

From *Essentials of Utilization-Focused Evaluation*
by Michael Quinn Patton (2012,
Sage)

15

Prepare an Evaluation Report to Facilitate Use and Disseminate Significant Findings to Expand Influence

The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

*George Bernard Shaw (1856–1950),
1925 Nobel Prize for Literature*

The data from our study of federal health evaluations revealed that much important sharing of and discussion about findings and their significance is interpersonal and informal. In hallway conversations, over coffee, before and after meetings, over the telephone, and through informal networks, the word gets passed along when something useful and important has been found. Knowing this, evaluators can strategize about how to inject findings into important informal networks. This is not to diminish the importance of formal reports and oral briefings which, presented with thoughtful preparation and skill, can sometimes have an immediate and dramatic impact. But the increasing importance of networked communications in the Information Age carries a caution that *evaluators should not confuse producing a report with having communicated findings.*

In all cases, reporting is driven by intended evaluation purpose and the information needs of primary intended users. Formative reporting is different from a summative report. A lessons-learned report is distinct from an accountability report. When a single report serves multiple purposes (and audiences), clear distinctions should be made between sections

of the report. Bottom line: *Communicating and reporting should be strategic* (Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 1996), which means honed and adapted to achieve use by targeted users. Dissemination to larger audiences then follows.

Formally Communicating Evaluation Findings: Report Menu

In logic model terms, an evaluation report is an output, not an outcome. It can *feel* like an outcome because so much work goes into producing a major evaluation report. But, alas, it is a means to an end, not the end itself, the end being use. Indeed, reports can hinder use when they are poorly written, too long, overly obtuse, and in countless ways anything but user friendly.

As with other stages in utilization-focused evaluation, the reporting stage offers a smorgasbord of options. Menu 15.1 displays alternatives for reporting format and style, content, contributors, and perspectives. Selecting from the menu is affected by the purpose of the evaluation. A summative report will highlight an overall judgment of merit or worth with supporting data. A knowledge-generating report aimed at policy enlightenment may follow

MENU 15.1

Evaluation Reporting Menu

Style and Format Options: Written Report

- Traditional academic research monograph
- Executive summary followed by a full report
- Executive summary followed by a few key tables, graphs, and data summaries
- Executive summary only (data available to those interested)
- Different reports (or formats) for different targeted users
- Newsletter article for dissemination
- Press release
- Brochure (well crafted, professionally done)
- No written report; only oral presentations

Style and Format Options: Oral and Creative

- Oral briefing with charts
- Short summary followed by questions (e.g., at a board meeting or legislative hearing)
- Discussion groups based on prepared handouts that focus issues for interpretation and judgment based on data

Half-day or full-day retreat-like work session with primary intended users
Videotape or audiotape presentation
Dramatic, creative presentation (e.g., role-playing perspectives)
Involvement of select primary users in reporting and facilitating any of the above
Advocacy–adversary debate or court for and against certain conclusions and judgments
Written and oral combinations

Content Options

Major findings only; focus on data, patterns, themes, and results
Findings and interpretations with judgments of merit or worth (no recommendations)

- (a) Summative judgment about overall program
- (b) Judgments about program components

Recommendations backed up by judgments, findings, and interpretations

- (a) Single, best-option recommendations
- (b) Multiple options with analysis of strengths, weaknesses, costs, and benefits of each
- (c) Options based on future scenarios with monitoring and contingency suggestions
- (d) Different recommendations for different intended users

Authors of and Contributors to the Report

Evaluator’s report; evaluator as sole and independent author
Collaborative report coauthored by evaluator with others involved in the process
Report from primary users, written on their behalf by the evaluator as facilitator and adviser, but report ownership resides with others.

Combinations:

- (a) Evaluator generates findings; collaborators generate judgments and recommendations
- (b) Evaluator generates findings and makes judgments; primary users generate recommendations
- (c) Separate conclusions, judgments, and recommendations by the evaluator and others in the same report

Perspectives Included

Evaluator’s perspective as independent and neutral judge
Primary intended users only
Effort to represent all major stakeholder perspectives (may or may not be the same as primary intended users)
Program staff or administrators respond formally to the evaluation findings (written independently by the evaluator); GAO approach
Review of the evaluation by an external panel—*metaevaluation*: Formatively and summatively evaluate the evaluation using evaluation standards to elucidate strengths and weaknesses

a traditional academic format. A formative report may take the form of an internal memorandum with circulation limited to staff. I am often asked by students to show them the standard or best format for an evaluation report. The point of Menu 15.1 is that there can be no standard report format, *and the best format is the one that fulfills the purposes of the evaluation and meets the needs of specific intended users in a specific situation*. In many cases, multiple reporting strategies can be pursued to reach different intended users and dissemination audiences.

E. Jane Davidson, an independent evaluation consultant working out of New Zealand and author of the very useful *Evaluation Methodology Basics* featuring the nuts and bolts of sound evaluation (Davidson, 2005), has emphasized that evaluation reports should be structured around the demand for “actionable questions” (Davidson, 2010c, p. 13). My experience mirrors Jane’s. Her reflections are so insightful and her voice so powerful that I want you to experience her thoughts on writing reports in her own words. In reviewing countless evaluation reports, she often found that they were “plagued with the structure of a Master’s thesis,” which made it quite difficult to figure out what results were important. This academic report format typically begins with a lengthy Executive Summary that presents “lots of introductory information, methodology, sampling, random snippets of findings that fail to give a clear sense of the program’s quality or value, plus something incomprehensible about moderator variables.” This is followed by

an Introduction, Literature Review, a theoretical model and detailed explanation of the relevant social science theory explaining the links among some variables (unfortunately not a program logic model, and not even remotely linked to an evaluation question—this part contributed by a university faculty member with no evaluation expertise), Methodology, Findings (about 20 pages of raw data, all presented separately by source and data type with virtually no explanatory narrative, none of it linked back to the questions), Conclusions (some glimmers of hope in here, but by now we are 37 pages into the report and have lost most of our audience), Appendices. (Davidson, 2007, pp. v–vi)

She goes on to note that “for the client, reading a report like this feels like wading through mud. Page after page of graphs and interview quotes, but not a hint of whether or how they were used to answer any question of value. When, oh when, are they going to get to the point?” (p. vi).

