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# User Surveys: Libraries Ask, “Hey, How Am I Doing?”\*

Dwight B. King, Jr.\*\*

*Mr. King offers suggestions on how to create and use surveys effectively to assess the quality of a library.*

¶1 “How am I doing?” was a question former New York City mayor Ed Koch often asked his constituents. In an effort to make sure he was meeting their needs, he surveyed their opinions constantly. Library decision makers frequently use surveys to ask, “How is our library doing?” with the same purpose in mind. This article offers various suggestions and tips on how to make your library’s next attempt to assess quality a success.

## Why Do a Survey?

¶2 The academic law library is vital to the law school as the “workshop of professors and students alike.”<sup>1</sup> Academic law librarians naturally want to provide the best workshop possible, and they can employ a variety of tools to “survey” how well the library is doing, including focus groups, interviews, and survey questionnaires.<sup>2</sup>

¶3 Focus groups are effective in drawing out users’ true feelings; but because the groups are small, it is difficult to make generalizations from their responses.<sup>3</sup> Interviews are good for obtaining in-depth information,<sup>4</sup> but interviewing large numbers of people to get representative feedback can be very time-consuming. Survey questionnaires are often the best choice for “an economical method to

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1. *The Harvard Law School*, 3 LAW Q. REV. 118, 124 (1887) (remarks of Professor Christopher Columbus Langdell at the “quarter-millennial celebration of Harvard University,” Nov. 5, 1886).
2. MIGNON S. ADAMS & JEFFREY A. BECK, USER SURVEYS IN COLLEGE LIBRARIES 2 (1995).
3. *Id.* For tips on using focus groups, see CARTER McNAMARA, BASICS OF CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS (1999), at <http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>; RICHARD A. KRUEGER, FOCUS GROUPS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR APPLIED RESEARCH (1988); SUCCESSFUL FOCUS GROUPS: ADVANCING THE STATE OF THE ART (David L. Morgan ed., 1993).
4. ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 2. For tips on conducting interviews, see CARTER McNAMARA, GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS (1999), at <http://www.mapnp.org/library/evaluatn/interview.htm>; MICHAEL QUINN PATTON, QUALITATIVE EVALUATION AND RESEARCH METHODS 277–368 (2d ed. 1990).

reach a large number of people”<sup>5</sup> with a large number of questions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, this article will focus on how to create effective survey questionnaires.

¶4 The information gleaned from survey results can be invaluable to an academic law library in its attempt to fulfill a mission statement, goal, or objective.<sup>7</sup> Frequently cited purposes for conducting a survey include evaluating existing services, gauging the need for new services, and preparing for strategic planning. Analyzing space problems, planning a new facility, or responding to budget cuts or user complaints<sup>8</sup> are other reasons. Surveys can also provide “a ‘snapshot’ for comparison over the years.”<sup>9</sup> Some academic law libraries survey returning summer associates to find out about the students’ research experience so that those involved in teaching legal research can adjust the instruction they provide accordingly.<sup>10</sup> Many surveys are prepared as part of a self-study for accreditation purposes.<sup>11</sup> In marketing terms, surveys can provide information that the academic library can use for greater marketing effectiveness—higher customer retention, more sales to existing customers, and greater potential for recruiting new customers.<sup>12</sup>

### Planning for the Survey

¶5 Your first step is to contact the appropriate campus office to find out if you should clear the survey with your parent institution. Many universities require a review of any human subject research, including library surveys, to protect the “welfare and confidentiality of respondents.”<sup>13</sup> Assuming you get the go ahead, call a meeting to prepare the staff. Everyone, “particularly those who will be directly concerned with the survey,” should be informed of its purpose and procedures. Even staff not involved in creation of the survey may need to know about its existence, especially those who might encounter users who have questions about picking up, completing, or returning the survey.<sup>14</sup>

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5. ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 2.

6. SUSAN M. COOPER ET AL., *The Survey as a Tool for Looking Around*, in COMMUNITY ANALYSIS METHODS AND EVALUATIVE OPTIONS: THE CAMEO HANDBOOK 62 (1993), available at <http://skyways.lib.ks.us/pathway/cameo/chap7.htm>.

