How to Conduct a Festival Survey in Your Community

Purpose: Most of us never consider how alcohol beverages are sold at the outdoor festivals we attend. But advocates and community leaders need to know how local events sell and serve alcohol as they review the community alcohol environment. Many events have well organized and operated beer tents and concessions, while some events have relied on past practices long after it became clear the event was the source of community alcohol related problems.

An anonymous survey of local outdoor festivals and celebrations provides a “snap shot” of alcohol control, allowing organizers to see the current practices and the policies that have been adopted but rarely enforced. When comparing the alcohol policies at more than one event, a consistent scoring system allows you to compare the events fairly. At least one assessment should be conducted in the evening near the end of the event to ensure practices and behaviors don’t very greatly based on the time of day.

This is an anonymous survey – festival staff will not know when teams plan to visit and team members should not introduce themselves as part of a survey team. This assessment identifies 12 policies that can be observed without any additional questioning. Each individual observer should complete the 30 questions (12 policy) survey based on what they observed at each event. Two or more visits – on different days and times – will also improve the value of your survey results.

Observer Teams: The assessment itself has 30 questions. Teams of two or more observers increase the accuracy of the assessment. If you feel uncomfortable carrying around clip boards or recording your notes, you may carry the assessment with you and complete it after the visit was complete, but it would be wise to look over the survey while you are at the event to determine if you have gathered all the information you need.

All the reviewers should meet once as a group to review the assessment. It is vital that everyone clearly understands the questions and possible responses. For example; Question #7 asks what prevents youth from entering the alcohol sales area. Observers need to agree whether that question applies to all youth or only youth unaccompanied by a parent or guardian. Observers need to understand the types of barriers they might encounter and how to describe them. For example, how would observers’ describe either a uniformed officer checking ID or an unattended gated fence?

As part of the orientation, observers should review different alcohol brands and products that are likely to be found in beer tents. The assessment tool asks observers to visually distinguish between beer with and without alcohol, malt liquor and wine coolers. Having
sample logos identifying local favorites in each category will improve the accuracy of the observations.

Observer teams should also discuss the estimated amount of time needed to complete an assessment.

**Completing the Survey:** Volunteers should complete the assessment for each festival site visited. Even if team members agree on the scoring, separate surveys should be completed while on the grounds or immediately after leaving.

**Scoring:** The individual scoring for each festival requires compiling the narrative information collected and creating a numerical score. The numerical score is created by assigning the numerical value to specific questions using the “Code Sheet for Scoring Model Strategies - 2011” for the 12 strategies.

The scoring or coding sheet has two columns. The column on the left side of the page details the numerical score that should be assigned for each answer. The right side column identifies by number the questions that are appropriate for each set of codes.

Overall, numerical codes from 1-3 are assigned to answers as indicated on the code sheet. The yes or no questions have values of 1 or 3. Failure to answer one or more of the questions will distort a festival score. Add up all answers to create the total the numerical score (X) then follow the directions at the bottom of page 2 of the Code Sheet. X ÷36 = [ ] x 100= Final Score. Scores can range from 36 to 100, with the higher scores indicating more evidence based serving practices to prevent alcohol misuse have been observed.

Reviewers need to carefully compare the surveys for each festival. Individual impressions will differ and uneven or sporadic enforcement can result in conflicting information. For example: If two observers indicate (a) that wristbands are issued to all attendees over age 21 and (b) that wristbands are not used, contact the observers to confirm the written answer was recorded as intended. It is possible that at different locations or different times at the same location, wristbands were used inconsistently. The numerical score should be adjusted accordingly.

Selling distilled spirits (examples: gin, rum, bourbon, scotch) is not permitted under a Temporary Class B License (also called the Picnic License) often granted for community events. It is unlikely festivals will be selling mixed drinks containing spirits, but distilled spirits brands such as Bacardi and Smirnoff have products lines that are fermented malt beverages which are taxed and regulated like beer, such as Smirnoff Ice, that may be sold under a Class B Temporary license. Knowing the product logos will reduce confusion and result in a more accurate survey.
The narrative information requested on the survey should be completed either while the observers are at the event or immediately after leaving. Several questions request descriptions: the serving area, where children were present, festival decorations and signage, the type and how food was sold. Compiling the descriptions and comments allow a complete picture of the festival a numerical score alone cannot provide and it can be difficult to remember these situations accurately.

**Using the results:** Those who initially conducted the festival assessments believe providing individual scores to the organizers privately would build trust between festival organizers and the Coalition. The Coalition learned that festival organizers were most often volunteers, not professional event planners, who spend a significant portion of their free time each year planning and staging the event.

Poor sales policies were not intentional efforts to create problems, alcohol sales policies were most often based on past policy and local tradition. Evidence based practices with the potential to reduce and prevent alcohol misuse are still relatively new in Wisconsin.

Every assessment is an opportunity for community leaders and coalitions to improve the local alcohol environment in the spirit of community progress.