Gathering Information about Your Priority Audience: A Methods Overview

Gathering information about your priority audience is key to understanding their needs, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors. Use this handout to learn about various information gathering methods and determine which are the right fit for your resources and needs. You can also use many of these methods to gather feedback from your priority audience (like what they think about draft content to promote your project). Keep in mind that it is important to gather information in the language spoken by your priority audience.

Method	Strengths	Limitations
Focus group A facilitated discussion with 6–11 people in your priority audience Check out OPA's Focus Group Tip Sheet	• People can describe their needs, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors in their own words • Provides an opportunity to ask follow-up questions and delve deeper into topics • Can gather many perspectives at once (unlike individual interviews) • Provides qualitative data and information from non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, body language)	• Findings are not as generalizable as surveys • Time-intensive for staff to recruit for, conduct focus groups, and analyze themes • May be difficult to manage the discussion without an experienced facilitator • Participants may feel pressure to give similar or "desirable" answers • May be difficult to recruit participants without compensation
Individual interview A one-on-one discussion between an interviewer and someone in your priority audience	• People can describe their needs, beliefs, attitudes, preferences, and behaviors in their own words • Provides an opportunity to ask follow-up questions and delve deeper into topics • Greater ability to gather detailed information and insights, compared to other methods • Informal or unstructured interviews may encourage more candid responses	• Findings are not as generalizable as surveys • Need several interviews to generate insights, which can be time-intensive • Can be difficult to analyze themes • Dynamics between interviewer and interviewee can bias responses • May be difficult to recruit participants without compensation

Method	Strengths	Limitations
Survey A consistent set of questions (closed and/or open-ended) distributed to a large number of people Check out OPA's Designing Surveys Tip Sheet	• Findings are generalizable (if the sample size is large) • Easy to administer, compared to non-survey methods • Easy to analyze (if the survey includes mostly closed-ended questions) • Allows for both quantitative and qualitative data • Can be administered in a variety of ways (online, by telephone, face-to-face) • People can participate privately and anonymously • Can gather information from a wider geographical area (using remote methods)	• No opportunity to ask follow-up questions or get in-depth information • Respondents may not provide complete or reliable responses • Survey questions may be interpreted differently among respondents, clouding the data • May be difficult to recruit respondents without compensation
Stakeholder meeting A discussion with a group of stakeholders that serves or has knowledge of your priority audience	• Can leverage existing relationships with other organizations • Can learn from the successes and challenges of other organizations • Typically free of cost	• Information is second-hand (not directly from members of the priority audience) so may be less reliable • Less certainty that other organizations will have the types of information you are looking for
Online research Using various online tools, including search engines and peer-reviewed research articles, to gather objective information	• Can be easy, quick, flexible, and inexpensive • Can gather information from a wide range of sources and locations	• May be difficult to find highly specific information • Information may be inaccurate or difficult to verify • Search results may elevate some information and render other information more difficult to find • Some information must be purchased