7. See Helen M. Gothberg, *The Library Survey: A Research Methodology Rediscovered*, 51 C. & RES. LIBR. 553, 554 (1990).

8. See *Flyer 205*, in USER SURVEYS IN ARL LIBRARIES (Elaine Brekke & Laura Rounds eds., SPEC Kit No. 205, 1994).

9. ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 2.

10. See, e.g., Posting of Albert Brecht, Associate Dean, Chief Information Officer, and Professor of Law, University of Southern California, [abrecht@law.usc.edu](mailto:abrecht@law.usc.edu), USC Law Students in Legal Settings, to [law-lib@ucdavis.edu](mailto:law-lib@ucdavis.edu) (Sept. 29, 2003) (describing results of annual survey of returning USC students who worked in legal settings during the summer). For a copy of the questionnaire used in this survey, see USC Legal Research and Writing Questionnaire (Sept. 20, 2003), available at <http://www.nd.edu/~lawlib/surveys/>.

11. See ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 2.

12. See LEONARD L. BERRY & A. PARASURAMAN, *MARKETING SERVICES: COMPETING THROUGH QUALITY* 8 (1991).

13. NANCY A. VAN HOUSE ET AL., *MEASURING ACADEMIC LIBRARY PERFORMANCE: A PRACTICAL APPROACH* 27 (1990).

14. *Id.*

¶6 Since most library surveys measure “user satisfaction with existing services,”<sup>15</sup> those departments whose services are being evaluated should have input into the survey’s questions. Many surveys measure satisfaction with multiple services, so staff from many departments might be involved. Whether measuring satisfaction with one department or several, however, emphasize to staff who may feel nervous about survey results that *services* are being evaluated not *individuals*.<sup>16</sup> “The more they understand, the less threatened staff members will be.”<sup>17</sup>

¶7 Most likely the survey will be designed in-house by professional library staff with limited survey experience. They should ask two basic questions as they plan: “What difference will it make for us to have this information?” and “Which data will be most useful for the decisions that face us?”<sup>18</sup> Asking these questions will lead to the creation of an effective survey instrument likely to produce worthwhile results for decision making. If your survey produces meaningless results, it will simply be placed on the shelf and the library will have wasted much time and effort.<sup>19</sup>

### Designing the Questionnaire

¶8 “Designing comprehensive, clear questions is difficult.”<sup>20</sup> Many find it useful to look at examples and to adapt to their own needs successful surveys from other institutions.<sup>21</sup> Hunt for samples on the Web,<sup>22</sup> or ask for them through electronic law library discussion forums sponsored by such groups as the AALL Research Instruction and Patron Services Special Interest Section (rips-sis@aallnet.org) or the AALL Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section (all-sis@aallnet.org).<sup>23</sup> If outside assistance is desirable, campus research centers can offer valuable

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15. *Flyer 205, supra* note 8.

16. Barbara Wittkopf & Patricia Cruse, *Using the ACRL Performance Manual: The LSU Libraries Experience*, 52 C. & RES. LIBR. NEWS 570, 571 (1991).

17. VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 27.

18. *Id.* at ix; *see also* Gothberg, *supra* note 7, at 554 (“Anyone who is considering a library survey should first ask themselves what difference it will make and what action will be taken based on the survey results. . . . To the clarion call to do a survey, the first response should be, ‘to what purpose?’ and the second, ‘with what effect?’”).

19. Gothberg, *supra* note 7, at 554.

20. VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 26.

21. *See Flyer 205, supra* note 8.

22. Web sites with examples include Snap Surveys ([www.snapsurveys.com](http://www.snapsurveys.com)), SurveyGold (<http://surveygold.com>), SuperSurvey ([www.supersurvey.com](http://www.supersurvey.com)), and QuestionPro ([www.questionpro.com](http://www.questionpro.com)). For a list of additional survey construction software packages, *see* JOE RYAN, *Library Surveys & Questionnaires, in INFORMATION RESOURCES FOR INFORMATION PROFESSIONALS*, at <http://web.syr.edu/~jryan/infopro/survey.html> (last visited Oct. 4, 2004).

