

Conducting the Needs Assessment #4: Audience Motivations, Barriers, and Objections¹

Laura Warner and Matt Bengé²

Abstract

The third publication in the *Conducting the Needs Assessment* series outlined a range of motivations, barriers, and objections Extension educators and other service providers may have pertaining to needs assessments. This fourth publication in the series provides Extension educators and other service providers with an overview of motivations, barriers, and objections specific to participants in needs assessments.

For a complete list of the publications in this series, refer to the overview of the *Conducting a Needs Assessment* series in Appendix A.

Introduction

Extension educators and other service providers tend to have no shortage of program participants but ensuring that people who have insight into the problem are at the needs assessment table requires intentional and thoughtful consideration. The benefit of engaging the right people is that you can access accurate information truly reflective of the people you serve (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018).

A successful needs assessment is contingent on participation from the right people, so understanding potential motivations, barriers, and objections specific to your participants' engagement in these activities is critical.

Extension educators and other service providers can encourage participation using these motivations and take action to address and reduce barriers and objections that could inhibit potential participants or negatively affect their overall experience.

It is important to keep in mind that people tend to do things when they believe the rewards of participating will outweigh the costs, a concept captured by social exchange theory (Ali & Warner, 2017; Dillman et al., 2009). With this in mind, Extension professionals and other service providers should emphasize and increase benefits to participating in needs assessment activities while addressing and removing barriers or objections. Because the perceived value of these costs and benefits will vary widely from person to person, it is critical to know your intended participants (Dillman et al., 2009). Further, trust develops between Extension educators and needs assessment participants through shared and repeated interactions. Actions such as remembering participants' names and interests, meeting their needs, and helping them solve problems both within the needs assessment process and in their lives (e.g., helping them to find a job or access services) build trust. Many costs are incurred by participants well before benefits are realized, and trust increases willingness to enter such a transaction. For example, participants must give up their time and knowledge to contribute to focus groups, and they might not see the personal/community benefits of a

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2. Laura Warner, associate professor, and Matt Bengé, assistant professor, Department of Agricultural Education and Communication; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

resulting program for years. Participants will be more likely to incur this cost upfront when trust has been established.

The following discussion of potential needs assessment participants' motivations, barriers, and objections can help Extension educators and other service providers develop successful needs assessment activities. The summaries below are drawn from a wide variety of needs assessment techniques, and some will be more applicable to specific approaches than others.

Increasing Audience Motivations to Participate

Potential needs assessment participants could be motivated to participate by a number of factors, which are described below along with strategies for increasing participation.

Incentives (Dillman et al., 2009; Klabunde, Willis, & Casalino, 2013)

- **Description:** Providing incentives is a classic strategy for encouraging participation in a wide range of activities. Incentives work because they increase the perceived rewards associated with participating in an activity, which can help to outweigh potential costs of participating.
- **Strategy:** Incentives can be provided in advance (for example, a token in a survey envelope or a meal offered before a focus group), which increases the likelihood of a participant following through. The type of incentive might also be aligned with the data collection method (for example, an electronic gift card sent via email to online survey participants or physical vouchers given to group participants). In some cases, a financial incentive may be necessary to motivate potential participants. Most importantly, it is critical to offer incentives that would be of value to your participants, so you must know the people you want to participate. For example, people who cook participating in a needs assessment to inform nutrition programs might be highly motivated by the offer of a cookbook, whereas many others would see no value in this type of incentive.

Clear Communication During the Planning Process (Corp & Darnell, 2002; Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018; Dillman et al., 2009; Klabunde et al., 2013)

- **Description:** Commitment to and confidence in your needs assessment process is built through clear and intentional communication.

- **Strategies:** (1) Provide information through prenotices and informative brochures; (2) consider developing a statement of purpose with input from the stakeholders both to clarify the intent of the needs assessment and to generate ownership; and (3) consider tailoring your communications so specific receiver groups perceive how the needs assessment is relevant to them.

