

Focus Groups:

Another Tool for Library Management?

Professional Perspectives — Tools and Techniques of the Trade. The Professional Development Committee encourages members to continue to explore topics after presentations at the local, regional and national levels. We welcome your comments and article suggestions. Please contact Lori Hedstrom at 651/687-5891 or lori.hedstrom@westgroup.com.

Talk Amongst Yourselves

Librarians are interested in how the library and its services are viewed by their patrons. The reasons may range from the altruistic — librarians want the library to provide the best service possible to meet the needs of its patrons — to the practical. Librarians may need to expand (or contract) the physical facility or ask for a larger budget but need some solid information to back their requests. They may want to convince the power structure that librarians are the “go-to” people for information. Many reasons can create a need for input from users.

How does one go about gathering this input? Traditionally, librarians have used surveys on paper, with varying degrees of success. The return rate on surveys is uneven at best. Online surveys might intrigue the technologically advanced library patron but still not generate sufficient completed questionnaires. Whether on paper or online, however, surveys require sophisticated questions to retrieve detailed information. An alternative method that has been used by businesses and marketing operations for years to gain information on products and services is the focus group.

Focus groups can generate information that is largely unavailable through other types of research or surveys. “A relatively small group of interested people can, by talking among themselves and with a moderator, produce more valuable thoughts and ideas than if each participant were interviewed separately,” according to George Edward Breen, Alan Dutka and A.B. Blankenship in *State of the Art Marketing Research*. Focus groups can also provide more information than the informal surveys that are distributed in libraries. Attorneys use focus groups to prepare for trial, to develop criteria for selecting jurors, to flag potential juror reactions and to prepare effective arguments. Librarians can use focus groups to gather valuable information on library use. One caveat, however: A focus

group is not a sample of the population. The results of a focus group are simply what the people involved in that discussion think about the topics under discussion. In addition, focus groups are only as valuable as the time and effort put into preparing for them.

How to Use Focus Groups

There are a number of elements that determine the functionality of focus groups. These include: deciding whether to hire a professional to run the focus groups; selecting participants; developing questions; deciding on the timing of the focus groups; choosing a facilitator and note-taker; conducting the focus groups; and reporting.

Do it yourself or hire a professional?

The first question is whether the library should conduct the focus group itself or hire a professional to organize and carry out the process. An outside professional is most likely neutral and is much less likely to influence the outcome of the focus group by bringing preconceived notions to it.

The Valparaiso University School of Law has conducted focus groups on a variety of topics by hiring professional facilitators. On the other hand, the Valparaiso Law Library decided to handle the process itself in the three years that it held focus group sessions. It is less expensive to do the process oneself, but it is time-consuming.

Selecting participants. The best focus groups use participants who are randomly chosen but homogeneous. The experts say that the best-sized focus group has seven to 12 participants. There should be enough people to have a free-flowing discussion, but not so large a group that one or two people are likely to dominate the conversation. Participants should feel that they are involved in a creative project that is gathering information that will be of use to the library. It is common to offer an inducement to get people to attend focus groups. Professionals frequently pay money or offer meals.

In selecting its participants, the Valparaiso Law Library asked the law school registrar to randomly select 25 students from the first- and third-year classes. The registrar gathered enough students to make the discussions meaningful. This method produced a random list of potential participants, but the group became self-selected when those invited accepted or declined the invitations.

Developing questions. Developing the questions for the focus groups is time-consuming. The questions need to be neutral in tone, open-ended, non-leading, and designed to stimulate thinking and discussion. Although the questions must be crafted with care, the facilitator may not use the questions as written, but rather express the questions in his or her own words when stimulating discussion.

Developing the questions was one of our biggest problems. We knew the type of information that we wanted to gather, but writing questions that did not express any bias on our part turned out to be surprisingly difficult. Once we had a decent set of questions, however, we were able to recycle them, with revisions, in future years.

Timing. Deciding when to conduct focus groups is another consideration. Information for a particular purpose — for example, user opinions about a proposed remodeling — can be gathered when it is needed. Focus groups of summer clerks would have to be held fairly close to the end of their summer experience. In our case, we wanted to obtain information on library services from students at the end of their first and third academic years. Trying to find a time at the end of the school year when students are willing to devote an hour to discussing the library, even when food is offered, can prove difficult. In the best of all possible worlds, a library would hold two or three 60- to 90-minute sessions to really cover all the bases. We were lucky to get seven or eight students to participate in a one-hour session.

A Desktop Learning Opportunity

Selecting a facilitator and note-taker. The role of the facilitator is to foster the best possible discussion on the matters under consideration. The facilitator must let the discussion roam freely, yet be able to bring it back on track. He or she must rein in overly talkative group members without being domineering. The facilitator has to have a good memory for names and be as neutral as possible. The success of the focus group will depend on the ability of the facilitator to obtain meaningful discussion from the group. To effectively lead the discussion, the facilitator should be thoroughly briefed on the topics under discussion and be prepared for the many possible directions that the conversation might follow.

A librarian can be the library's own facilitator or someone can be brought from the outside. We decided that the students would be more forthcoming if no member of the law library staff was present at the sessions. We were lucky to have a psychologist in the campus counseling center with experience in conducting focus groups. One of the faculty secretaries served as the formal note-taker. She shared her notes with the facilitator, who combined her own notes on the discussions with the those taken by the secretary and produced a report for us. Tape recording the sessions is also very valuable.

Conducting the focus group. Focus groups have to be held in a location convenient to the members of the group. A professional organization that conducts focus groups regularly will most likely have a facility with a one-way mirror and other furnishings that are conducive to discussion and observation. Libraries planning on conducting groups themselves are not likely to have that kind of facility available. In such a case, they need a setting that is conducive to free-flowing discussion. Unless the facilitator and the participants already know each other well, name cards should be provided. The rules for the discussion should be covered first. At the end of the discussion, the facilitator should summarize for the group the points and suggestions discussed during the session.

For the convenience of the students, we conducted the focus groups in law school seminar rooms. The students were on familiar territory and were used to having discussions in those rooms. We held the focus groups in mid-April, about two weeks before the beginning of exams. Librarians brought in donuts and juice for the groups and ensured that the groups had everything they needed. Otherwise, the facilitator ran the meetings. The groups themselves ran smoothly, according to the facilitator and the note-taker.

Results. A debriefing should be held with the facilitator as soon as the session is finished to gather preliminary thoughts and reactions. The facilitator should also provide a written report after all the sessions are concluded.

Our facilitator gave us a short oral report after each session, telling us the highlights of the discussions, and then wrote up a formal report. Although the information we gathered did not reveal any earth-shaking new insights, we learned some interesting things. For example, many students didn't realize that we published a library newsletter even though it was placed in their lockers. We discovered that the library signage was inadequate, so we developed new signage.

The Power of Focus Groups

Focus groups can be powerful sources of information for library planning. They can allow the participants to contribute to library operations and projects, while flattering them because their opinions are solicited and valued. Library managers who need information should consider focus groups as a method of gathering needed information.

Thoughts to Ponder

- What kinds of information are needed that can best be gathered by using focus groups?
- Does the need for information make it worth the time, effort and expense to conduct focus groups?
- What will be the best method to guarantee that those selected attend the group meetings?

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Other Sources of Information

Joan L. Axelroth & Mary Talley, "Listening to Focus Groups: Find out What Users Need, How They View Library Services, and What Can Be Improved", *23 Legal Times* 22 (July 17, 2000).

The Management Assistance Project for Nonprofits has useful information on conducting focus groups on its Web site at <http://www.mapnp.org>.

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