23. A selection of faculty and student surveys used by the law libraries of Northwestern University, University of Notre Dame, University of Southern California, University of San Francisco, and University of Texas are available at the Notre Dame Law Library Web site, at <http://www.nd.edu/~lawlib/surveys> (last visited Oct. 4, 2004).

expertise.<sup>24</sup> Sometimes a faculty member with survey design and administration experience can offer assistance. Books and articles can also provide design information.<sup>25</sup> Here are further tips:

- “Write an introduction for the survey which will bring cooperation from participants.”<sup>26</sup> A good introduction “engages the audience by welcoming them, educates them about the purpose of the survey, details how the results of the survey will be used, and assures that confidentiality will be maintained.”<sup>27</sup>
- Researchers have suggested that asking users about their *awareness* of library services may be more telling than asking them about their *satisfaction* with services. That is because many patrons have “low expectations for library resources and services to begin with and will often report satisfaction with whatever they think is available.”<sup>28</sup> By asking questions about awareness, your survey becomes not just a measuring tool, but a marketing tool that alerts users to available sources.
- Once you have undertaken the task of creating a survey, it is tempting to stuff it with questions. “Some questionnaires give the impression that their authors tried to think of every conceivable question that might be asked with respect to the general topic of concern. The result is a very long questionnaire causing annoyance and frustration on the part of the respondents resulting in [a low return rate].”<sup>29</sup> Remember that surveys that are short, clear, and focused are more likely to be answered and more likely to yield useful information.<sup>30</sup>

24. See *Flyer 205*, *supra* note 8.

25. *Id.* See the sources listed in Doris J. Schlichter & J. Michael Pemberton, *The Emperor's New Clothes? Problems of the User Survey as a Planning Tool in Academic Libraries*, 53 C. & RES. LIBR. 257, 265 n.8 (1992). Two sources were cited as being particularly helpful by ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 5: VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13; ALA *Customer Satisfaction Survey*, 55 C. & RES. LIBR. NEWS 65 (1994).

26. Holly Gunn, *Web-based Surveys: Changing the Survey Process*, 7 FIRST MONDAY, no. 12 (Dec. 2002), at [http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue7\\_12/gunn/](http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue7_12/gunn/) (citing Susanne E. Gaddis, *How to Design Online Surveys*, TRAINING & DEV., June 1998, at 67, 68 (1998)).

27. Gaddis, *supra* note 26, at 68. Gaddis provides this example from a survey of dental patients:

Welcome! The questions in this survey focus on the perceptions and feelings of the typical patient (YOU!) when you take a trip to the dentist. The answers you provide will be used to develop an overall picture of how the public thinks dentists meet their needs, specifically how service oriented they are. This information will be used to help educate dentists as to how patients feel about the manner in which dental services were provided to patients in 1996 and to further help dentists recognize and meet the needs of their patients (and isn't this what the Net is all about—gathering and sharing information for everyone's benefit!). By the way, please be assured that all information is strictly confidential—we thank you for your participation!

*Id.*

28. Schlichter & Pemberton, *supra* note 25, at 259 (citing Vernon E. Palmour, *Planning in Public Libraries: Role of Citizens and Library Staff*, DREXEL LIBR. Q., July 1977, at 33).

29. Robert B. Frary, *Hints for Designing Effective Questionnaires*, 5 PRAC. ASSESSMENT RES. & EVALUATION 3 (1996), at <http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=5&n=3>.

30. See *Flyer 205*, *supra* note 8; ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 16.

Divide long surveys into sections and avoid “something that might just be good to know” questions.<sup>31</sup>

