2 Designing Your CAHPS Project

Page

Introduction 13

Planning and Project Design 15

Form a Project Team 15
Consider Forming an Advisory Group 16
Define Your Project Goals 18
Think About Reporting CAHPS Results 19
Consider Your Audiences 20
Consider the Content and Format of Your Reports 20
Think About Sampling, Data Collection, and Data Analysis 21
Think About Evaluating Your CAHPS Project 22

Project Management 23

Establish Clear Roles for Project Team Members 23
Establish Communications and Coordination Policies 24
Develop Budget and Schedule Estimates 24
Hire Survey and Reporting Vendors 26
Develop a Request for Proposal (RFP) 27
Develop the Contract 28

List of Figures

Figure 2-1. CAHPS project flowchart 14

2 Designing Your CAHPS Project

Introduction

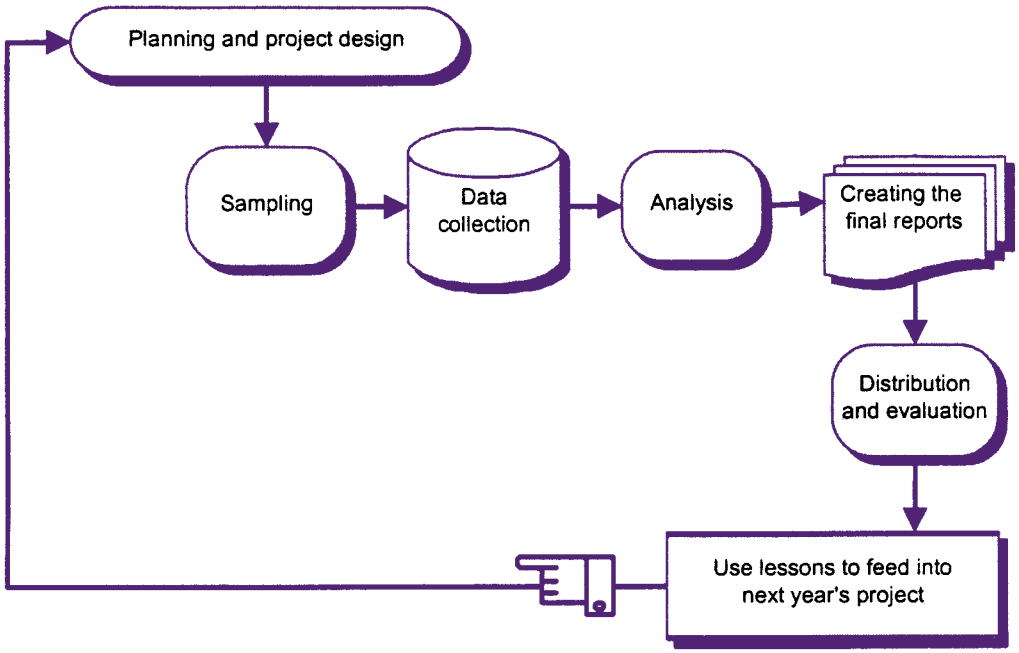
A CAHPS project is a large undertaking with several distinct yet interrelated components:

- Planning and project design,
- Project management,
- Data collection,
- Data analysis,
- Reporting, and
- Evaluation.

These components involve a series of decisions and tasks, some of which occur simultaneously and others sequentially. All of these components have important effects on the others. Figure 2-1 shows these components and how they relate to each other during the course of a CAHPS project.

Because CAHPS projects vary widely, this chapter provides only general guidance on project design and management issues. However, we have developed a series of worksheets on many of the components of project planning and management, and projects can use these to apply the general guidance to their own specific needs and circumstances. You may find it helpful to refer to these worksheets in the ***CAHPS Project Planning Workbook*** appendix, found on ***CD-ROM 1***, as you read through the chapter.

Figure 2-1. CAHPS project flowchart



This chapter discusses two components that are crucial to a successful CAHPS project; Chapters 3 and 4 cover the remaining topics. The first component is **planning and project design**, the initial phase during which sponsors:

- Gather all the players who will develop, carry out, represent, evaluate, and be affected by the project;
- Define the project's overall goals, objectives, and scope; and
- Make decisions in several key areas that will guide the entire project.

The second component covered in this chapter is **project management**, an effort that requires attention early on as management strategies are established and vendors hired, as well as throughout the life of the project.