In an effort to make reports more sensible and user friendly, Davidson recommends an alternative to the traditional research monograph format.

One strategy I use is to structure the *Findings* part of the evaluation report into 7 +/- 2 sections, one for each of the ‘big picture’ evaluation questions used to frame the evaluation. In each section, all data pertaining to that question (qualitative, quantitative, interviews, surveys, observations, document analyses, from different people and perspectives) are presented, interpreted as they are presented, and woven together to form a direct answer to the question.

Next, I write a 2-page executive summary using the same structure: 7 +/- 2 questions with straight-to-the-point and explicitly evaluative answers of 1–2 paragraphs each.

If the client has seven or so major questions about the program that need to be answered, then the first two pages he or she reads (perhaps the only two pages!) should contain direct answers to those questions. And if the client wants to know on what basis those conclusions were drawn, it should be a simple matter to turn to the relevant section of the report and see clearly how ‘quality’ and ‘value’ were defined for that particular question, what data were used to answer it, and how they were interpreted together, relative to those definitions of quality/value. (Davidson, 2007, p. vi)



The 1:3:25 Format for Report Writing

The Canadian Health Services Research Foundation has pioneered a user-friendly approach to report writing that is becoming widely used as a way of communicating with focus. The 1:3:25 format specifies:

- One page for main messages and conclusions relevant to the reader
- A three-page executive summary of the main findings, and
- A 25-page comprehensive, plain-language report

Canadian Health Services Research Foundation (2008)

Another resource on structuring an evaluation report and making sure it contains all essential elements is the Evaluation Report Checklist (Miron, 2004). The thing to remember is that, while a report is only one part of the overall process, it is a concrete documentation of what has occurred and a visible representation of major findings. The quality of the report reflects on both the evaluator and the primary intended users. A great report won’t ensure use, though it can help, while a lousy report can undermine not only use but future interest in evaluation among those who receive and read it. Take the time to do it well. Nothing undermines producing a quality report more assuredly than treating it like cramming for a final exam and spending an all-nighter just to get it done. Such reports are easy to spot—and undermine both credibility and utility, not to mention stress they induce and the toll they can take on the evaluator’s mental health.

Utilization-Focused Reporting Principles

I’ve found the following principles helpful in thinking about how to make reporting useful:

1. Be intentional about reporting; that is, know the purpose of a report and stay true to that purpose.
2. Stay user focused: Focus the report on the priorities of primary intended users and answer their questions.

3. Use graphics and other visuals to communicate findings succinctly and powerfully.
4. Prepare users to engage with and learn from “negative” findings.
5. Distinguish dissemination from use.

Let me elaborate each of these principles.

1. Be intentional and purposeful about reporting.

Being intentional means negotiating a shared understanding of what it’s going to mean to close-out the evaluation, that is, to achieve use. You need to communicate at every step in the evaluation your commitment to utility. One way to emphasize this point during early negotiations is to ask if a final report is expected. This question commands attention.

“Will you want a final report?” I ask.

They look at me and they say, “Come again?”

I repeat. “Will you want a final report?”

They respond, “Of course. That’s why we’re doing this, to get a report.” And I respond. “I see it a little differently. I think we’ve agreed that we’re doing this evaluation to get useful information to improve your programming and decision making. A final written report is one way of communicating findings, but there’s substantial evidence now that it’s not always the most effective way. Full evaluation reports don’t seem to get read much and it’s very costly to write final reports. A third or more of the budget of an evaluation can be consumed by report writing. Let’s talk about how to get the evaluation used, then we can see if a full written report is the most cost-effective way to do that.” Then I share Menu 15.1 and we start talking about reporting options.

Often I find that, with this kind of interaction, my primary intended users really start to understand what utilization-focused evaluation means. They start to comprehend that evaluation doesn’t have to mean producing a thick report that they can file under “has been evaluated.” They start to think about use. Caveat: Whatever is agreed on, especially if there’s agreement not to produce a traditional academic monograph, get the agreement in writing and remind them of it often. A commitment to alternative reporting approaches may need reinforcement, especially among stakeholders used to traditional formats.

2. Focus reports on primary intended users and their priority questions.

A dominant theme running throughout this book is that use is integrally intertwined with users. That’s the thrust of the personal factor. The style, format, content, and process of reporting should all be geared toward *intended use by intended users*. For example, we know that busy, big-picture policy makers and funders are more likely to read concise executive summaries than full reports, but detail-oriented users want—what else?—details.

Some users prefer recommendations right up front at the beginning of the report; others want them at the end; and I had one group of users who wanted the recommendations in a separate document so that readers of the report had to reach their own conclusions without interpreting everything in terms of recommendations. Methods sections may be put in the body of the report, in an appendix, or omitted and shared only with the methodologically interested. Sometimes users can't articulate what they want until they see a draft. Then they know what they don't want and the responsive evaluator will have to do some rewriting.