- You may need to do separate surveys for faculty, students, or other members of your university community because each group has “distinctive needs and thus different perceptions of the quality of the library’s collections or services.”<sup>32</sup> Also, “[it] may be better to do several short questionnaires at different times than one long questionnaire.”<sup>33</sup> Remember, however, busy faculty and students may be reluctant to spend time filling out several library surveys. Determining the proper balance can be difficult, but it is very important to obtaining a sufficient number of responses.
- Do not ask for information without contemplating its usefulness beforehand. “Consider how . . . data will be analyzed before writing the survey.”<sup>34</sup>
- Two basic formats are possible: open-ended questions and those with structured responses. “Allow for some open-ended responses, but not too many, because the results are difficult to compile”<sup>35</sup> and respondents are generally unwilling to spend time answering open-ended questions.
- “Structured response types include: yes/no or true/false items, multiple choice, check off or ranking lists, Likert (strongly agree to strongly disagree) and semantic differential (excellent to poor) scales. . . .”<sup>36</sup>
- Put response categories in progressive order, usually from lower to higher in left-to-right order, e.g.:  
(1) Never    (2) Seldom    (3) Occasionally    (4) Frequently
- Avoid using too many categories, and combine them when possible (unless several questions will use the same scale):<sup>37</sup>  
(1) Seldom or never    (2) Occasionally    (3) Frequently
- Avoid asking users to rank responses, and do not expect them to rank more than six things at a time.<sup>38</sup>
- Items should be clear and brief and worded in neutral, balanced terms.<sup>39</sup> Compound questions should be avoided because respondents may want to answer questions differently. Survey items should not be redundant, unless there is some reason to check the reliability of respondents.<sup>40</sup>
- “Plan to pre-test your survey instrument with others, especially non-librarians”<sup>41</sup> so that it will be understandable and free of library jargon. Some libraries

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31. Frary, *supra* note 29.

32. USER SURVEYS IN ARL LIBRARIES, *supra* note 8, at 175.

33. VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 26.

34. ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 15.

35. *Id.* at 16.

36. COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 67.

37. Frary, *supra* note 29.

38. *Id.*

39. COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 68.

40. *Id.*

41. ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 6.

pre-test a survey instrument on a sample of potential respondents. That group's input can help library staff identify areas of concern and find flaws in a survey draft.<sup>42</sup> "Once a survey has been administered, changing the items or responses is no longer an option."<sup>43</sup> Pre-test survey procedures as well.<sup>44</sup> Where should students pick up the survey and return it? Can students fill out a Web survey from home without encountering difficulties, or must the survey be completed on law school computers?

### Survey Dissemination

¶9 What method will you employ to get your survey to users? Whatever method you choose, you want one that will provide an adequate response rate. "The response rate is the percent of people approached who returned completed and usable questionnaires. . . . The goal is a response rate of at least 50 percent. Less may mean that your respondents are not representative of your entire user group." Response rates in academic libraries "run about 50 to 90 percent."<sup>45</sup> And although you might think that today's computer-savvy faculty and students would be more inclined to reply to an e-mail or Web-based survey, researchers have found that "response rates to Web surveys tend to be lower than for paper surveys."<sup>46</sup>

### Distributing Paper Surveys

¶10 In many university libraries, with their large student populations, surveys are only distributed to a group of students large enough to create a representative sample.<sup>47</sup> Consequently, "the number of paper questionnaires distributed depends on the number of responses needed."<sup>48</sup> In all but the largest law schools, however, law libraries need not be concerned with sampling. Traditional paper questionnaires should be put in the mailboxes of all students or faculty who are suitable respondents for the survey topic. When seeking faculty input, law libraries will probably want to canvass all faculty members because this is a relatively small group (as compared to all campus faculty) and the library's central clientele.<sup>49</sup>

¶11 Surveyors might also approach users as they enter or leave the library and ask them to answer questions or fill out a questionnaire.<sup>50</sup> A face-to-face encounter allows the persistent surveyor greater control in assuring a respectable response

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42. *Id.* at 2.

43. COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 70.

44. See VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 28.

45. *Id.*

46. Robert M. Carini et al., *College Student Responses to Web and Paper Surveys: Does Mode Matter?* 44 RES. HIGHER EDUC. 1, 12 (2003).

