

Using Sondeos for Program Development and Evaluation ¹

Sebastian Galindo-Gonzalez and Glenn D. Israel²

Introduction

Will our Extension program be relevant to our audience? Do we really know how the audience and program interact? Are we using the right indicators to evaluate our program? You may have faced these or similar questions. Sondeos are a quick and relatively inexpensive tool that you can use to explore why some programs may or may not work.

This factsheet provides a brief overview of the sondeo method and suggestions for its use. After studying this document, you should feel confident in your ability to use sondeos for program development and evaluation.

The Sondeo Method

The sondeo is a qualitative method developed to attain a rapid assessment of a given situation through the use of informal dialogue. “Sondeo” is the Spanish word that means “to sound out.” Sondeos are used to collect data and they involve a group of interviews. This strategy was created at the Instituto de Ciencia y Tecnología Agrícola (ICTA) in

Guatemala as a quick, economical alternative to obtain feedback from local residents (Hildebrand, 1981). The rationale for this method is that significant and trustworthy information can be obtained from multiple key informants through social interviews in a short time period (one week on average). The sondeo was initially used in rural areas of developing countries, as a key element of the Farming Systems Research and Extension approach. Its versatility, however, allows this method to be used in a variety of settings.

Preparing a sondeo

As with all qualitative inquiry, the sondeo needs to start with at least one focal question or issue. This question arises after the program team has processed the information available from previous experience or secondary data. A good question needs to address a relevant issue and be broad enough to encourage a rich conversation. Once this question has been formulated, the team needs to plan how to collect the data in the field.

-
1. This document is AEC 386, one of a series of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date February 2008. Reviewed October 2010. Visit the EDIS Web Site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
 2. Sebastian Galindo-Gonzalez, graduate research assistant, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Glenn D. Israel, Professor, Program Development and Evaluation Center, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611-0540. The authors wish to thank Amy Harder and Marta Hartmann for their helpful suggestions on an earlier draft.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Millie Ferrer-Chancy, Interim Dean

In Breuer et al. (2005), we find an example of appropriate questions for a sondeo. In this study, the program team used the following two questions: What are the main water issues present in South Florida? Could seasonal climate forecasts be useful for water management for Extension agents and clientele?

Interview Form

The sondeo does not rely on a highly-structured instrument where every question is defined in advance and presented to the interviewee in a certain order. Instead, the team identifies conversation topics that will be introduced in the dialogue during the interview process. The objective is to achieve an interview setting as similar to an actual informal conversation as possible. The informal, unstructured nature of the sondeo interview provides freedom for both the team and the participants to express and investigate their concerns in relation with the general conversation topic.

Selection of participants

The next step in a sondeo is to select the participants for the study. The team needs to establish meaningful criteria for the selection of individuals from the target audience to help answer the study question. Generally, key informants are selected to be the participants of a sondeo.

Breuer et al. (2005) interviewed 30 Florida Extension agents working within the South Florida Water Management District to identify the water issues present in their counties, as well as the potential applications of seasonal climate forecasts for water management.

Forming the Interview Groups

In a sondeo, an interview group conducts the interviews. Three to five members, preferably from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, comprise an interview group. It is desirable to have more than one interview group and to vary the composition of these groups from one interview to the other.

In the same study (Breuer et al., 2005), three interview groups were formed and the composition of these groups was changed

from one day to the other. Team members included animal scientists, agricultural engineers, extensionists, etc.

Every member of the interview groups must have a very clear idea of the purpose of the sondeo and which questions the team wants to answer. This information will be useful to keep the conversation on track during the interviews. Because the multidisciplinary program team is a strength of the sondeo method, the members of the interview groups should be aware and take advantage of the expertise of their colleagues.

Conducting a sondeo

Interviewing

In a sondeo, the actual interview is similar to what Holstein and Gubrium (2003) define as a social interview. This is characterized by the presence of more than one active interviewer (interview group). It is also possible for the group to interview more than one participant at a time. These interviewees can be arranged into what we may arbitrarily call small groups, focus groups, or big groups (composed by 2 to 3, 4 to 10, or more than 10 participants, respectively). With more than one interviewee at a time, the interview group has the challenge of ensuring that every participant has the chance to express his/her opinions and that there is not one voice dominating the process. The larger the group the harder it will be to engage all the participants. The length of each interview session will vary by the depth of the dialogue that evolves between interviewers and interviewees. In addition, probes (follow-up questions) are asked to get clarification or more complete details from an interview.

