Gathering Evidence: Practical Uses of Focus Groups to Prove Your Library’s Worth

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Without data, you’re lost

Mike Bloomberg
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In God we trust. Everyone else, bring data:
on.nyc.gov/oHMCK0  #NYC  #Smoking  #PublicHealth

5:17 PM - 15 Sep 2011
What is wrong with surveys?

- Excessive reliance on surveys limits types of questions libraries are asking (Halpern et al., 2015)
- How many, how much, how often but no real answer to “why”
- Wide disparity between findings of surveys and focus groups – focus groups reveal “patterns of deep concern” (Shoaf, 2003)
What is a focus group?

- **Definition:** “a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Kruger & Casey, 2000)

- Common in web usability, product testing, political opinion research, Hollywood movie endings

- Earliest use in LIS in early 80s
OK then, what are focus groups for?

- Learning more about a few people’s experiences
- Gathering beliefs and attitudes about an idea, product or service through open-ended questions
- Finding ideas left unvoiced in one-on-one interviews / surveys
Focus groups at the SCC Library

• Have used them for a number of years with law clerks
• In the past, questions about range of services & products
• 2015 Q – “Would a listing of major research resources related to each hearing be useful?”
• New “Case Guides” product launched Fall 2015
• FG with law clerks Feb. 2016
What are Case Guides at the SCC?

Starting place for materials relevant to cases on appeal:

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**Case Guides / Guides sur les appels**

**April / avril 2016**

*Disclaimer:* The content below provides a starting point only, and does not represent exhaustive research.

*Mise en garde:* Ce qui suit constitue seulement un point de départ pour la recherche et ne représente pas un guide exhaustif.

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36460
2016-04-01 Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta v. Board of Governors of the University of Calgary (Alberta) (Civil) (By Leave)

University of Calgary v. R. (J.), 2015 ABCA 118
Date: 2015-04-02 Docket: Calgary Appeal 1301-0368-AC


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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of the Case / Nature de la cause</th>
<th>Note-up / citateur</th>
<th>Relevant Research Guide(s) / Guide(s) de recherche suggéré(s)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Articles, Books, Looseleafs and Annotated Legislation / Articles, livres, feuilles-mobiles et législations annotées</td>
<td>Suggested Research Strategies / Stratégies de recherche suggérées</td>
<td>Table of Authorities / Recueil de sources citées par les parties</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Moderator

- Pro moderator can cost a lot
- **We chose Court employee who does not work for the library and who does not use the case guides**
- Look for friendliness, sense of humour, curiosity about new insights, non-judgmental
Developing Questions

- Open-ended
- Clear meaning
- One topic per question
- Any hidden biases?
- Lead to practical answers that can be easily implemented
- If time, do pilot study
What did we want to find out?

- At what pt. in research process are guides used?
- Useful / useless sections?
- Do suggested materials directly answer the research question?
- Delivered too early / late in the research process?
- Continue / terminate project?
Recruitment

Finding people takes a lot of work:
Recruitment (2)

- Group size: 8-12 common practice in N. America
- Do not mix people with different power levels
- Recruit more than you need to offset no-shows
- Incentive – payable only upon attendance – pizza, coffee card, etc.
Running the session

- **You must never be in the room, ever!!!**
- **Feed them quickly!!!**
- Circular seating is best
- Beepers and phones off!!!
- Welcome script – mod does not work for you, feelings won’t be hurt
- Print outs
- Questions on flipchart or PPT
Running the session (2)

Question sequence from broad to narrow:

- Ice-breaker question to launch, put people at ease
- Exploration questions
- Silences, boredom: re-energizing questions
- Ask to compare, sort, rate, give examples…
Analysis

• Transcribe notes: tone, heated moments, surprise, when felt positive or negative
• Listen to tapes to fill in info blanks
• Combine responses into common themes, exclude anything that does not fit research questions i.e. not everything is worthy of analysis
• Report – background, results, discussion – include interesting direct quotes if you can: “Your librarians are amazing. Can you clone them?”
Lessons learned

- Test audio in advance
- Don’t skimp on food
- Not too many questions
- People want to be liked, say nice things - We’re in luck: lawyers, law profs & students are outspoken, opinionated, blunt
Possible drawbacks

- Can’t generalize without corroboration
- Not for emotionally charged topics
- Groupthink, social desirability bias
- Unwillingness to accept negative comments: 1985 New Coke marketing disaster was predicted in disregarded focus group sessions


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