47. See *Flyer 205*, *supra* note 8.

48. VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 28.

49. USER SURVEYS IN ARL LIBRARIES, *supra* note 8, at 180.

50. For instructions on how to approach users when distributing a survey, see VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 30-31.

rate because the surveyor can stop as many people as is necessary to get a sufficient number of responses. This method blurs the distinction between a survey and an interview, however, and interviews can be very labor-intensive and time-consuming. In addition, users might be hesitant to make negative comments to the surveyor/interviewer. They might be less reluctant to criticize, however, if instead of being questioned on the spot, they were simply handed a questionnaire to return anonymously. On the other hand, the encounter with a clipboard-toting librarian or library representative does allow an opportunity for greater exploration of certain areas by the surveyor with follow-up questions.

¶12 The face-to-face encounter can be particularly useful for distributing specialized service surveys. For example, “the Reference Satisfaction Survey may be given only to people who asked reference questions, while the general Satisfaction Survey goes to all users.”<sup>51</sup> At one university library, a librarian or student assistant with a clipboard buttonholed students as they left the reference desk to ask them questions about their level of satisfaction with a recent reference-desk encounter.<sup>52</sup>

### *E-mail Surveys*

¶13 “E-mail surveys are very easy, cheap, and very fast. Almost anyone can do [them] with little or no formal training.”<sup>53</sup> Essentially “online paper-and-pencil surveys,” they “should be short (i.e., less than 20 questions)” because many respondents find them boring.<sup>54</sup>

¶14 Early versions of text e-mail surveys did not have automated data accumulation. “[T]he researcher had to receive the e-mails, print them out and re-enter the data into standard database format. Newer software allows the researcher to encode a survey for semi-automatic data accumulation as the return e-mail is received.”<sup>55</sup>

### *Web Surveys*

¶15 “There is no other method of collecting survey data that offers so much potential for so little cost as Web surveys.”<sup>56</sup> One 2001 study found the average cost of a paper survey to be \$2.07 compared to \$.88 for a Web version.<sup>57</sup> Further advantages of Web surveys identified by Gunn<sup>58</sup> include:

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51. *Id.* at 29.

52. *See* Wittkopf & Cruse, *supra* note 16, at 571.

53. Bill MacElroy, *Comparing Seven Forms of On-line Surveying*, QUIRK’S MARKETING RES. REV., July 1999, at 40, 41, available at [http://www.quirks.com/articles/article\\_print.asp?arg\\_articleid=510](http://www.quirks.com/articles/article_print.asp?arg_articleid=510).

54. *Id.* at 40, 42.

55. *Id.* at 40–41.

56. Gunn, *supra* note 26 (citing DON A. DILLMAN, MAIL AND INTERNET SURVEYS: THE TAILORED DESIGN METHOD 400 (2d ed. 2000)).

57. *Id.*

58. *Id.*

- “a faster response rate”;
- it is “easier to send reminders to participants”;
- it is “easier to process data [because] responses [can] be downloaded to a spreadsheet, data analysis package or a database”;
- “complex skip pattern questions are easier to follow”; and
- graphic nature of the Web makes the addition of graphics, color and images quite inexpensive.”

¶16 Despite the advantages associated with Web surveys, there can be problems as well.

- Designers must have Web page design skills and computer programming expertise. If librarians do not possess these skills, they will have to look elsewhere for help—perhaps to the law school’s or the university’s information technology staff.
- “Questionnaires do not look the same in different browsers and on different monitors.”<sup>59</sup>
- “Respondents may have different levels of computer expertise. This lack of expertise can be a source of error or non-response.”<sup>60</sup>
- “Since information can be collected about respondents without their knowledge or permission, respondents may be concerned with privacy of the data they are entering. The surveyor can determine the time of day the survey was completed, how long the respondent took to complete each question, how long the respondent took to finish the entire survey, what browser was used, and the respondent’s IP address.”<sup>61</sup>
- “The surveyor is faced with concerns about data security on the server.”<sup>62</sup>
- Failure to complete Web surveys can be a problem because of “open-ended questions, questions arranged in tables, fancy or graphically complex design, pull-down menus, unclear instructions, and the absence of navigation aids. . . .”<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, “plain Web surveys gave a better response rate than those with a fancy design containing colors, graphics and tables.”<sup>64</sup>

¶17 Several suggestions for designing any type of survey—paper, e-mail, or Web-based—were mentioned earlier. Here are some additional suggestions for designing a *respondent-friendly* Web survey—one that “increases the likelihood

59. *Id.*

60. *Id.*

61. *Id.*

62. *Id.*

63. Gunn, *supra* note 26 (citing Michael M. Bosnjak & Tracey L. Tuten, *Classifying Response Behaviors in Web-based Surveys*, 6 J. COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMM. (April 2001), at <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol6/issue3/boznjak.html>).