Beyond Generating a Report to Providing an Information Experience™

Information Experience™ is what *Juice Analytics* calls "the intersection between user experience and information-intensive applications, where success is how effectively a user can consume, understand, and apply that information."

Like sitting behind the wheel of a BMW or my two-year-old flipping through photos on an iPhone, great Information Experiences have less to do with features and more to do with an intimate connection between human and device. Great information experiences tell stories where data is the primary medium for communication. The information appears when it is needed and the device or application seems to anticipate the next question or action. These are the objectives that we apply to the solutions we design and build.

1. **Support the achievement of organizational objectives.** How can the information experience fit into users' existing decision-making and work processes? How can we influence decision making with the right information at the right time?
2. **Direct the user to likely actions in order to "get it done."** What are the important questions a user is trying to answer or tasks the user wants to accomplish? How can the application make it as easy and intuitive as possible to get to results? Does the navigation and user flow feel like an extension of users' thought process?
3. **Present only the information that needs to be seen.** For any given view of data and situational context, what is the most critical information to share with the user? How can information be progressively revealed to give the user what he or she needs to know at any given time?
4. **Present the information in a way that produces understanding and action.** For any given data and situational context, what is the most effective information visualization? What are the best ways to present information given users' experience and sophistication with interpreting information? What is the appropriate level of detail to be displayed given the context and user needs? (*Juice Analytics*, 2010, p. 1)

Consider this story from an evaluator in our federal use study.

Let me tell you the essence of the thing. I had almost no direction from the government [about the final report] except that the project officer kept saying, “Point 8 is really important. You’ve got to do point 8 on the contract.”

So, when I turned in the draft of the report, I put points 1 through 9, without 8, in the first part of the report. Then I essentially wrote another report after that just on point 8 and made that the last half of the report. It was a detailed description of the activities of the program that came to very specific conclusions. It wasn’t what had been asked for in the proposal I responded to, but it was what they needed to answer their questions. The project officer read it and the comment back was, “It’s a good report except for all that crap in the front.”

OK, so I turned it around in the final version, and moved all that “crap” in the front into an appendix. If you look at the report, it has several big appendices. All of that, if you compare it carefully to the contract, all that “crap” in the appendix is what I was asked to do in the original request and contract. All the stuff that constitutes the body of the report was above and beyond the call, but that’s what he wanted and that’s what got used.



“Boring! Not a single story in the whole thing.”

3. Use graphics and other visuals to communicate findings succinctly and powerfully.

Mike Hendricks (1994) has studied effective techniques for executive summaries and oral briefings. The key, he has found, is good charts and graphics to capture attention and communicate quickly. A trend line, for example, can be portrayed more powerfully in graphic form than in a table, as Exhibit 15.1 shows. Hendricks trains evaluators on reporting and he asserts emphatically: “Evaluators have got to learn graphics. I’m amazed at how bad the charts and graphics are that I see in reports. You can’t emphasize it too much. Reporting means GRAPHICS! GRAPHICS! GRAPHICS!” This involves “visible thinking,” which includes causal mapping and other data displays (Bryson, Ackermann, Eden, & Finn, 2004).

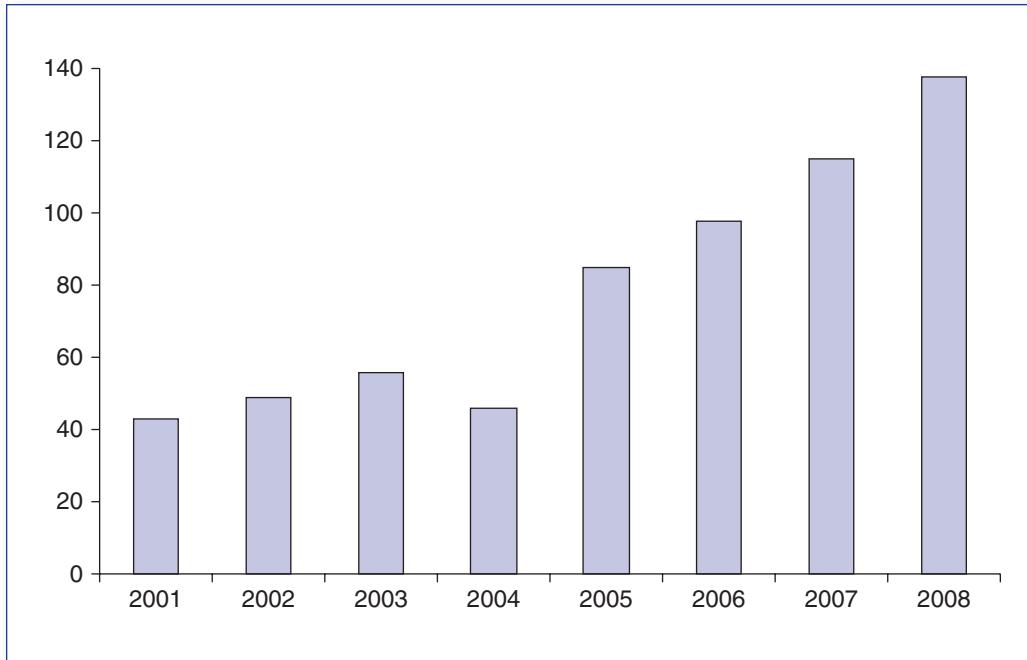
The *Extreme Presentation™ Method* (2010) provides a set of tools for enhancing visual presentations including guidance on effective choice of visual formats and chart options for conveying different kinds of information. The *Periodic Table of Visualization Methods* (2010; Lengler & Eppler, n.d.) offers 100 examples of data visualization options, arranged thematically as a periodic table that you can interact with online. Nancy Duarte (2010) has assembled a set of videos on effective presentations that includes enhancing PowerPoint presentations (Duarte, 2008) as well as a range of techniques to more effectively engage audiences. Susan Kistler (2010a, 2010b), the executive director of the American Evaluation Association, is a leader in monitoring new developments in data visualization, like those cited here, and bringing them to the attention of evaluators.

