Focus Groups Gauge Satisfaction of Interdisciplinary Customer Segments

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Introduction

In 2005, librarians at the Research Library at the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) conducted a series of focus groups. The purpose was to assess the information needs and satisfaction of a unique group of interdisciplinary customers in three emerging research areas. A 2001 comprehensive survey had shown a need for additional resources in these research areas; collection development efforts had since addressed augmenting the gaps.

The focus group is one of a variety of assessment tools used at the NIST Research Library to evaluate customer needs. It was selected in this case to permit librarian facilitators to drill down to obtain rich qualitative data about a specialized interdisciplinary customer segment.

Participant demographics

Identification of researchers in the interdisciplinary areas was challenging, as they were spread across all NIST work units. A focus group team of library liaisons used a variety of outreach mechanisms to locate them. Of 53 researchers contacted, 29 agreed to participate in the focus group discussions.

Participants included project leaders, first and second line supervisors, laboratory technical managers, and bench scientists. The participants are located across the NIST campus in nine distinct laboratories and programs.

Planning

The timeline below describes the assessment’s planning and execution phases.

Logistics

A member of the focus group team facilitated each session, providing invaluable face-to-face time with the interdisciplinary customer participants. This also eliminated lead time and costs associated with a professional facilitator.

Four 90-minute sessions were planned with a maximum of eight participants.

Developed questions

The team collaborated with six other library liaisons, the Research Library Advisory Board, and the management team to develop eight areas and we want you to share your ideas about the Library. We’re particularly interested in finding out how you use the library’s resources and what you find most and least helpful about the library’s collection.

Ground Rules

- Responses filtered by research area only.
- Participant responses kept confidential.
- Responses aggregated into general themes.

Analysis

The team transcribed responses to questions and coded each one. They then grouped coded responses together by theme.

Themes Identified

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection</th>
<th>Outreach and Marketing</th>
<th>Interlibrary Loan</th>
<th>Website/interface/User Feedback</th>
<th>Classification/Reference</th>
<th>Training Needs/Opportunities</th>
<th>Customer Satisfaction</th>
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Findings

Researchers in all three interdisciplinary segments were satisfied with the Library and its services, particularly with the helpfulness of staff and the speed and efficiency of the interlibrary loan process. Participants pointed out subsections of the portal/book collection that needed to be filled in, such as biological imaging and biomechanics. They made requests such as “streamline the Virtual Library to cut down on the number of places to search,” and “need more information about the various databases.” Actions have been completed or are under way to address these requests.

There are unexpected benefits to using focus groups, surveys, as a customer assessment tool. In this assessment the discussion format brought to light the fact that the so-called “emerging research areas” had become very well integrated into the NIST work units over the past four years. This made it possible to apply many of the comments from the focus group participants to the understanding of habits, needs, and patterns of all NIST researchers.

What we learned

- A focus group assessment can produce much rich data about the information needs of a specialized customer group.
- Focus groups provide beneficial prospects for outreach and “face time” with customers, with built-in follow-up opportunities for relationship building.
- Outside consultants may lack the background to decode customer comments during discussions. Here, inside knowledge of NIST research was important in directing and interpreting the flow of the group discussions.
- Focus group findings can be unexpected. Be prepared to analyze data with an open mind.
- Interdisciplinary participants may take advantage of the focus group format to meet new colleagues and exchange ideas—another unanticipated benefit.
- Delegating after each session and coding of responses are each time-intensive processes which require much discussion.
- Focus group format allows users to say why they are satisfied with the Library and its services—often a more useful measure than findings from quantitative surveys.