The planning cycle sensibly requires some feedback, assessment or reflection to measure the success or otherwise of a venture – and to help whatever the next step is to be. Obviously, if the result has been a disaster then the next step is to do something else, but at least you know where you are. For example, the memo at the Harland and Wolff shipyard in 1912 read: ‘Double-check plans for successor to the Titanic.’

So, when planning a lecture, meeting, course or any form of training we need to ask for feedback from those attending, which usually means designing a form. The immediate question is: what sort of information do you want to get back? There are obvious things such as the usefulness of the day, the value of the content and the quality of the speakers, but it becomes more difficult when you try to discover, for example, how the event was appraised against learning objectives. This is more difficult because it is more complicated, and the more complicated it becomes the more opportunities there are for people to make a muddle of it. And some will.

No matter how simple you think you’ve made something, someone will always come up with a point you haven’t thought of. Why have you used white paper when this is harder on the eye than green paper? Is it recycled paper? Will you be recycling after you’ve extracted the data – if yes, why haven’t you said so? Where is your environment impact statement?

Having sorted it out as well as you can (and let’s be honest – it could very easily be a night-before-the-event, ‘oh damn, I’ve forgotten to do the feedback form’ sort of a task) you ensure copies are placed in delegate packs or laid out on seats. You also ask the chairperson to specifically mention it in their introductory remarks. They forget. You remind them at the morning coffee break and they apologise – but then forget again, so just before lunch you wave a copy at them from the back of the room and the announcement is given to kindly complete the forms and hand them in at the reception desk. Three conscientious delegates do so immediately despite one of the questions being ‘How was lunch?’, which they haven’t yet eaten, as well as giving their opinion of all of the afternoon speakers, none of whom have yet presented.

Another reminder at the end of the session does mean that the majority of attendees complete the form, albeit resting on their handbags, cases and coats so that the paper rapidly transforms from a crisp A4 sheet to a crumpled, ball-point-pen-smudged mess, but at least you get the data you need. Or do you?

Asking for a score against the educational objectives between one and 10, at least one person will put 73, two will write ‘very nice’ and several others will ignore it as they weren’t sure what you meant exactly. A fair majority will like the presenters but wonder why one of them wore an orange top with green shoes, a handful will have doodled on the sheet with alarming images of skulls and knives and someone, always someone, will leave the whole of the questionnaire blank and merely write ‘the salad was warm’ at the bottom. Feedback or foodback?

Stephen Hancocks is Editor-in-Chief of the British Dental Journal. He can be contacted at shancocks@aol.com

Do you have a bugbear or can you offer a light-hearted look at training? Let us know. Please email nesceducation@nesc.nhs.uk