Skilled visual facilitators can work with evaluators to facilitate, record, and represent the ideas of a group and map relationships between ideas and concepts shared by individuals in a group. California-based evaluator Terry Uyeki (2010) reports that “using graphic facilitation or recording often opens up thinking about patterns, themes, and a sense of the ‘big picture’ emerging from participant input processes. It is particularly effective when used with culturally diverse groups.”

Journalist David McCandless (2010a), reflecting on “the beauty of data visualization,” has asserted that *data is the new oil* in terms of its potential power in the Knowledge Age, or the new soil for growing knowledge—but only if it can be effectively accessed and displayed for appropriate understanding and use. Visualization, he explains and demonstrates, is a form of knowledge compression in which “the dataset can change your mindset.” His “information is beautiful” website aims to do just that (McCandless, 2010b). No one has illustrated this phenomenon better than Swedish scholar Hans Rosling (2010), who animates statistical trends and graphically illustrates global development in 200 countries over the last 200 years in 4 minutes. His visualizations point the way to the future for evaluation presentations.

EXHIBIT 15.1

The Power of Graphics



4. Prepare users to engage with and learn from “negative” findings.

There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2, 239–251

William Shakespeare

The program staff’s fear of negative results can undermine an evaluation. On the other hand, the absence of negative findings can call into question the evaluator’s independence, integrity, and credibility. Here, then, is where evaluation use can take a back seat to other agendas. Staff will resist being made to look bad and will often treat the mildest suggestions for improvements as deep criticisms. Evaluators, worried about accusations that they’ve lost their independence, emphasize negative findings. As we grapple with these tensions, two points are worth remembering: (1) one person’s negative is another person’s positive; and (2) evaluators can do much to increase staff receptivity by shifting the focus of reporting to learning and use rather than simply being judged as good or bad.

Few evaluations are all negative or all positive. It's helpful to move beyond a dichotomous win/lose, pass/fail, success/failure, and positive/negative construct on evaluation results. This tendency to label evaluation findings as either positive or negative seems born of a tendency I find common among evaluators and decision makers: to think of evaluation findings in monolithic, absolute, and purely summative terms. This becomes especially true when evaluation findings get into the media—which tends to exaggerate the negative because negative findings make more compelling and attention-grabbing headlines. I reiterate that, in my experience, evaluation findings are seldom either completely positive or completely negative. Furthermore, whether findings are interpreted as positive or negative depends on who is using and interpreting the findings. As the old adage observes: *Whether the glass is half empty or half full depends on whether you're drinking or pouring.* Evaluators can shape the environment and context in which findings are reviewed so that the focus is on learning and improvement rather than absolute judgment. This is part of our overall responsibility to strive for balance.

5. Distinguish dissemination from use.

Dissemination of findings to audiences beyond intended users is distinct from the kind of use that has been the focus of this book. Studies can have an impact on all kinds of audiences in all kinds of ways. As a social scientist, I value and want to encourage the full and free dissemination of evaluation findings. Each of us ought to be permitted to indulge in the fantasy that our evaluation reports will have impact across the land and through the years. But only a handful of studies will ever enjoy (or suffer) such widespread dissemination.

Dissemination takes us beyond intended use by intended users into the broader concept of *evaluation influence* (Kirkhart, 2000), both intended and unintended, and longer-term *evaluation consequences* generally (Mark, 2006). This includes instances where planned dissemination *hopes for* broader influence but can't be sure if or where this will occur.

Dissemination efforts will vary greatly from study to study. The nature of dissemination, like everything else, is a matter for negotiation between evaluators and decision makers. In such negotiations, dissemination costs and benefits should be estimated. The questions addressed in an evaluation will have different meanings for people not directly involved in the painstaking process of focusing the evaluation. Different individuals and audiences will be interested in a given evaluation for reasons not always possible to anticipate. Effective dissemination involves skills in extrapolating the evaluation specifics of a particular study for use by readers in a different setting (raising issues of external validity and generalizability).

The problematic utility of trying to design an evaluation relevant to multiple audiences, each conceptualized in vague and general terms, was what has led to the emphasis in utilization-focused evaluation on identification and organization of primary intended users. Dissemination can broaden and enlarge the impact of a study in important ways, but the nature of those long-term impacts is largely beyond the control of the evaluator.

What the evaluator can control is the degree to which findings address the concerns of specific intended users. That is the use for which I take responsibility: intended use by intended users. Dissemination is not use, though it can be useful.