Participant Ownership (Corp & Darnell, 2002; Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018; Knowles et al., 2005)

- **Description:** When participants feel like they are in control, they will be motivated to contribute thoughtfully and feel encouraged to contribute to a successful needs assessment.
- **Strategies:** (1) Consider using participatory processes to generate buy-in; (2) encourage participants to collectively develop a purpose statement and group rules to increase ownership of the process; and (3) ensure needs are being considered at appropriate levels relevant to participants.

Self-Perceptions (Dillman et al., 2009; Klabunde et al., 2013; Rogers, 2003)

- **Description:** Potential participants may be motivated to engage in your needs assessment because they want to avoid negative feelings that might come with nonparticipation (i.e., letting your organization down). They may also see themselves as people who contribute (i.e., they are committed to helping Extension) and want to act consistently with their self-perceptions.
- **Strategies:** (1) Consider building social norms for participation (i.e., making people aware that others approve of the needs assessment, and that others are participating) possibly through the use of opinion leaders (the people in the community to whom others look for advice and cues for how to act); (2) help people develop positive perceptions about supporting your cause; (3) ask for help to build a sense of responsibility among potential participants and communicate how you value their input; and (4) emphasize how the tasks at hand are similar to something potential participants have done in the past.

Sharing Needs Assessment Results With Participants

- **Description:** Potential participants may be motivated to participate when they are confident the results of the needs assessment will be returned to them.
- **Strategies:** (1) Communicate early on how the results will be shared with the participants; and (2) always follow through with your commitment to your participants.

Trust (Ali & Warner, 2017; Dillman et al., 2009)

- Description: Potential participants may be motivated to engage in needs assessment activities because they trust you.
- Strategies: (1) Trust is built out of long-term relationships. Devoting time in the community and with your stakeholders should be a priority; (2) prioritize following through on commitments (i.e., to provide information) in a timely manner; (3) use appropriate branding (for example, use logos on correspondence and data collection tools) to increase your likelihood of being seen as a legitimate partner; (4) emphasize ways in which you belong to the same communities or social groups; (5) communicate the importance of the task and ensure confidentiality to build trust; and (6) always express gratitude to convey respect for people's time.

Removing Audience Barriers and Objections

Participation of potential needs assessment participants could be hindered by a number of factors, which are described below along with strategies for their removal or reduction.

Discomfort or Embarrassment Pertaining to the Needs Assessment Topic (Ali & Warner, 2017; DePue et al., 1995; Dillman et al., 2009)

- Description: When a needs assessment focuses on a sensitive topic or requests information that could embarrass some individuals, potential participants could be lost.
- Removal strategies: (1) Reduce this barrier by requesting sensitive information only if absolutely necessary; (2) if a topic is especially sensitive, consider using anonymous and confidential needs assessment methods, such as mailed surveys or electronic Delphi techniques; (3) consider asking questions in a more general form when appropriate (i.e., income ranges as opposed to exact salary); and (4) make sure responses are valid for the audience (i.e., using income ranges that are representative of participants).

Feeling Unwelcomed (Corp & Darnell, 2002; Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018)

- Description: When disagreements occur, some participants could feel unwelcomed.
- Removal strategies: (1) Reduce this barrier by collectively establishing group norms (i.e., ground rules or self-regulating agreements) for participation at the beginning

of a session—for example, have participants commit to one person speaking at a time while others engage in active listening and avoid side conversations; and (2) turn conflict into productive discussion through strong facilitation skills. If you are not an experienced facilitator, you might consider bringing in a partner with this expertise or seeking training, especially if you anticipate tension related to the topic.

Inability to Contribute (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018; Donaldson & Franck, n.d.; Haskell & Prichard, 2004)

- Description: You can miss important information when dominant personalities overtake a discussion. You also want to be sure you do not personally contribute and influence the process or prevent participants from providing input.
- Removal strategies: (1) Create an outcomes-focused agenda to communicate expectations and support input for all group members; (2) use strong facilitation skills, or use an outside experienced facilitator, to ensure equal participation along with a dialogue where answers are found together; this can help ensure the needs assessment process will take the form of a dialogue rather than a one-way lecture; (3) establish group norms for productive participation at the beginning of a session, as with the previous barrier; and (4) ensure there are strategies in place so stakeholders who need to use the data have appropriate access to the results.

