



An Evaluation and Sustainability Resource Brief

Maximizing Your Reentry Program’s Reach by Pretesting Participant Recruitment Materials

Introduction

Many agencies and organizations that serve returning citizens seek to inform prospective clients about their services. Many develop written recruitment materials for this purpose (e.g., brochures, quarterly newsletters, flyers), post to social media, and create scripts or talking points for in-person or virtual presentations.

To effectively reach currently and formerly incarcerated individuals, actively examine how your reentry program’s recruitment materials are received by those whom you wish to engage. Recruitment materials that closely reflect returning citizens’ life experiences and preferred terminology are more likely to land as relevant, to be readily understood, and to be acted upon. In contrast, materials that are not carefully worded and framed can inadvertently deter participation by making a program appear irrelevant, burdensome, or stigmatizing of those whom it is intended to welcome and serve.

The way in which people are recruited for programs can affect enrollment. Pretesting recruitment materials with people who have lived experience with the criminal legal system can help programs identify the most effective materials. A pretest assesses how a selected group of individuals representing the intended target audience respond to draft materials, concepts, or messages before the materials are produced in final form and disseminated more widely. This strategy, sometimes also referred to as pilot testing, is used in a variety of settings and industries to hone marketing messages so that they resonate well.

This brief shares strategies for pretesting recruitment materials used by reentry programs. It describes the steps typically used in marketing research and includes sample questions for reentry program staff to use when pretesting recruitment materials. Finally, it provides recommendations for developing your program’s recruitment materials and examples of how the content of such materials might change before and after a pretest.

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Steps for Pretesting Recruitment Materials

The only way to ensure that your recruitment materials will resonate with the intended audience is to involve members of that audience in the development process. We recommend doing so in six steps.

▶ **Step 1: Determine the objectives of the pretest and understand the target audience.**

Establish the objectives of the pretest; they will shape your approach in subsequent steps. Often, reentry program staff hope to inform prospective clients about what services are offered, who is eligible to receive them, and how to enroll. At this stage, it is also important to identify the demographic characteristics and primary spoken languages of your program target population.

Recommendation: Integrate your program's brand into your product. Insert your organization's logo in the document and be sure to include your program's mission, vision, and values.

▶ **Step 2: Choose the pretest method and plan the pretest.**

Choose the right method for pretesting your recruitment materials and make a detailed plan for the pretest. Methods of pretesting include focus groups and individual interviews.

Focus groups are open-ended discussions among a small number of participants (typically 6–8), facilitated by a moderator who follows a semistructured protocol. The moderator aims to get people talking about the materials and obtain their honest feedback and suggestions. These groups can be done in person or virtually. Inviting participants with diverse backgrounds from among your target population is critical.

Focus groups are especially well suited when you want to test materials with a variety of target audience members through interactive discussion. Focus groups allow the exchange of viewpoints among members of the target audience and can elicit a richer sense of areas of consensus or divergence than is possible in a one-on-one interview.

A key limitation of focus groups is that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Focus group moderators should ask participants to keep what is said in the group confidential. But moderators must also advise all participants that, given the group nature of the activity, the moderator cannot guarantee the confidentiality of what is shared.

Recommendations: Avoid using stigmatizing language to refer to your target audience. Avoid using technical or legal jargon.

Before: This program serves offenders in the Second Judicial District.

After: This program serves people involved with the justice system in Beaufort, Hyde, Martin, Tyrrell, and Washington Counties.

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Individual interviews are ideal if you want to gather more detailed and in-depth information from members of the target audience. Interviews also allow participants to convey their opinions privately and candidly, without concern for group dynamics. The advantage of an interview is that the interviewer can probe more deeply into each individual's perception of the

Recommendations: Spell out acronyms for people who may not be familiar with them and avoid using jargon where possible.

Before: Participants will receive CBT and MRT.

After: Participants will receive two kinds of talk therapy (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Moral Reconciliation Therapy).


materials (and specific suggestions for improvement) because the interviewee is not competing with the group for talking time. However, individual interviews require a greater overall time investment from staff, who must first gather in-depth information from each participant and then discern themes across the interviews.

When prospective program participants are relatively heterogeneous and you would like to create an opportunity to elicit (and perhaps reconcile) diverse feedback in real time, consider a focus group. If more in-depth feedback is desired—such as detailed and precise suggestions on content and word choice—or if staff are concerned about participants' confidentiality or candor in the group setting, individual interviews will be preferable.

Once you have determined the method, prepare for the pretest by identifying the venue, selecting moderators or interviewers, recruiting participants, and estimating the costs of your pretesting exercise.

There are many other considerations to keep in mind when designing any primary data collection, including focus groups and interviews, with reentry program clients.

For more information about collecting primary data from reentry program clients, see our resource brief on this topic:

<https://nationalreentryresourcecenter.org/resources/best-practices-collecting-primary-data-reentry-populations-program-evaluation> 

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• Identifying a Venue

When pretesting recruitment materials in a correctional facility setting, be sure to get the appropriate clearances and permission from facility leadership to conduct the pretesting activities. When conducting a pretest in a community setting, choose a conveniently located venue that has good transport links and car parking and where participants will not be highly visible to the public as they arrive or depart.