Exhibit 15.2 depicts the complex, dynamic relationship between use and diverse strategies for dissemination and influence. At the center, as the bull's-eye, is **intended uses by intended users**. The utilization-focused evaluator works with intended users to plan formal dissemination and influence strategies if the findings are of sufficient import to merit sharing more widely; these formal pathways are depicted by the solid box on the left. At the same time, informal networks can be energized for dissemination, as shown in the dotted-line box to the right. Informal networks are likely to generate some unexpected and emergent opportunities for further dissemination and influence. Moreover, in a complex dynamic system, some formal pathways will manifest links to informal networks, as shown in the feedback arrow at the bottom of the diagram, even as some informal dissemination networks may generate and lead to formal dissemination strategies, like publications and conference presentations. The dynamic links that begin informally and opportunistically but then morph into formal and planned strategies are represented by the meandering arrows at the top. The intended uses by intended users can further generate unanticipated but important new opportunities for dissemination and influence. As Exhibit 15.2 shows, dissemination can be a multifaceted, many-splendored phenomenon, like the diffusion of birth control pills, mobile phone applications, and the uses of the Internet for information dissemination, but always at the core, always in the spotlight, always in high-definition focus, is *intended uses by intended users*.

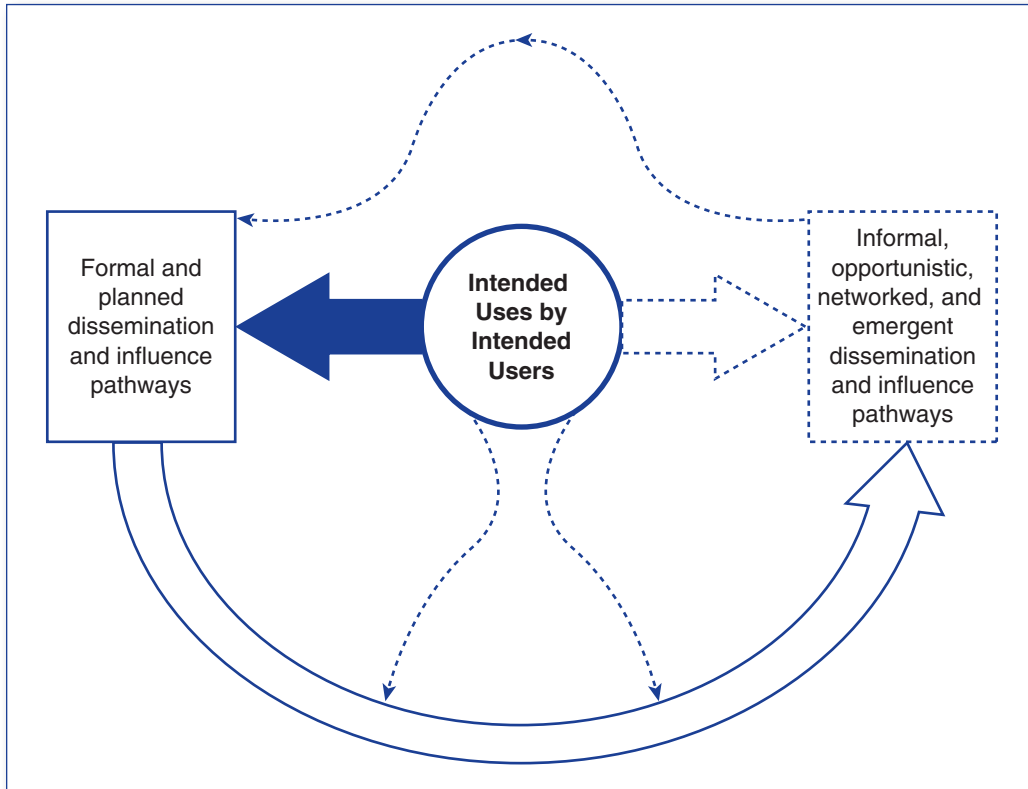
Use Is a Process, Not a Report

Analyzing and interpreting results can be exciting processes. Many nights have turned into morning before evaluators have finished trying new computer runs to tease out the nuances in some data set. The work of months, sometimes years, finally comes to fruition as data are analyzed and interpreted, conclusions drawn, recommendations considered, and the evaluation report finalized. Great relief comes in finishing an evaluation report, so much relief that it can seem like the report was the purpose. But use is the purpose and, as this book has emphasized throughout, use is a process, not a report or single event.

I remember fondly the final days of an evaluation when my co-evaluators and I were on the phone with program staff two or three times a day as we analyzed data on an educational project to inform a major decision about whether it met criteria as a valid model for federal dissemination funding. Program staff shared with us the process of watching the findings take final shape. Preliminary analyses appeared negative; as the sample became more complete, the findings looked more positive to staff; finally, a mixed picture of positive and negative conclusions emerged. Because the primary users had been intimately involved in designing the evaluation, we encountered no last-minute attacks on methods to

EXHIBIT 15.2

Complex, Dynamic Relationship Between Use and Dissemination Approaches, Both Planned and Unplanned



explain away negative findings. The program staff understood the data, from whence it came, what it revealed, and how it could be used for program development. They didn't get the dissemination grant that year, but they got direction about how to implement the program more consistently and increase its impact. Two years later, with new findings, they did win recognition as a "best practices" exemplar, an award that came with a dissemination grant. The highly polished summative evaluation report made that recognition possible and was a central part of the dissemination process. One intended use of the evaluation was to influence thinking and practices generally, but to achieve that dissemination and influence

purpose, the evaluation first had to be useful to the primary intended users who funded, developed, implemented, and adapted the program in the years leading up to the final summative evaluation findings and report.