Planning and Project Design

Form a Project Team

Once a sponsor has decided to conduct a CAHPS project, one of the first responsibilities is to establish a project team consisting of individuals who will be involved in planning and carrying out a project. At the earliest stage, participants may be limited to the staff of the sponsoring organization. If a consortium is conducting the project, representatives from each participating organization will be on the project team. After the project is underway, the team will likely grow to include individuals from other organizations.

For Information on Conducting a CAHPS Project Through a Consortium

For information and guidance on conducting a CAHPS project through a consortium, contact the ***SUN Help Line*** at **(800) 492-9261**.

Project teams have several important responsibilities:

- Deciding how to incorporate CAHPS into existing health plan selection activities and whether to develop an effort to inform and educate target audiences about health care quality issues and health plan selection;
- Deciding on the content and substance of the survey and the reports that are produced as a result;
- Managing the survey and reporting process;
- Monitoring the vendor(s);
- Overseeing the preparation, production, and distribution of reports;
- Providing support to consumers and intermediaries in using the reports;
- Handling followup activities; and
- Handling communication about the project with media and others.

Project teams are usually headed by a project director who oversees the day-to-day management and is in charge of liaison with stakeholders. Other team members may include the following staff:

- Technical staff who carry out survey and reporting tasks and supervise vendor(s);
- Survey/reporting consultant(s) to provide expert advice and assistance on data collection and analysis issues; and
- Benefits counselors and other existing and potential intermediaries who are involved in disseminating CAHPS results.

Consider Forming an Advisory Group

As the project team is being formed and beginning to work together, we suggest that you also consider establishing an external project advisory group. Because CAHPS may be the first effort of this kind in an area and can be a springboard for further efforts in the health plan quality measurement arena, ensuring the support and interest of the community will be a critical element in the success of a CAHPS project. An external advisory group can help ensure the buy-in of important community groups and stakeholders. It also can play an invaluable role in advising a project on how CAHPS can fit into a community's current and future efforts to inform and educate audiences about health care quality and health plan selection.

An external advisory group can play several additional roles as well:

- Provide an ongoing venue for contributing stakeholder perspectives on the project and results of the survey.
- Advise on design and implementation issues.
- Serve as an important source of distribution channels for survey results.

There should be some overlap between your project team and this advisory group to ensure continuity and clear communication, so key project staff members should be included on the advisory group. You may find it helpful as well to include outside technical experts, such as a literacy or survey research expert. These experts can provide guidance on issues that are important to consider in planning and carrying out a CAHPS project but that are outside the scope of the team's expertise. They also provide important credibility to the project for stakeholders, such as health plans and community groups, who care about and are affected by the results of the survey.

The following groups should be considered when selecting members of an external advisory group:

- Funding organizations
- Health plans
- Health care provider groups, hospitals, and other care institutions
- Consumer advocates
- Legislative staff
- Regulatory and accreditation agencies
- Social service organizations
- Policy analysts and researchers
- Key internal officials (e.g., CEO) of the sponsoring organizations
- Employers

Even if you do not establish a formal external advisory group, periodically involve representatives of these groups right from the beginning. The extent and nature of their involvement will vary by project and type of stakeholder. At a minimum, the project team should try to keep these individuals and groups well informed about the project and its purpose and seek their ideas and feedback.

Notes From the Field

One survey sponsor, a coalition of purchasers, convened an advisory group that included plan representatives, members of the local medical society, business leaders, and consumer advocates. The coalition spent months discussing the project, answering questions, working with its vendor, and allowing health plan representatives to voice concerns about using member surveys to understand differences among plans. The project succeeded because it allowed all perspectives to be heard before the results were publicly reported. In contrast, a previous member survey effort in the same location that did not include such an advisory group was publicly criticized by health plans in the local media.

Define Your Project Goals

An important early task for the project team in planning and designing a CAHPS project is to define its goals. What do you want to learn through the survey? What will you do with the survey results?

Issues to Consider in Defining Project Goals

- Specific reporting objectives (who is your audience and what other information pertaining to the project is needed)
- Individuals/health plans who will participate in the survey
- Overall scope of the project
- Sponsor's short- and long-term objectives
- Linkage with other quality measurement efforts
- Level of available resources

You can define your project goals in several ways. The first task is to identify the audiences for your project, taking into account their interests and uses for the information. For most CAHPS sponsors, consumers are the primary audience for results and other information pertaining to the project. They will use CAHPS results to compare health plans on the basis of quality and to help select a health plan for themselves and their families. For many consumers, this is new information, and sponsors will need to help them use it effectively.

