me what great work the coalition was doing."
>
> "I work for [organization] and we are trying to help reduce youth ATOD use."

2. Coding

Finally, you may also choose to organize the open-ended comments into codes or themes. This process can be somewhat more complicated than simply listing responses, but can be very useful if there were a lot of respondents. Coding responses into themes is also helpful for identifying common ideas expressed by the respondents.

To code open-ended responses, first create a comprehensive list of all responses to a particular question. Next, read through the responses and identify themes (patterns of responses) that are emerging in the responses. These themes will be the codes you will use. Assign a code to each response given to the question, like 'outcome' or 'other members'. Every response should fall into one of the code categories. Try to avoid using a code of "other" or "miscellaneous" unless absolutely necessary. Finally, list the codes in order from most common to least common, or identify the number of respondents whose responses reflect the same theme.

As an example of this process, here are the responses and possible codes (in brackets) to the question: "What has been the most worthwhile aspect of your participation in the coalition?"

> "Working with others who care." [other members]
>
> "Seeing changes in our youth." [outcomes]
>
> "Becoming a part of the community." [community involvement]

> "Hearing about fewer underage drinking charges." [outcomes]
>
> "Networking at meetings." [other members]

If you choose to code responses, there are different ways you can report the data. You may choose to report only the themes themselves, report individual comments organized by theme, or report the number of respondents who mentioned a particular theme. The following provides three examples of each reporting option, using the sample open-ends provided above.

Themes only

Members of this coalition feel that the most worthwhile aspect of their participation includes:

> Meeting and working with other coalition members.
>
> Seeing positive outcomes due to our work.
>
> Being involved more in the community.

Comments organized by theme

Members of this coalition feel that the most worthwhile aspect of their participation includes:

> **Meeting and working with other coalition members**
>
> "Working with others who care."
>
> "Networking at meetings."
>
> **Seeing positive outcomes due to our work**
>
> "Seeing changes in our youth."
>
> "Hearing about fewer underage drinking charges."
>
> **Being involved more in the community**
>
> "Becoming a part of the community."

Number of respondents who mention particular theme

Members of this coalition feel that the most worthwhile aspect of their participation includes:

> Meeting and working with other coalition members. (N=2)

> Seeing positive outcomes due to our work. (N=2)
>
> Being involved more in the community. (N=1)

In instances where you have a long list of themes, you may want to choose a threshold of responses to report. For example, if you have 40 themes, you may only want to list the top 10, or report those themes that were identified by at least 5 respondents. If you choose one of these strategies, be clear in your report about what you are or are not reporting.

Be objective

However you choose to report your evaluation findings, it is crucial that you report objectively, including both positive and negative findings. Here are some tips for ensuring your objectivity and increasing credibility with stakeholders:

- Do not use emotionally charged language when describing your findings, like ‘very’ or ‘extremely’. This can make you sound like a program advocate, thus reducing your objectivity and credibility.
- Use disappointing results to guide recommendations for enhancing services or addressing implementation barriers, rather than dismissing or hiding them.
- Discuss limitations in terms of how information was collected, so that audiences can judge the degree of confidence to place in the results. Every evaluation study has limitations, and it is important to know what they are so stakeholders can consider the findings in context.

Deciding what to include in your report

In addition to these recommendations, you may also choose to prepare additional reports with more information about your evaluation. The following tips may guide you in preparing evaluation reports that require additional details.

- Background on program/project: Orient readers to the program or project being evaluated. Provide basic information about program participants, the history of the program, and the program or project goals.
- Review of evaluation questions: Describe the goals of the evaluation. List the specific evaluation questions, and inform readers why each evaluation question was addressed.

- Evaluation methods: Describe the design of the evaluation, including criteria used to select participants and the data collection approaches used. Also explain how data was analyzed.

- Key findings: Provide readers with a description of the evaluation participants, including demographics and level of participation in the program or initiative. Also describe the services provided by the program. Share the results for each evaluation question described earlier in the report. You may choose to represent some of the findings with graphs or charts.

- Conclusions: Recognize the strengths of the program that were identified in the evaluation, and also recommendations for improving the program. Also include the limitations of the evaluation and the results, and provide suggestions for improving future evaluation activities.

- Appendix: In the appendix, include additional information that can help readers understand the evaluation process. Include examples of survey instruments, copies of consent forms, and, if available, a copy of the logic model. You may also choose to include charts and graphs in the appendix, rather than in the body of the report.

If you have questions about coding, or any other reporting options or specifics discussed here, please contact your Wilder consultant.

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