Ultimately, of course, utility is linked to accuracy. As reports get disseminated, any inaccuracies will take the spotlight and subject the report to potential ridicule. One of the most obvious examples of this phenomenon is premature obituary reports, as when the *New York Journal* published the obituary of American humorist Mark Twain. Upon hearing the news, Twain famously replied: “The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” A more recent example is that of Dave Swarbrick, a British folk-rock violinist, who was killed off mistakenly by the *Daily Telegraph* in April 1999. The newspaper reported that he had been hospitalized in Coventry, where he subsequently died. His witty response to the news: “It’s not the first time I have died in Coventry.”

And what have these obituary examples to do with evaluation reports? Just this: In the Internet age, reports have a long life. Inaccurate reports seem especially hard to kill, as fake news, fabricated statistics, and distorted findings circulate round and round, generating affirmation by repetition rather than rigor. As *New Yorker* journalist Jonah Lehrer (2010a) found in a recent review of scientific publishing, “Many scientific theories continue to be considered true even after failing numerous experimental tests. . . . Although many scientific ideas generate conflicting results and suffer from falling effect sizes, they continue to get cited in the textbooks and drive standard medical practice” (p. 57). The long life expectancy of widely disseminated evaluation reports in the Internet age raises the stakes for determining what findings deserve a wide audience.

Taking Report Writing Seriously

Report writing is serious business, often with high stakes, and typically consuming considerable time and resources—which is why evaluation conferences often include a lot of self-deprecating humor about report writing, like this advice:

Remember that people don’t actually want to read an evaluation report. The purpose of reports is to decorate offices, not inform readers. So the most important things are cover color and size. Don’t ask intended users about content and substance. Ask their preferences about cover color and size so that the report will nicely match their office décor and therefore be more likely to be prominently displayed. That’s a *best practice* dissemination strategy.

Or this, on writing annual accountability reports:

Those that think you do good work don’t need to know your warts. Those that think you are a waste of space are not going to be convinced otherwise. So write for the great mass in between who just don’t want to know. Help them not know. Nurture them.

The safest path is to appear to have said a good deal, without having said anything at all. With a little practice, you can incorporate the ideas presented to produce impeccable annual reports that will confuse people so badly they won't even know they are confused. Look for the knowing nods of people when they read your report. That will tell you you have succeeded. (Bacal, 2009, p. 1)

Skepticism about the value of reports notwithstanding, effective report writing is an essential evaluator competence. Work at writing. Take time to do it well. Get feedback on how well you do. Evaluate use.

In doing so, you will be engaging in “utilization focused communication”—which is not an oxymoron according to international communications expert Ricardo Ramírez. He further asserts that “*communication focused evaluation* is not an oxymoron.” These observations flow from reflections in which “evaluation and communication approaches and methods keep on interconnecting in my mind” (Ramírez, 2011). In essence, when thinking evaluation, think communications; when thinking communications, think evaluation. And make both utilization-focused.

Checklist details about what is involved in each step are provided in the summary *U-FE Checklist* in the concluding chapter. See pages 421–422 for the checklist items for Step 15 discussed in this chapter. (See pp. 375–376 for discussion of this distinction.)



PRACTICE EXERCISES

1. Using Menu 15.1, discuss the reporting situation that would be appropriate for each of the Style and Format Options (both Written and Oral). Show that you can match the reporting option to a situation for which that option is a good match. Make it clear how the situation you describe lends itself to each reporting option.
2. Find an evaluation report on the Internet. See if you can distinguish use (intended use by intended users) from dissemination. Discuss the implications of the distinction between use and dissemination using the particular example you've found to illustrate the implications you generate.

16

Follow Up With Primary Intended Users to Facilitate and Enhance Use

It ain't over till it's over.

Yogi Berra,
former New York Yankees baseball manager

Reporting evaluation findings is not use. That was the central message of Step 15. Producing findings and a report are outputs. Use is the desired outcome. Achieving that outcome means working with primary intended users after the findings and report are presented to facilitate use—*acting on the findings*.

In a 2006 online survey of members of the American Evaluation Association (Fleischer, 2007), 991 respondents rated which factors were most influential in facilitating use. Most highly rated were:

1. Planning for use at the beginning of the evaluation
2. Identifying and prioritizing intended uses of the evaluation
3. Developing a communicating and reporting plan

A communicating and reporting plan should extend beyond the report. Indeed, the evaluation design and contract should extend beyond producing a report. One of the greatest

barriers to working with intended users to actually apply and act on findings and recommendations is that evaluation designs, work plans, and contracts typically end with production of the report. That means that no time and money has been allocated to the critical processes of following up with primary intended users to facilitate action and ongoing use.

Evaluators should not be expected to engage in follow-up work as a matter of goodwill. Follow-up to facilitate use is the payoff for months of work. No matter how good the report nor how clear the recommendations, utilization is served by working with primary intended users to monitor what happens to the findings and recommendations, and to watch for additional opportunities to apply findings, which can include opportunities for broader dissemination discussed in Step 15. Consider this example.

I completed an evaluation of an innovative adult reading program that integrated individualized computer instruction with personal tutoring. Following the summative report, which was largely positive but also indicated areas of potential program redesign, the following work took place to facilitate use.

- A presentation to the school board 2 months after the report, to inform a funding decision on the program and discuss with board members possible expansion of the program; this led to three subsequent meetings with a board committee. Follow-up time: 12 hours.
- A half-day session at the program's summer staff retreat to revisit the findings and discuss their implications for redesign and improvement; this led to work with a redesign team. Follow-up time: 3 days.
- A joint presentation with the program director at a national reading conference. Follow-up time to plan and make the presentation: 6 hours.
- An article for a monthly newsletter addressed to adult literacy specialists. Follow-up time: 3 hours.
- An in-person interview with a local newspaper journalist who wrote a news article on the findings, followed by some e-mail clarifications. Follow-up time, 2 ½ hours.
- A presentation at a statewide literacy education conference. Follow-up time: 4 ½ hours.
- Four meetings with the evaluation task force of primary intended users after the evaluation was completed. These were the people who had been involved in initially focusing evaluation questions, selecting methods, interpreting findings, and generating recommendations.