Health plans are another critically important audience. Sponsors need to keep in mind that they are presenting information that may affect the reputation and revenues of participating health plans. The plans will be very interested in the results of the survey, and they will closely follow the progress of your project. You should incorporate their needs for information into your planning. Open and clear communication throughout the course of your project will help to prepare plans for the results, reduce concerns or defensiveness about the project, increase the credibility and legitimacy of your results, and help you develop strategies to deal with concerns and problems.

A second issue is to decide which individuals you will survey or which health plans or products you will include. It is important to note that these decisions are inextricably linked; making choices about individuals will to a large extent determine which plans will be included in the survey and vice versa. With regard to individuals, sponsors can choose to survey commercially insured individuals or Medicaid recipients, adults only, children only, or particular subgroups such as those with chronic conditions. For the plans, sponsors can include health maintenance organizations (HMOs), preferred provider organizations (PPOs), point-of-service (POS) plans, or fee-for-service plans.

Several other issues may emerge as well, as the project team discusses its CAHPS goals:

- The overall scope of the project (e.g., a modest project surveying plans in one county with production of a two-color or black-and-white report versus a large and complex multiplan statewide project with production of print and computerized reports and extensive dissemination and promotion activities);
- Short- and long-term objectives in conducting a CAHPS project and reporting results to particular audiences;
- CAHPS relationship with similar ongoing efforts, such as the NCQA accreditation process or HEDIS; and
- The resources available for the project (e.g., overall staff resources, data analysis and graphic design capability, and financial resources).

Decisions on these fundamental, overall questions will provide a framework within which to make specific planning and design decisions in two key areas:

- Communicating with audiences and reporting CAHPS results; and
- Sampling, data collection, and analysis.

Think About Reporting CAHPS Results

Many consumers and other audiences are interested in learning about the concept of quality in health care, as well as about the details of picking a health plan that meets their needs. For example, research has shown that consumers lack a good understanding of the basic principles and characteristics of managed care and how they affect the nature of the care provided. As a sponsor, you may be interested in participating in or developing a communications effort to educate and inform consumers and other target audiences about these fundamentals, about the issue of quality, and about how CAHPS fits into that framework. Or, if your resources are more limited and your interests more specific, you may choose solely to field a CAHPS survey and report its results. Either decision has a number of implications for your overall strategic thinking, as well as for your specific data collection, analysis, and reporting decisions.

The remainder of this section and Chapter 3, ***Using CAHPS Reports for Consumers and Other Audiences***, focuses primarily on the strategic thinking and specific decisions involved in reporting CAHPS results. However, much of the discussion applies equally well to a broader education and information communications effort, and you may find this material useful if you are planning such an effort.

Because data collection and other specifics of carrying out a survey come before reporting results, project teams tend to focus on the specifics of developing questionnaires and implementing surveys before they turn their attention to issues related to reporting. We recommend the opposite approach: Focus on reporting issues first, then on data collection and analysis.

Reporting decisions affect many aspects of data collection and analysis. Thus, it is important to think about what you want to do with the results and when *before* you move on to the details of how you will handle data collection. The following sections, which discuss two crucial issues involved in developing a reporting strategy, show how this is true.

Consider Your Audiences

Once you have identified the key audience(s) for a CAHPS project, the next step is to clearly delineate their characteristics and information needs. This will help you determine the content and format of reports, which in turn will guide data collection and analysis decisions (e.g., whether to add supplemental questions to the core questionnaire or to analyze children's surveys separately from adults). The following questions may be useful in defining your audiences' needs, both specific to CAHPS and with respect to health information more broadly:

- What do they know already about health plan selection and quality?
- What information can best help educate and inform them about health plan quality and plan selection?
- For what purpose will they use this information?
- What other sources of information do they trust and/or use now?
- What distribution channels and media can best reach them?

Consider the Content and Format of Your Reports

The answers to these questions will help determine how you shape the content of your reports, including the key messages you want to communicate about the survey and its uses, the amount of information and level of detail, and the reading level that will be appropriate for your audiences.

