

Customer Service Notes for *wic*

Using Open-Ended Questions: The Key to Getting Maximum Information from your Participants

We know how important effective communication is when working with participants. It often can mean the difference between a participant feeling like they received stellar service instead of mediocre customer service.

Asking open-ended questions is one of the keys to good communication. Open-ended questions (as opposed to closed-ended questions) are those that cannot be answered by a “Yes,” or “No” or a short one or two word response.

Open-ended questions are particularly important when developing rapport or asking motivational interviewing questions. The problem with closed-ended questions is that it allows some people to give short answers, and we do not gather enough information or learn about the participant’s situation. Take for example an introverted participant named Anna. If you ask Anna, “Is Tommy eating more fruits and vegetables instead of high calorie snacks?,” you may get only a “Yes” or “No.” This will then require you to ask a follow up question. Instead, by asking an open-ended question such as “Tell me how Tommy is doing with his snacks,” you will get a longer, more meaningful response. Typically, good open ended questions begin with the word WHY, WHO, HOW, WHERE, WHEN or “Tell me about ...”

As an example, when beginning a session with a participant, if you ask “How are you doing?,” you may only get “Fine” or “Good.” Instead, ask an open-ended question such as “What has happened since we last met?”

When asking questions of participants, remember not to ask and then answer the questions yourself. This sometimes happens because we are uncomfortable with silence and feel we must jump in to fill that silence. Don’t let a little bit of silence on the part of a participant unnerve you. If you ask an open-ended question and the participant doesn’t immediately respond, look at them and smile. If they are still unable to respond, then re-phrase your question.

Keep in mind that English may not be the first language of some of your participants. For these individuals, speak a little slower when asking your open-ended questions, remember not to look annoyed, and be ready to re-phrase the question using different, simpler language.

Questions for Reflection:

1. How often do you use open-ended questions when building rapport with participants and asking motivational interviewing questions?
2. Are you mindful of cultural differences when asking questions?