In Breuer et al. (2005), all the visits to the Extension offices were unannounced to provide an element of randomness. The time allocated for each one of the sessions varied between 15 and 30 minutes due to the busy schedules of the agents. At the beginning of the talk, the interview group explained the purpose of the study to the agent (or agents). The interview dialogue was initiated asking about the water issues of the area. After these questions, the interview group provided an explanation on

seasonal climate forecasting. Finally, the agent was asked to talk about the possible applications (or lack thereof) that he/she envisioned for the forecasts to address water issues in the region. The interviewers used probes when they judged pertinent.

Sondeo data

The traditional sondeo does not record data (in any format) during the actual interview. This strategy aims to overcome the natural tendency of some participants to share less information when they are conscious that a record of it is being kept.

Immediately after the end of the interview, each group member must write an individual summary of what he/she recalls was said by the participant. Then, as an interview group again, the individual notes are shared and discussed giving to everyone the chance to add, or in some cases delete, information to their personal annotations. The groups usually get the most out of this discussion by revisiting the questions for their next interview.

This process of writing a summary and comparing notes should be repeated after each interview. A synopsis of every interview, with which every group member agrees, is generated. If it is possible, for validity purposes this summary can be shared with the interviewees to make sure that the information is consistent with what was said during the interview. This practice is known as member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

It is very important for group members to refrain from making any kind of analysis (introducing their own ideas) of the data at this point because the transcriptions need to be as close as possible to what the actual interviewees said. However, it is always a good practice for group members to write down their thoughts because these may be useful during the analysis.

As a variation, the decision to record the interview shall be taken by the program team after a thorough consideration of the possible impacts that this activity may have on the participants responses.

Furthermore, this should be negotiated with the interviewees. The audio of a sondeo interview should be recorded when the program team plans to conduct a more sophisticated and rigorous analysis of the data (e.g. domain analysis (Spradley, 1980) Discourse analysis (Gee, 2005) , or narrative analysis (Labov, 1972) , etc.).

After all the interviews have been conducted, the program team conducts the analysis and writes the report. Through collective reading of the interview summaries, the program team identifies the important ideas or themes in the data. This begins by asking, “what are people talking about?” and, “how do the themes relate?” If possible, the categories of themes should be mutually exclusive and exhaustive.

The team members identified multiple water issues from the interviews that were grouped under two main themes, namely water quality and quantity. Additionally, a large set of potential applications of the forecasts was identified. The participants identified uses they can assign to the forecasts as educational tools as well as applications that other stakeholders -- like farmers, policymakers and researchers -- may have for this information (Breuer et al., 2005).

When the themes have been identified, a narrative must be written for each one of them. The program team may form small groups, each of which may address one or more of these themes (depending on the number of themes and groups). The narratives would consist of descriptions of the different elements related to each particular theme depicted by the participants. These descriptions should include comparisons among participants to identify similarities and differences. A set of recommendations and/or implications of the findings may be included in the narrative for each theme.

Reporting

The individual narratives generated by the groups will later be incorporated, in a uniform way, into a final report. To ensure the trustworthiness of the results, each one of the program team members needs to agree to the information contained in the final report. This is known as triangulation (Lincoln

& Guba, 1985) . Additional data, either related with the context of the study or that did not fit into any of the main themes, may be included as part of the final report as appendixes.

Depending on the original purpose for conducting a particular sondeo, the resulting report can have multiple applications. These include policy-making, developing or improving a program, etc.

The report from Breuer et al. (2005) aimed to serve as a guide for setting the agenda for future research, development, and Extension efforts on climate forecast-based water management by the Southeast Climate Consortium.

Limitations

The rigor of a sondeo is limited because the original data from the interview is usually not recorded. Even though the group members thoroughly write down everything that they can recall immediately after the interview, it is likely that significant pieces of information will be lost. A second limitation is that its analytical method is more a democratic consensual procedure than a grounded systematic process. However, these limitations do not devalue the sondeo as a method for providing the program team, in a short period, valuable information with which to develop or improve a program.

Conclusion

The sondeo is an informal, multidisciplinary, low-cost, and effective method to obtain a broader understanding of our target audience in a reduced time. The findings obtained through this method may be used to develop or evaluate Extension programs.

References

Breuer, N., Canales, G., Cabrera, V., Hildebrand, P. E., Galindo-Gonzalez, S., Kulstad, T., et al. (2005). *Potential applications of seasonal climate forecasts for water management and Extension agent perceptions of water issues in South Florida.*: Southeast Climate Consortium.

Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Hildebrand, P. E. (1981). Combining disciplines in rapid appraisal: The sondeo approach. *Agricultural Administration*, 8, 423-432.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2003). *Inside interviewing: new lenses, new concerns*. Thousand Oaks [Calif.]: Sage Publications.

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city; studies in the Black English vernacular*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications.

Spradley, J. P. (1980). *Participant observation*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.