• Identifying Staff

Staff who have experience leading focus groups or conducting individual interviews are likely to be the most effective and comfortable moderators or interviewers for pretesting activities. To support greater rapport and trust during pretesting, select interviewers or moderators who share demographic characteristics or life experiences with the target population if you can.

If your program serves participants with preferred languages other than English, involve an interviewer or focus group moderator who can conduct pretesting in those languages.

Staff who lack facilitation and interviewing skills but are interested in building them may make good notetakers. Ideally, the people who are conducting and taking notes on the focus groups or interviews will also be involved in analysis, along with program administrators and research partners.

If no one on your team (including program staff and research partners) meets these criteria, you may wish to consider hiring an external facilitator.

• Recruiting and Protecting Participants

Select participants in pretesting activities who are representative of the program's target audience, including those with lived criminal legal system experience. A local or state community advisory board, council, organization, or steering committee that includes formerly incarcerated individuals may be helpful in identifying participants for pretesting activities. Pretest recruitment can be done in collaboration with these groups or with your correctional agency partners, if you aim to pretest materials with individuals who are incarcerated.

Develop a short (one page or less) summary that describes the purpose of the pretest; the pretest activity (e.g., individual interview or focus group); date; start and end times; location; any transportation assistance, food, or incentives that will be offered for participation; and a way to register. The summary can be distributed directly by program staff as well as through your partner organizations.

Recommendation: Provide clear instructions for the target audience on what to do next and include your organization's contact information.

Before: Contact the Reentry Wellness Program for more information and to enroll in services for which you may be eligible.

After: Let's meet & check for eligibility.

WE'RE OPEN!

Mon – Fri

9 a.m. – 5 p.m.

1359 Pinecone Way, Suite 205

Raleigh, NC 27545

www.reentrywellnessprogram.org

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Be mindful that an individual's participation in a focus group for pretesting reentry program recruitment materials might inadvertently broadcast their criminal legal system involvement to others. To minimize this risk, avoid holding interviews or groups in highly visible public locations, keep the identities of those who participate confidential, and ensure that any individual outreach messages to potential participants do not broadcast their lived experience with the system as the reason that their input is being sought.

• Developing a Budget

Next, develop a budget for the pretest. Include the costs of any incentives, food, or transportation assistance that will be provided for participants; location costs (if you must pay for space); and the staff time required for recruiting, scheduling, facilitating and documenting, and analyzing the interviews or focus groups. Keep in mind that the more participants you include, the longer your interview or focus group guide, and the more iterations of pretesting you conduct (discussed in the next section), the greater your total costs. In general, be mindful that interviews are likely to cost more than focus groups. Participation supports and incentives, such as a modest gift card and a meal for those who attend, increase your up-front costs but often produce substantial savings by greatly reducing the high costs of staff time that can be associated with unsuccessful recruitment efforts or high no-show rates among recruited participants.¹

▶ Step 3: Develop a pretest guide.

Your pretest guide should include (1) a reminder to participants of the purpose of the pretest activity and an explanation of how the information they provide will be protected and used, (2) background information on your program and the purpose of the recruitment materials, and (3) pretest questions to help you understand how participants respond to the draft recruitment materials and how they could be improved.

Topics you may wish to cover in your pretest guide include whether the participants have a positive or negative overall impression of the materials; whether they find the materials visually appealing; what they see as the takeaway message of the materials and how easy it was for them to identify that message; whether the materials would influence them to participate in the reentry program; and what specific suggestions they have for revising, adding, or removing information. Example questions appear in Appendix A.

Recommendation: Design the aesthetics of your product to be visually appealing and helpful.

For example, you might consider including images of individuals who are smiling or working together.

¹ Confirm that your funding source does not prohibit providing incentives to participants of pretesting activities.

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Step 4: Conduct the pretest.

Using the script included in your pretest guide, explain the purpose of the pretest to respondents. It is often important early in the interview or group to actively counter participants' tendency to give polite and affirmative responses by letting them know you are not looking for compliments but are genuinely interested in their candid impressions so that you can improve your materials.

Share or present a hard-copy draft of the focal recruitment materials, social media posts, or recruitment scripts with participants. Be sure to note their verbal and nonverbal responses to your questions and the recruitment material drafts. Document any signs of hesitation or confusion while they review the materials.

In delivering the pretest guide, rely heavily on open-ended questions and avoid closed-ended (yes or no) questions that might influence a participant's response. When possible, follow up with a probing question to understand what is beneath a participant's initial or surface response.

Recommendation: Be sure to explicitly state your program's purpose while reaffirming that prospective clients must take the first step.

Before: The County Reentry Initiative provides a wide range of services for returning citizens with complex needs.

After: We exist to show you that no situation is truly hopeless. Make the change today.

