

The importance of needs assessment

Why is it important to assess the needs of the members of your organization?

The answer is quite simple. Knowing what the members need or want, and then planning activities to meet those needs will encourage members to participate in your group and increase the likelihood of them staying as vital, interested members.

A second reason for conducting needs assessments is executive members can't possibly know everything and it's not realistic of them to make assumptions about other people's needs.

When doing needs assessments, no single source of information is really adequate, so try to be flexible and use several different methods of collecting and double-checking the information. It's not really important to do a perfect research study — it's difficult to do and takes too much time and money. Sometimes needs are assessed and by the time the program is in place, so much time has elapsed that the needs have changed and the program or activity is no longer needed.

Methods you use for collecting the information will depend on your organization and knowing what will work best for its members. Often the most informal ways can be very effective and the quickest.

INFORMAL METHODS

1. Listen to and observe what members seem to be interested in.
2. Keep track of members' requests for talks, films, speakers.
3. Read the local newspapers to find out:
 - who were the guest speakers at other meetings
 - what topics other groups are interested in
 - ideas in letters to the editor
 - topics of feature articles
 - check Coming Events for program topics.
4. Check attendance at past activities/programs. It may show areas members are interested in.
5. Review completed evaluation forms from previous activities/

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programs, especially if you asked members for ideas for future programs.

6. Exchange ideas with people from other organizations in your community.
7. Contact the board of education and community colleges to check what continuing education courses are the most requested.
8. Whenever the opportunity arises, conduct one-to-one interviews over coffee, with the key people in your organization.
9. Use part of a meeting to brainstorm with the group for ideas or use a suggestion box at meetings for ideas.

REMEMBER

- to ask as many members as possible
- to ask newcomers and oldtimers to your group
- to ask members of different age groups
- to ask people who don't belong to your group YET BECAUSE THEY ALL HAVE A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE.

FORMAL METHODS

1. Surveys
 - telephone
 - mailed questionnaire
 - questionnaire distributed at a meeting(s)
 - personal interview or group interview
2. Focus Group — gather six to 12 key people of your group together and brainstorm for program/activity ideas. Make sure everyone has a chance to express his/her opinion. A group interview may be applicable.
3. Organization Forum — all group members are invited to attend a meeting to specifically address needs assessment.

Needs assessment is not a one-time event, rather it is an ongoing process in any organization. Knowing what your members want, from year to year, is important when preparing to plan programs. An article in the next issue of **Home & Country** will provide some tips on program planning.

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