64. Gunn, *supra* note 26 (citing Don A. Dillman et al., *Influence of Plain vs. Fancy Design on Response Rates for Web Surveys* (1998), presented at Joint Statistical Meetings, Dallas, Texas, available at <http://survey.sesrc.wsu.edu/dillman/papers/asa98ppr.pdf>).

that sampled individuals will respond to the survey request, and that they will do so accurately, i.e., by answering each question in the manner intended by the surveyor.”<sup>65</sup>

- Notify students and faculty with an e-mail message (via law school electronic discussion lists if possible) encouraging them to participate and including a link to the survey itself. Understand that the e-mail notification might miss those who are not reading their e-mail messages, so also post signs in the library and law school advertising the survey.
- “Use a welcome screen that is motivating, that emphasizes the ease of responding, and that shows respondents how to move to the next page.”<sup>66</sup> It should contain a short, straightforward message written in the style of “a conversation with a person with whom we hoped to maintain a mutually respectful relationship.”<sup>67</sup> “Be sure the first question is interesting, easy to answer and related to the topic of the survey.”<sup>68</sup>
- “Use a conventional format similar to a paper questionnaire.” And design the survey “for the least compliant browser so that all respondents [will] have the same visual stimulus.”<sup>69</sup>
- Limit line length. “Respondents [are] less likely to skip words when lines are kept short.”<sup>70</sup>
- “Provide instructions for the necessary computer actions, i.e., erasing radio buttons, drop-down menus, and clearing open-ended questions.”<sup>71</sup>
- “Don’t make it necessary for respondents to answer each question before going on to a next one,” although some questions might need to be “required” to avoid uselessly incomplete surveys. “Use a scrolling design that allows respondents to see all questions unless skip patterns are important.”<sup>72</sup>
- “Make the survey simple, and have it take no longer than 20 minutes. Give an estimated time that it will take to complete the survey. . . . Use symbols or words to give respondents some idea of their progress in the survey. Web survey respondents, like paper respondents, need some indication of how near they are to completion.”<sup>73</sup>

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65. Don A. Dillman et al., *Principles for Constructing Web Surveys* 3 (1998) [hereinafter Dillman et al., *Principles*], available at <http://survey.sesrc.wsu.edu/dillman/papers/websurveyppr.pdf>.

66. Gunn, *supra* note 26 (citing Dillman et al., *Principles*, *supra* note 65, at 3). For an example of a “motivating introduction,” see figure 1 of Dillman’s article, available at <http://survey.sesrc.wsu.edu/dillman/papers/websurveyfigs.pdf>. (last visited Nov. 3, 2004).

67. DILLMAN, *supra* note 56, at 159.

68. Gunn, *supra* note 26.

69. *Id.*

70. Dillman et al., *Principles*, *supra* note 65, at 9.

71. Gunn, *supra* note 26.

72. *Id.*

73. *Id.*

- “Allow an alternate mode of completion if people are concerned about privacy, i.e., print out and [anonymously return] the survey.”<sup>74</sup>
- Send “follow-up reminders by e-mail.”<sup>75</sup>

¶18 Speaking of Web surveys, a popular alternative to a home-grown Web survey being adopted by a growing number of law libraries is the LibQUAL+ survey offered to the library community by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL). A law library can join with more than four hundred other libraries and subscribe to the LibQUAL+ suite of services. According to the LibQUAL+ Web site, the product is used by libraries “to solicit, track, understand, and act upon users’ opinions of service quality. . . . The program’s centerpiece is a rigorously tested Web-based survey bundled with training that helps libraries assess and improve library services, change organizational culture, and market the library.”<sup>76</sup>