The answers will also help determine the right format for reports and associated communications materials. For example, you will need to choose whether to produce the print guide, computerized guide only, or both. You will also need to decide how to promote the CAHPS video, adapt the CAHPS poster and flyer, and combine CAHPS results with other information about the health plan choice process.

Finally, distribution and dissemination strategies will need to be considered. Making sure that all consumers receive CAHPS reports is important even if some are unlikely to use these results in their decisionmaking that particular year. Situations change, and the consumers who are satisfied with their current plan may decide to switch plans the following year if their health care needs change.

A distribution strategy should factor in such issues as who will get which reports (e.g., employees will receive the print or computerized guide, health plans may receive other types of reports that contain more detailed results); how they will be distributed (e.g., mailed in enrollment packets, distributed through work sites), and when they will be distributed.

The ***CAHPS Project Planning Workbook*** appendix on ***CD-ROM 1*** can help you work through these issues.

Think About Sampling, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Once some preliminary decisions about audiences, communications, and reporting are made, planners can focus on issues that are related to conducting the survey.

As this phase of the design process begins, two important issues should be kept in mind:

- All of these survey- and data-related issues are interrelated, and decisions in one area inevitably affect other areas. The process of decisionmaking, therefore, involves going back and revisiting early decisions in light of later ones and balancing the needs for certain decisions in one area against their consequences for another.

- Many of the survey-related decisions will be driven by available financial and staff resources and the size of your project.

Based on the respondents and plans available for the survey, the project team will be able to begin making some decisions about selecting survey samples, collecting the data, and analyzing the data. These decisions will cover a wide range of issues, including obtaining the data files of potential survey participants and ensuring the confidentiality of data collected, determining sample sizes and response rate goals, and choosing specific analyses. ***Chapter 4*** describes these issues in greater detail, and the ***CAHPS Project Planning Workbook*** appendix on ***CD-ROM 1*** has worksheets to help teams work through these decisions.

Getting Technical Assistance from SUN

At this stage of your planning, if your project team does not have the necessary technical expertise to make these decisions, you may want to consult with a survey expert. ***SUN Help Line***, at **(800) 492-9261**, can also provide guidance.

Think About Evaluating Your CAHPS Project

We urge all sponsors to incorporate some kind of evaluation into their projects. Evaluation will provide important feedback on the conduct of the project itself. This will help you plan your next CAHPS project or future similar survey research efforts. In addition, evaluation can provide information on the impact of the project on consumers' choices, on efforts of health plans and providers to improve their services, and on purchasers' decisions.

Many simple and inexpensive methods produce useful information. Urge those who are asked for feedback to be frank; it is the only kind of feedback that will help you. The following options give some examples:

- Provide an E-mail address for comments and suggestions from those who use the reports;
- Include an area for feedback at the end of your print or computerized guide that invites those who have used the report to share their comments;
- Establish a toll-free telephone number to answer questions about the report and solicit opinions from consumers;
- Several weeks after the survey results are released, conduct focus groups or formal debriefings with all those who were involved in project planning and implementation (it may be helpful, though more expensive, to hire a professional facilitator who was not involved in the project to conduct this debriefing); and
- Conduct focus groups or "town meetings" of key audience representatives and other stakeholder groups.

It is important to consider evaluation options at the beginning of your planning for the project because many of them require advance planning and must be carried out immediately after the survey results are released in order to get meaningful and useful feedback. It is also important to clarify who will be responsible for summarizing the feedback. The options you choose also need to be included in your budget.

Project Management

Many steps are involved in planning and conducting a CAHPS project, and some tasks are complex and time consuming. CAHPS projects also typically occur within tight time frames and with unforgiving deadlines (e.g., open enrollment periods). Establishing a comprehensive project management strategy early on and in concert with your planning and project design efforts will do much to help you manage your project smoothly. Breaking down the overall management task into smaller pieces also can help make it more easily accomplished. These smaller component tasks include the following:

- Establish clear roles for project team members;
- Establish communication and coordination policies;
- Develop budget and schedule estimates; and
- Hire survey and reporting vendors.

Establish Clear Roles for Project Team Members

Once work begins in earnest on a CAHPS project, it is helpful to clearly establish the roles that members of the project team will play during the course of the project. The following are the major staffing roles:

- Providing overall direction and design leadership;
- Working with a consulting firm or consultant to get advice about sampling design, data collection and analysis, reporting, and other technical issues;
- Writing the RFP for vendors, evaluating the proposals, and hiring the vendors;
- Supervising the vendors' work during the survey and reporting phases;
- Serving as a point of contact for questions once the survey results have been published; and
- Conducting followup activities after the survey, such as creating or changing health benefits policies or carrying out education activities about health plan quality and choice issues.

