Can You Hear Me Now?

Using Focus Groups to Enhance Marketing Research

Deborah Lee

In previous columns we've talked about the role of marketing research in the marketing process. One very useful means of collecting marketing data is the focus group. More than informal discussions, focus groups require a great deal of preparatory effort. And like surveys, the more effort invested in the planning and implementation stages for focus groups, the greater the payoff.

Having served as both a moderator and member of focus groups, I know they can be a unique opportunity to explore an issue far beyond the ability of a static survey. With careful planning, focus groups can be an excellent complement to your marketing research set of tools.

Focus Groups: Definitions

Focus groups are a qualitative method used to collect data from users or clients in a group setting. David Morgan presents three defining characteristics that all focus groups have in common: they are a qualitative research method for collecting data, they are focused data gathering exercises, and they use group discussions to generate the data collected.[1] Beyond this, focus groups take on a number of appearances.

It's important to note what focus groups are not: they are not an informal discussion between key librarians and their users. Such informal means of gathering information can be vital, and within the academic community the use of liaisons has been used very effectively to tap into this useful informal information from users. The use of focus groups, while a qualitative data-gathering process, is a more structured endeavor. As is the case with surveys, libraries interested in using focus groups should carefully evaluate whether the time and effort invested will ultimately be beneficial to the library.

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Library Uses of Focus Groups

Focus groups have been used very effectively in a number of library settings. The literature on the use of focus groups within public services is quite large. Research projects involving focus groups have been used to examine reference services, circulation, library instruction, and numerous other library services. Von Seggern and Young provide a good overview of this literature, including an annotated bibliography.[2] Other researchers have explored use of focus groups with nontraditional populations. Large and Beheshti have pioneered the use of focus groups with children, stressing the need to carefully follow procedures governing research with children and the advisability of holding same-sex sessions.[3]

Focus groups can be used for program assessment and marketing endeavors beyond public services. The concept of internal marketing focuses on permeating a marketing culture throughout the enterprise, including internal service departments. Focus groups can be used to help these internal units, such as systems or technical services, connect with their "users" or "clients"—namely, the other library personnel using those services. Elhard and Jin describe the efforts of the cataloging department at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to assess their service to other library units. They held several focus groups with both librarians and library staff, with each session focused on seven core questions.[4]

Developing a Focus Group

There are five critical steps in developing and implementing a focus group:

- Plan the focus group research process.
- Recruit members for the research group.
- Appoint a moderator for the research group.
- Conduct the focus group.
- Analyze the focus group data.

Planning the focus group is a critical step in the process. Focus groups are neither easy nor inexpensive

to implement. The payoff, however, is a type of data not easily obtained from other means. The planning process will include identifying the type of data needed, the target audience, and the moderator.

Focus groups are best suited to topics that require some type of follow-up. While typically a focus group will have a set of predetermined questions, the real benefit of this method is the ability to ask follow-up questions and related items based on the discussion. A predetermined set of core questions will aid in evaluating answers across multiple focus group sessions or across different user groups. Questions should be open-ended and appropriate for the user group involved in the session.

Virtually any user group can be queried using the focus group method. I have even participated in a focus group via telephone. The members of the focus group were seven librarians, each located in a different type of library and in a different state. Whether it's a group of local businesses, parents with young children, or some other type of clientele, virtually any market segment that can be defined can be successfully canvassed by a focus group.

However, identifying a target audience is one thing; getting them to show up is another. Consider how to best attract members to your focus group. Some type of reward or enticement usually improves attendance. Food works well with some groups (graduate students in particular). Undergraduates can be particularly difficult to attract to focus groups. Some strategies that have helped improve attendance include offering a raffle (free tickets, book, or some other attraction) or a reward for attendance. (As a librarian, I've picked up several new books from online booksellers as a reward for participating in a library-related focus group.)

The success of the focus group depends in no small part on the skill of the moderator. Most resources strongly suggest using an outside moderator, someone who is not vested with the outcome of the session.[5] It's important that the moderator be impartial. Focus group members may not be complimentary about library services (which is part of the data collection process) and they may also be misinformed. If focus group members complain about the lack of after-school programming at the local public library, for example, the moderator should not correct this misperception even if he or she knows that numerous programs are available. It's the perception of the focus group member that counts, not the accuracy. Unfortunately, using an outside moderator can significantly increase the cost of the focus group. Whoever serves as the moderator will need to skillfully keep the discussions on track and be alert to the need for follow-up questions where warranted.

When conducting the focus group, choose a physical area that will facilitate discussion. In addition to the focus group members and the moderator, several additional staff should be available to handle last-minute details and to take notes. The moderator's focus should be on keeping the session moving; someone else will need to make note of comments. Consider recording not just the responses but visual clues as well: whether the speaker was agitated, defensive, angry, unsure of their response, and so on. If you're planning on recording the session, be sure to obtain written permission from all group members and make sure focus group members know that the session will be taped or recorded ahead of time. To be sure you cover the concepts and core questions in each session, keep the session focused. The moderator will want to make sure the sessions start and end on time.

After the session a useful way to follow up the focus group experience is to send the participants a thank-you letter. This is an excellent way to also address any issues that may have been raised. (For example, to follow up on the situation of after-school programming mentioned above, you could provide information to focus group attendees concerning this issue.)

There are a number of ways to analyze the data. Most review the data, looking for commonalities in responses. Von Seggern and Young describe the use of The Enthnograph, a software package designed to assist with the analysis of textual data.[6] This software provides a more formal analysis of the data, drawing in part on content analysis of the responses given.

Typically, data collected from focus groups constitute one part of a larger marketing research process and augment other data. Focus groups can be an excellent way to explore in greater depth issues raised by surveys or from user comments. When planned well, focus groups can yield unique insights into how users (or nonusers) view library services.

When developing your next marketing plan, consider using focus groups. A number of publishers and database providers use focus groups to evaluate their own services and products for libraries and librarians. Volunteering to serve as a member of such a group allows you to see firsthand how a focus group is run and gives you an opportunity to have input into the products and services you use. And who knows, you might even earn a free book along the way!

References

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