### Ensuring a Good Return

¶19 Once you have developed a good questionnaire, you want to make sure that people will answer it! Boost the response rate by publicizing the survey with catchy notices posted in the building, in the library newsletter, or on a law school listserv. Emphasize the message, “Help us help you!” by explaining “to potential respondents how the survey findings will be used in decision-making.”<sup>77</sup>

¶20 “Provide anonymity or confidentiality to respondents. Respondents are anonymous when there is no way of knowing who returns a completed survey form.”<sup>78</sup> Anonymity is easily maintained with paper questionnaires returned to a central drop box. As stated above, it is potentially possible for the surveyor to identify the respondent with e-mail and Web surveys, so when employing these types of surveys, maintain confidentiality by assuring respondents that “their individual answers will not be published or announced, even though the [surveyor] knows who they are.”<sup>79</sup>

¶21 “There is no ideal time to do a survey,”<sup>80</sup> but use common sense. Survey law students about their summer research experience soon after they return in the fall while the experience is still fresh in their minds. Don’t attempt to approach students with your survey when they are likely to be rushing off to class. No one stops for surveys during exam period! In general, conduct your survey at a time when

74. *Id.*

75. *Id.* (citing David J. Solomon, *Conducting Web-based Surveys*, 7 *PRAC. ASSESSMENT RES. & EVALUATION* 19 (2001), at <http://pareonline.net/getvn.asp?v=7&n=19>).

76. LibQUAL+: Defining and Promoting Library Service Quality, at <http://www.libqual.org/About/Information/index.cfm> (last visited Nov. 3, 2004).

77. COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 69.

78. *Id.*

79. *Id.*

80. VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 29.

users are least likely to have other demands on their time.<sup>81</sup> And conduct your survey during a typical week in a typical month to get representative results.<sup>82</sup>

¶22 Offer rewards, such as a chance to enter a drawing for food, clothing, or electronics, to those who complete the survey. Preserve anonymity by allowing respondents to tear off a portion of the paper questionnaire with their name and return it to a separate location. Similarly, those collecting e-mail responses might print out returned questionnaires, manually detach the names and enter them into a drawing. With Web surveys, anonymity can be maintained if, when respondents submit their replies, a separate screen appears asking them for an e-mail address. Keep the survey responses and the e-mail addresses in separate databases.

¶23 Most law libraries can easily contact their entire patron base with a paper or Web questionnaire. An added benefit of contacting *everyone* is that you can also reach nonusers of the library for their comments, which could help in determining the overall needs of students and faculty.<sup>83</sup> Finally, “be sure the survey instrument identifies prominently the due date and how or to whom it should be returned. Give telephone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses for anyone a potential respondent may call if he has questions about the survey. . . . Monitor the response rate regularly,” and try to reach nonrespondents with follow-up messages to everyone encouraging them to complete the questionnaire.<sup>84</sup>

### Collecting and Analyzing the Data

¶24 Most library surveys are self-administered with library staff also overseeing collection and analysis of the data.<sup>85</sup> Again, an alternative to doing these tasks in-house would be to seek assistance from a campus research center. If a consultant, association, or outside researcher was involved in creating the survey questionnaire, that same person or entity would probably also be involved with collection and analysis of results.

¶25 If collection is done in-house, the staff should “ensure the most accurate data” is used for analysis by reviewing and editing the survey returns before compiling the information. For example, inspect the returns for notes in the margins that might explain how a particular respondent understood a question. Try your best to correctly interpret open-ended responses handwritten on paper surveys. Some replies will not be clear, and a decision will have to be made whether to use the data.

¶26 For simple, short surveys with few responses, the results may simply be compiled by hand. The information from more substantial surveys may be entered

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81. See ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 6.