Each of these roles needs a leader and, in many cases, a group of people to carry out the tasks involved. Try to delineate the responsibilities involved as clearly as possible. The ***CAHPS Project Planning Workbook*** appendix on ***CD-ROM 1*** includes a table that shows how roles and responsibilities might be divided among sponsor, vendor, and consultant members of a project team.

Establish Communications and Coordination Policies

Because CAHPS is an integrated survey process in which activities are going on concurrently and decisions made in one area have dramatic effects on others, you need to have clear communications and coordination policies. These policies will ensure that the leaders of each group consult with and inform the project director and other group leaders of ongoing activities and changes that might affect other groups. Overlapping membership in key groups, regular meetings, E-mail, and established procedures for documenting the survey and its changes will encourage this coordination. Such policies are particularly important if you have an advisory group in addition to your project team or if you are working with other organizations for the first time on a survey.

Develop Budget and Schedule Estimates

Two of the most important elements of an effective project management strategy are a clear budget and a realistic schedule. Start with preliminary versions, recognizing that they will evolve as the design phase progresses. In fact, the need to keep budget and schedule in mind as your design progresses will help keep your thinking clear and realistic. Start by considering all the potential project components; each has interrelated cost and scheduling implications. Create a budget and a schedule for the project you would ideally like to carry out. Then, prune back and adjust as needed given your available resources, existing deadlines, and design parameters. Make sure to include a cushion for unexpected expenses and account for tasks that might take longer than anticipated. Project components and tasks include the following:

- Consultants
- Advisory group (both establishing and maintaining it)
- Data collection (typically conducted through a vendor)
- Translation of questionnaire/materials (CAHPS has a Spanish-language version, but you may wish to conduct the survey in another language)
- Data analysis (typically conducted through a vendor)
- Reports production (typically conducted through a vendor)
- Computerized guide production (typically conducted through a vendor)

- Dissemination and distribution
- Media relations
- Evaluation
- Project planning and coordination

For Guidance on Translation Issues

See ***Guidelines for Translating CAHPS into Other Languages*** appendix on ***CD-ROM 3*** for more guidance on translation issues. Also, if you are considering conducting a survey in a foreign language other than Spanish, call ***SUN Help Line*** at **(800) 492-9261** to see if other sponsors have conducted surveys in that language.

Estimating how much each component will cost or how long it will take to accomplish a task involves thinking about the following issues:

- The size of your survey (e.g., number of health plans included; size of geographic area covered by survey; number of questionnaires to be sent or telephone interviews conducted; length of field period);
- The scale of your project (e.g., use of both mail and telephone survey or only one; inclusion of survey in a broader health plan quality and choice communications and education effort; scope of publicity and dissemination efforts; number of reports to be produced and for how many audiences);
- The characteristics of your survey population (e.g., need for translation of questionnaire or reports for non-English-speaking, low literacy, or older populations); and
- The number of vendors/consultants and their responsibilities (e.g., extent to which in-house resources and expertise will suffice; need to hire a reports vendor as well as a survey vendor; type of consultants, if any, needed to advise on technical issues).

Because the nature and scope of CAHPS projects vary tremendously, we are unable to provide an exact budget or schedule. However, the worksheets contained in the ***CAHPS Project Planning Workbook*** appendix on ***CD-ROM 1*** may help you develop your budget. To develop your timeline, start with your ultimate deadline and work backward from there to identify key milestones. The sample timeline in the workbook provides some guidance.

Hire Survey and Reporting Vendors

Unless you are experienced in survey research, we recommend you hire a vendor to conduct data collection and analysis. Depending on your in-house expertise, available resources, and the nature of your survey, you also may want to hire a reports vendor (one for the print and another for the computer report) or a translation vendor. If you are conducting a survey for NCQA accreditation or HEDIS reporting purposes, the organization requires that you hire an NCQA-certified outside data collection and analysis vendor.

