

# tools of the trade

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## **Utilizing Results**

*Utilization-Focused Evaluation. Michael Q. Patton. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1978. 304 pp. \$12.50 (paper).*

In this book, Patton argues for an approach to evaluation that has utilization built in from the start. Utilization isn't a matter of examining the results of an evaluation study and deciding what if anything can be used to document impact or improve programming. Rather evaluation studies are relevant when decision makers and anticipated information users help formulate the questions on which data are gathered. Then, when a study is complete, the issue of how the results will be used has long ago been resolved.

Patton points out that evaluation results, if used, can be an important source of power. However, he warns that utilization isn't something that occurs suddenly at the time of a decision. Utilization is a gradual process over an extended period of time. He warns also that evaluators expect government decision making to be totally rational, but it is and will continue to be largely political.

Patton's framework of utilization-focused evaluation is *not* presented as a formal model or recipe for conducting evaluation research. In fact, the only real requirements are that evaluators identify relevant decision makers and information users, and work closely with these people in deciding evaluation questions, design, methods, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination.

About half the book is devoted to the question: What do evaluators have to do differently to produce evaluations that will actually be used? Suggestions are given, but Patton takes a pragmatic stance and stresses flexibility rather than a single design.

A convincing argument is offered for why a utilization-based approach is necessary, but the reader isn't provided sufficient guidance for choosing among the many alternative options. In lieu of a structured approach, evaluators are expected to assume an "active-reactive-adaptive" posture. The best I can tell, these are fancy terms that mean evaluators need to be flexible and adaptable.

The main audience for this book is evaluators. Field staff will find the central message important, but the reader shouldn't expect a "how-to-do-it" manual. There's more than the necessary theoretical jargon for readers to wade through. In addition, an assumption throughout the book is that evaluators are separate and apart from programming staff.

Because of the emphasis on the policymaker's role in evaluation, the functions of the evaluator are downplayed. Even though Patton denies doing so, to a great extent, he relegates the evaluator to a technician to be manipulated by policymakers. While it may be necessary to overemphasize the need to involve policymakers to bring some balance into the evaluation process, it's as much a mistake to understate the importance of evaluators as it is of policymakers.

However, even with these limitations, Patton communicates an important message for all Extension staff . . . unless evaluation is used, it's not worth doing.

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