82. See VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 18.

83. See Flyer 205, *supra* note 8.

84. COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 70.

85. See VAN HOUSE ET AL., *supra* note 13, at 33–39, for advice, worksheets, and forms describing how to tabulate questionnaires by hand or by computer.

into a computer file. You will need “an experienced data entry operator to ensure that this job is done as quickly and accurately as possible.”<sup>86</sup> Again, someone from the IT department of the law school or the university may be able to offer assistance if needed. (An advantage of a Web-based survey is that the data can be collected automatically with no need for data entry.) “There is a wide variety of spreadsheet, database, and statistical software available for data entry and analysis. Spreadsheets such as Lotus 123, Excel, and Quatro Pro; database packages such as Dbase, Foxpro, and Paradox; and statistical packages such as SPSS and SAS will enable computer analysis and reporting.”<sup>87</sup>

¶27 Several techniques are available for analyzing survey data:

1. Tabulate the frequency of different responses and calculate percentages. Describing and interpreting the basic responses of the total sample are the most elementary forms of analysis.
2. Compare responses from different groups of respondents. . . . [Note] how various groups of actual or potential users respond differently.
3. Analyze trends. Comparing responses to items in the latest survey with responses to similar items in earlier surveys is another frequently employed type of analysis.
4. Cross-tabulate items. Cross-tabulating two items may help to identify likely correlations.<sup>88</sup>

### Communicating the Results

¶28 “Surveys are time-consuming and worthless if not used.”<sup>89</sup> Obviously, results should be distributed to decision makers and departments responsible for services or collections. Results should be communicated early on to all library staff whose services were evaluated. Their participation in designing questions, attending meetings before survey distribution, and “sweating out” the returns should be rewarded by allowing them to see the results quickly. The statistics generated by the survey can be used to set baselines for future comparisons, plan for the future, demonstrate areas of needed improvement, or offer a morale-building pat on the back.

¶29 A common way to display the results of the survey is to add summary data to the survey form itself. “For more detailed findings, ranked lists, tables, and cross-tabulations will be helpful. Charts and diagrams illustrating findings may also be helpful for analytical as well as presentation purposes.”<sup>90</sup>

¶30 Present your survey findings in a concise report describing the reasons for the survey, the survey instrument, and the procedures used to administer it. It is usually a good idea to attach a copy of the survey as an appendix. Tell how the data

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86. COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 71.

87. *Id.* at 72.

88. *Id.* at 71–72.

89. ADAMS & BECK, *supra* note 2, at 16.

90. See COOPER ET AL., *supra* note 6, at 72.

was analyzed, and mention the findings and any conclusions made from them. "Generally, the higher the rank of the audience, the briefer the report should be. If a lengthy document is unavoidable, provide a one- to three-page executive summary."<sup>91</sup>

¶31 The library director may want to forward favorable responses to law school or university administrators to make them aware of significant achievements the law library has made toward fulfilling its responsibilities. Doing so will allow the director an opportunity to further market the library as a worthwhile investment to those with budgeting power. Should library administrators need to respond to negative comments from respondents, be prepared to offer justifications for unpopular actions that have been taken or to show concrete ideas for improving criticized collections, services, policies, or facilities. Remember that negative comments may serve to bolster requests to administrators for additional funding for needed improvements.

¶32 Also, consider reporting survey results back to the respondents. Doing so shows them that you appreciate the time they took to complete the questionnaires, and allows them to learn about their peers' opinions of the library. Favorable survey results, like positive word-of-mouth communications, can fulfill the marketing goals mentioned earlier, serving to attract new students who had not realized that reference librarians were so eager to help, keep up good relationships with long-time faculty who were not aware of new electronic services and print collections, and encourage new and long-time users to keep coming back to the library for superior service.

### Conclusion

¶33 A 1988 NBC survey of voters leaving the polls showed that most New Yorkers did not want Ed Koch to run for an unprecedented fourth term as mayor in 1989.<sup>92</sup> But Mayor Koch ignored the survey results and ran again anyway, only to lose to David Dinkins. Let's hope that your survey shows continuing confidence in the performance of the law library, because, let's face it, the law library *must* run again! It is vital to the life of the law school. Just remember that whether survey results leave the library staff with good news, bad news, or a mix of the two, the library now possesses much more information than it had before. So use it to your advantage . . . and run with it!

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91. *Id.* at 73.

92. See Ken Fireman, *Poll: Voter Views Split on Race Lines*, *NEWSDAY*, Apr. 21, 1988, at 5.