Meeting 1: Developing the dissemination plan.

Meeting 2: Focusing the presentation to the school board.

Meeting 3: Three-month follow-up on how the findings were being discussed in various places and what actions had been taken on recommendations.

Meeting 4: Discussing a new evaluation proposal for the refunded program.

Follow-up time for these 4 meetings: 5 days (which included planning interactions for each meeting with the task force chair, developing materials for the meetings, and carrying out agreed-upon tasks after the meetings).

Over a period of 4 months following completion of the evaluation report, follow-up to enhance and facilitate use involved 11 ½ days of work. The original contract had included funds for a week of follow-up (5 days). A contract addendum was negotiated to fund the additional days of follow-up. These follow-up activities were critical to the ultimate high level of use attained.

Lessons About the Importance of Follow-Up to Enhance Use

1. *Plan for follow-up.* Develop a follow-up plan with primary intended users. Intentionality is a foundational value that undergirds utilization-focused evaluation. Use doesn't happen naturally or by chance. Use is more likely to occur if planned. The plan should include being alert to unanticipated and emergent opportunities.

2. *Budget for follow-up.* Follow-up by evaluators should not be a *pro bono*, goodwill effort. It is the culmination of the work. At the same time, primary intended users may need to rethink their commitment. They may have thought their work was over when the report was produced. Follow-up involves time from them to monitor what happens to findings and recommendations. This may require a formal recommitment beyond what they had originally expected.

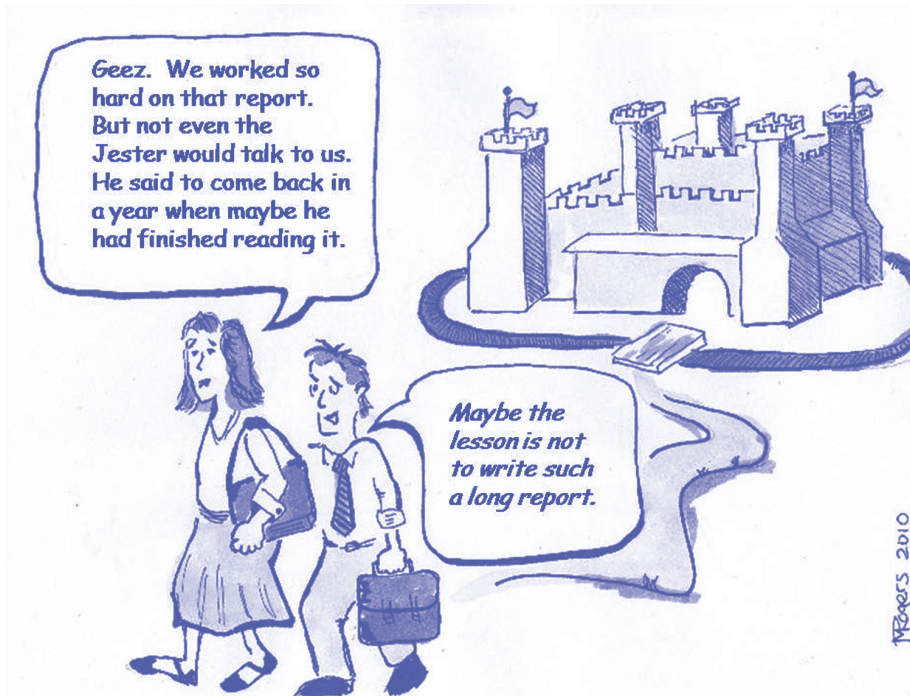
3. *Adapt findings for different audiences.* Follow-up includes adapting and reformatting the findings for use with different potential user groups; for example

- ✓ A newsletter article
- ✓ Reporting sessions back to community people or those who provided data during the evaluation (e.g., interviewees)
- ✓ A PowerPoint presentation
- ✓ A workshop or staff retreat handout
- ✓ Conference presentations
- ✓ A press release
- ✓ A refereed journal article

In adapting findings for presentations to various user groups, pay particular attention to effective presentation techniques (Atkinson, 2007; Kistler, 2010a, 2010b; Reynolds, 2008; Torres, Preskill, & Piontek, 2004). Boring or poorly done evaluation presentations can hinder use.

4. *Keep findings in front of those who can use them.* People get busy. Despite the best of intentions, they lose track of findings and recommendations. Follow-up reminds intended users of their use commitments and helps them follow through.

5. *Watch for emergent opportunities to reinforce the relevance of findings.* The significance of findings can change over time, sometimes quickly. As people react to the results, new opportunities may emerge to connect the evaluation findings to unanticipated events, new decisions, emergent research, or other evaluation findings. Some of this is likely to be done in the report, but new opportunities for making these connections will often emerge after a report is completed.



6. *Deal with resistance.* Some types of resistance can be anticipated, but when findings start to attract serious attention, they can also attract serious criticism, some of which may be inaccurate or unfair. A meeting with primary intended users a month after a report has been released and disseminated can be a chance to assess what kinds of opposition have emerged and what, if anything, should be done about them.