Inconvenient Participation Options (Ali & Warner, 2017; Donaldson & Franck, n.d.)

- Description: People may prefer a certain form of participation (individual, online, group, etc.) and they may object to participating when given only one option. Intensive or inconvenient timing may also serve as barriers (for example, evening sessions for new parents or daytime sessions for teachers during the school year).
- Removal strategy: Make sure you understand the potential participants' obligations and preferences before finalizing your needs assessment approach, and consider providing multiple participation options (ideally three or more). Offering options that are considerate of participants' preferences and obligations will decrease barriers to your targeted audience's participation.

Lack of Capacity to Make Informed Decisions (Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018)

- Description: When potential participants are not fully engaged in the process or do not have adequate

information, they may not be able to make informed decisions or provide the information you need.

- Removal strategies: (1) To remove or avoid this barrier, share all of the relevant information and data with participants; (2) present information in appropriate formats that are easy to access and understand; and (3) avoid using unnecessary jargon or inappropriate terminology.

Lack of Understanding About the Process and Expectations for Participation (Ali & Warner, 2017; Cuiccio & Husby-Slater, 2018)

- Description: When potential participants are unclear about the needs assessment or what you need from them specifically, they are less likely to engage with the process.
- Removal strategies: (1) Set clear expectations for participation and clearly communicate how the data will be used; (2) establish group norms collectively and provide direction for efficient and effective use of time; (3) work with stakeholders to develop a statement of purpose to both clarify the intent of the needs assessment and generate ownership; and (4) communicate clearly and often with participants so they can understand how the needs assessment is relevant to them.

Lack of Representation (Ervis et al., 2016; Ingram & Syvertsen, 2005; Rogers, 2003)

- Description: When recruitment efforts consistently target the same groups, potential participants outside those groups may be less likely to participate. Furthermore, the needs assessment would be less likely to reveal the true needs of the whole community.
- Removal strategies: (1) Recruit participants strategically and engage people representing various viewpoints; (2) provide adequate and effective communication that reaches all groups in the community, because not all groups may be aware of opportunities to participate in needs assessment activities; (3) understand what barriers exist for participating through different needs assessment approaches among the many groups in your community and plan activities that do not create these barriers (for example, if you only conduct a needs assessment activity online you may exclude lower-income individuals who are less likely to have internet access); and (4) include individuals on the needs assessment team who represent a full range of viewpoints within the community.

Conclusion

Needs assessments are an integral component of the program planning process. By paying attention to motivators that can drive thoughtful participation, Extension

educators and other service providers can increase their chances of sound needs assessment. Conversely, failure to consider possible barriers or participant concerns can result in inauthentic contributions or even lead to lack of participation.

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Appendix A: Conducting the Needs Assessment Series Overview

Conducting the Needs Assessment #1: Introduction

General summary of needs assessments, including what a needs assessment is, the different phases and tools to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #2: Using Needs Assessments in Extension Programming

Overview of using needs assessments as part of Extension program planning process.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #3: Motivations, Barriers, and Objections

Information about the motivations, barriers, and objections to conducting needs assessments for Extension professionals and service providers.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #4: Audience Motivations, Barriers, and Objections

Information about the motivations, barriers, and objections that clientele and communities may have for participating or buying in to a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #5: Phase 1—Pre-assessment

Introduction to the Pre-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including defining the purpose, management, identifying existing information, and determining the appropriate methods.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #6: Phase 2—Assessment

Introduction to the Assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including gathering and analyzing all data.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #7: Phase 3—Post-assessment

Introduction to the Post-assessment phase of conducting a needs assessment, including setting priorities, considering solutions, communicating results, and evaluating the needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #8: The Borich Model

Overview of using the Borich Model to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #9: The Nominal Group Technique

Overview of using the Nominal Group Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #10: The Delphi Technique

Overview of using the Delphi Technique to conduct a needs assessment.

Conducting the Needs Assessment #11: The Causal Analysis Technique

Overview of using the Causal Analysis Technique to conduct a needs assessment.