Step 5: Analyze data and interpret and summarize results.

In this step, you identify patterns in participants' responses to the recruitment materials and suggested revisions for improving the materials. It may be helpful to prepare an informal summary document that recaps the rationale for the pretest, highlights participants' global reactions and major points raised, and identifies priorities for revision. Rather than focusing on one-off critiques, summarize items that were raised consistently by multiple participants. Sometimes, it can be helpful to illustrate findings or substantiate proposed revisions with quotes from participants.

At this stage, you may want to share your findings and intended revisions with fellow reentry program staff and organizational partners—particularly those who helped to make the pretest activities possible—and agree on proposed revisions.

Step 6: Revise recruitment materials.


Finally, implement the revisions agreed on in Step 5 to produce a new, improved draft of your recruitment materials. Once the materials have been revised, consider pretesting the new version one more time, if budget and time allow. An additional round of testing can be smaller and simpler; for example, you can vet revised materials with one or two participants from the initial pretest activity. This step can help to ensure that issues from the first round of pretesting have been resolved and any important critiques have been effectively addressed.

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Conclusion

Effective recruitment demands recruitment materials that resonate with the program's target audiences. Pretesting recruitment materials can help reentry programs to reach and engage their target populations, particularly individuals who are currently or formerly incarcerated. While pretesting requires an up-front investment of time and resources, it significantly increases the chances that program materials will land as clear, non-burdensome, and welcoming. As such, it can pay immense dividends in successful program enrollment.

References

Compass for Social and Behavioral Change. (n.d.) *How to conduct a pretest*. United States Agency for International Development. <https://thecompassforsbc.org/how-to-guide/how-conduct-pretest> 

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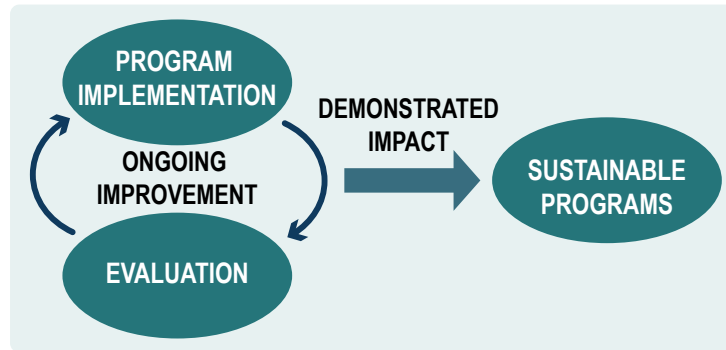
Appendix A – Interview or Focus Group Questions for Pretesting Recruitment Materials

1. First, what are your overall impressions of the [insert product here]? *(If no negative impressions are raised, probe: how about any negative impressions?)*
2. Next, I'd like to ask about how **visually appealing** the [insert product here] is, in terms of the way it looks, like the graphics, font, style, layout, and color scheme. What are your thoughts about how the [insert product here] looks? Does the way it looks make you want to read the content? Do you have any suggestions for how we could improve the way it looks?
3. Next, let's talk about the **content** in the [insert product here] and how this would influence your decision about... [insert reason for disseminating product here]. Pretend that... [insert hypothetical about receiving product here]. Do you think the information provided in the [insert product here] is helpful when considering... [insert purpose of disseminating product here]?
4. Is there any information missing about the [program/project/intervention] that you think should be included? What else do you think others would want to know about the [program] to make a decision?
5. Is there any information that you think is unnecessary or too wordy? Anything that you would recommend removing?
6. Is there anything in the content of the product that made you uncomfortable or that raised concerns for you? Anything said in the brochure that might make you hesitate to... [insert purpose of the product here]?
7. I'd like to get your feedback on the **language** used in the product. Do you think the information is described clearly? Are there certain words or descriptions that are unclear or too lengthy to read?
8. Is there anything else about the product that you think would make you or others more likely to read it? Is there anything else that could be covered in the product that would make the target audience more interested in the program?
9. Overall, do you think the product does a good job of encouraging [insert purpose of disseminating the product]?
 - a. IF YES: Is there anything in particular that stands out?
 - b. IF NO: Can you say more about that? What would make it more encouraging?
10. Can you think of anything else that could be done to the product to encourage stakeholders to [insert purpose of disseminating the product]?
11. Now, let's talk about recruitment materials **delivery mechanisms/approaches**. What do you think is the best way to share these recruitment materials with the intended audience? Who should be disseminating recruitment materials to the intended audience (e.g., security or program staff)? How should the materials be disseminated to the intended audience (e.g., print only, use of social media)?

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The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance Project

The Evaluation and Sustainability Training and Technical Assistance (ES TTA) Project supports Second Chance Act (SCA) grantees in conducting more rigorous evaluations that lead to data-driven program improvement and demonstrated impact and that support programs' long-term sustainability. For more information about the project, contact ESTTA@rti.org.



The ES TTA Project is conducted by RTI

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