7. *Watch for and guard against misuse.* As evaluation findings are used, the opportunities—and temptations—for misuse increase. “Misuse occurs when stakeholders modify, misstate, or inappropriately excerpt from the evaluation report. You have an important responsibility for assuring that your evaluation is conveying the information intended and not being misapplied in ways not justified by your evaluation” (Alkin, 2011, pp. 211–212).

8. *Champion use of the findings, but don’t become a champion for the program.* Evaluator credibility is a major factor in whether findings are used. We can and should advocate for evaluation excellence and use. But, as former AEA President Eleanor Chelimsky (2010) has consistently warned, evaluators must avoid advocating for “individual groups, particular outcomes, partisans, lobbyists, the policy makers who give us grants and contracts, in short, stakeholders in general. The problem is that once the question of evaluative honesty—that paramount value—is raised, it will tend to vitiate the persuasiveness of our work. But this is not the case when we advocate for excellence in evaluation” (p. 1).

EXHIBIT 16.1

Lessons About the Importance of Follow-Up to Enhance Use

1. Plan for follow-up.
 2. Budget for follow-up.
 3. Adapt findings for different audiences.
 4. Keep findings in front of those who can use them.
 5. Watch for emergent opportunities to reinforce the relevance of findings.
 6. Deal with resistance.
 7. Watch for and guard against misuse.
 8. Champion use of the findings, but don't become a champion for the program.
 9. Continue to build evaluation capacity throughout the follow-up process.
 10. Consider the future implications of all you do in follow-up, including interest in a new round of evaluation to address longer-term impact questions, or design of an evaluation for the next phase of an intervention.
-

9. *Continue to build evaluation capacity for use throughout the follow-up process.* A consistent theme of utilization-focused evaluation concerns the importance of training evaluation users. This is especially important during the ultimate pay-off processes of follow-up when key stakeholders are most directly engaged in going from findings to action, from reflection to decision, and from possible use to actual use. For example, it is rarely sufficient to just ask primary intended users how they want to monitor and reinforce use of findings and recommendations, or how the findings should be adapted for presentation to different audiences. In the active-reactive-interactive-adaptive process of evaluation facilitation, the evaluator will typically need to present primary intended users with options and possibilities, and help them consider the costs and benefit of various proactive approaches to enhancing use. This facilitates action in the moment but also builds capacity for future evaluation use.

10. *Consider the future implications of all you do in follow-up.* The follow-up period is also a transition period to future evaluation efforts. This may involve a new design for the next phase of a program, an evaluation approach for diffusing a successful program (“taking it to scale”), or interest in long-term follow-up of program participants for which there was not sufficient interest or funds originally; positive short-term results can give rise to new

opportunities for longitudinal follow-up. Many evaluations I have completed, *or thought I had completed*, led to revision of the design to include longer-term follow-up as questions of longer-term impact became more relevant and urgent given positive short-term findings.

- “Yes, the participants got and held jobs for 6 months, but what happened over the next 2 years?”
- “So test scores went up between pre- and posttest, but were those gains maintained the next year?”
- “Ahh, the community indicators have improved the past 2 years, but what will happen over the next year?”

The original evaluation design did not include these questions. Often initial evaluation budgets aren’t sufficient to include longer-term data collection. Or unless there are positive short-term gains there would be no perceived value in a longitudinal design. Or the original design may have suffered from inadequate vision about what was possible. Whatever the reasons, once the findings are known, new evaluation questions can take center stage.

Negative findings can also generate additional follow-up. Will changes in the program lead to better outcomes? Will short-term negatives become longer-term positives, as when behavior changes take longer to manifest; for example, an initial lack of behavior change (end-of-program results) may turn positive 3 months later when participants have had the opportunity to use what they’ve learned. I found this to be the case in an early childhood parent education program where short-term behavioral changes were minimal but longer-term changes (6 months later) were significant.

Exhibit 16.1 lists these 10 lessons about the importance of follow-up to enhance use.

Checklist details about what is involved in each step are provided in the summary *U-FE Checklist* in the concluding chapter. See pages 422–423 for the checklist items for Step 16 discussed in this chapter.



PRACTICE EXERCISE

Take some actual evaluation findings and recommendations from a report you locate and consider potential follow-up steps that could be taken with those findings and recommendations. See how many of the 10 follow-up actions from Exhibit 16.1 you can apply to this concrete example you’ve located. You’ll have to speculate and simulate possibilities, but that’s how you get better and more creative at follow-up.



INTERLUDE, INTERCONNECTIONS AMONG STEPS 14–16. U-FE AS A COMPLEX DYNAMIC SYSTEM

Facilitating Use

As I've noted throughout, the actual utilization-focused evaluation process unfolds as a complex dynamic system of relationships with the steps interacting. Actions lead to reactions, interactions, feedback loops, and adaptations. This between-chapters interlude offers a graphic depiction of the interactions among Steps 14, 15, and 16. The concluding chapter offers a graphic that shows all 17 U-FE steps as a complex dynamic system (See pages 425–426.)

Interdependence of and Interactions Among Steps 14, 15, and 16

Step 14, organizing and presenting the data for use by primary intended users and others leads to Step 15, reporting findings to facilitate use and disseminate major findings to increase influence. But reactions to the draft report (feedback) may lead to additional analyses and reorganizing the data (back to Step 14). Step 15, reporting, leads to Step 16, following up to facilitate use of findings. That follow-up process, however, may lead to adaptations of the report for new audiences (back to Step 15), or even back to Step 14 for additional analysis. Thus, these processes are interdependent and interconnected rather than simply linear and sequential.