Hiring a vendor is a good idea for several reasons. By working with an outside firm to conduct your survey, you will help to ensure neutrality and credibility of your results. This is especially important as more sponsors collect the same CAHPS consumer data and begin to share their results. A professional and experienced survey firm will enhance the integrity of your CAHPS data. Survey vendors can usually provide you with better quality products at a lower cost than if you were to do it yourself. Vendors typically have trained staff to perform the activities, as well as the facilities and equipment (e.g., large-scale mailing facilities; telephone switching equipment; computer, printing, and graphics capability) to handle the tasks.

Hiring a Vendor

Hiring the right vendor is critical to the success of your project. You need to have a very clear understanding of your vendor's capabilities and strengths so you can match them to the needs of your project (e.g., if you are going to do a telephone survey, make sure the vendor is experienced in this area). Some survey vendors will be able to handle your reporting needs as well; others will not. Ask whether your survey vendor can do reports, and look at samples of its work in this area. You may find that you would be better off with a separate reporting vendor.

Possible sources of help include the following:

- SUN (it has a list of vendors hired by other CAHPS sponsors);
- NCQA (it has a list of vendors that it has certified to carry out the CAHPS 2.0H survey);
- A local university (it may have a commercial survey research center or can recommend local vendors); and
- Vendors that other departments of your organization have used previously.

Develop a Request for Proposal (RFP)

The first step in hiring a vendor is developing an RFP. An RFP is essentially a way of telling prospective vendors what work you want done, how you want them to do it, and when the bids and work are due. An RFP also helps you by forcing you to organize your needs and timeline. The ***Hiring and Managing Your CAHPS Vendor*** appendix on ***CD-ROM 1*** contains a sample RFP and guidance on evaluating bids, selecting vendors, and developing a contract.

The RFP should contain a statement of work that describes the background for the survey and provides details of what needs to be done and how. It should also contain background material on the project; a schedule that specifies when activities should be completed and delivered; specifics on vendor responsibilities; details on the bidding, proposal evaluation, and selection process; and details on payment amounts and methods. Some tips for successful RFPs include the following:

- Make tasks, expectations, deadlines, and deliverables clear and specific.
- Ask for all the documentation, files, data sets, and other deliverables you think will be needed. (The contract you eventually sign with a vendor will be based on the specifications laid out in the RFP. You will not be able to go back and ask for any of these items later unless you modify the budget, so it is good to include them in the RFP.)
- Include monitoring, supervision, and problem resolution procedures.

When evaluating bids from vendors, carefully consider both the technical approach and the cost proposal. Look for the following:

- A demonstrated understanding of the project;
- Coherent, well-thought-through responses to the specifics of the RFP;
- Well-qualified staff with sufficient expertise; and
- Value for the cost proposed.

After reading through all the proposals, pick two or three vendors for further evaluation. Talk to them personally, and talk with their other clients. Consider visiting their facilities (this will be especially helpful for telephone survey vendors). These meetings and visits will help you determine whether you and the vendor will be able to work together well. To get the most from the visits and meetings, make sure that you include someone from your team with expertise in survey design, data collection, analysis, and reports production.

Develop the Contract

When you have chosen a vendor, draw up a contract that clearly states everything you expect to be done and when the work is to be completed. Use legal assistance as necessary to develop the language and terms. This contract will be like any other contract with an outside vendor. Include in the contract any incentives for meetings goals or targets, penalties for deadlines that are not met, or penalties for falling short of the required response rates and completed questionnaires.

Remember that even though the contract flows out of your RFP, the contract is the legally binding document. Make sure that everything you want and need from the vendor is specified in the contract. You can even include the vendor's technical and cost proposals, which detail the activities, deadlines, products, and amount and method of payment, as attachments to the contract. Before signing, review this document one last time with your audiences and goals and objectives in mind. Will the work specified really accomplish what you want it to? If not, then you should negotiate any necessary changes with your vendor.

Notes From the Field

After completing its CAHPS survey and reporting project, a sponsor decided to submit the data to the ***National CAHPS Benchmarking Database*** (NCBD). The CAHPS team had contracted with its vendor to provide a report for consumers, but had not included a request for a copy of the data set or for specific information about the administration of their CAHPS survey, both of which were necessary for participation in the NCBD. They requested from the vendor a copy of the survey response and administration files. The vendor replied that it would cost the sponsor more than $10,000 to retrieve these files and prepare them in the proper format. If they had anticipated and planned for this need, it would have cost much less.

The next chapter covers in more detail the issues involved in reporting CAHPS results and how they fit into your overall survey and reporting project.