

Focus Groups Gauge Satisfaction of Interdisciplinary Customer Segments



Nancy Allmang Mylene Ouimette

nancy.allmang@nist.gov mylene.ouimette@nist.gov

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 aroup 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

seament

Research in three overlapping interdisciplinary areas-Nanotechnology, Biosystems and Health Homeland Security-takes place across NIST work units

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 aroup discussions.

Participants included project leaders, first and second line supervisors, laboratory technical managers, and bench scientists.

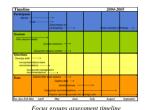
The participants are located across the NIST campus in nine distinct laboratories and programs.



The focus group participants were evenly spread across nine NIST work units

Planning

The timeline below describes the assessment's planning and execution nhases



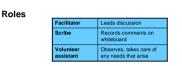
Logistics

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

Developed questions

The team collaborated with six other library liaisons, the Research Library Advisory Board, and the management team to develop eight questions. Arranged in sequence from broad to specific, the series ended with two "cooling down" questions designed to allow participants to articulate their greatest concerns

(1) How do you use the library's services and collection in your current interdisciplinary ("strategic focus area") research work?	(2) Which resources are of most value to you in your current interdisciplinary work?	(3) How comprehensive do you find the library's collection to be for your interdisciplinary research area?	(4) What do you find most and least helpful about the library's resource collection?
(5) How satisfied are you that the Research Library understands and meets your information needs?	(6) Do you have any different information needs/work habits in your current interdisciplinary research as compared to	(7) What one thing should the Research Library stop doing?	(8) What one thing should the Research Library start doing?
"How," "what,"	Lprevious projects?	ons encouraged partici	pant discussion



Ground Rules

Responses tracked by research area only.

- Participant responses kept confidential.
- Responses aggregated into general themes.

Script

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Script used at the four focus group sessions

Analysis

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

	Themes Identified
Collecti	on
Outread	ch and Marketing
Interlibr	ary Loan
Website	e Navigation/User Feedback
Electro	nic Resource Usage
Training	g Needs/Opportunities
Desired	New Services
Custor	er Satisfaction

Comments heard at the four focus group sessions were coded by theme

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 journal/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.

The team organized findings into acti	ion items according to
the time needed to comp	elete them

Short-term Solutions: Doable within one month	Discrete Projects Complete w one fiscal y	collect benchmark	Strategic Projects: Will take more than one year; enhance long-term services, capabilities
Example:	Example:	Example:	Example:
Increase	Disseminate	Develop a	increase
variety of	NIST-wide	comprehensiv	knowledge
content posted	newsletter in	e user training	management
on electronic	multiple	plan with	opportunities
bulletin boards	electronic	short and	across
outside library	formats vs.	long-term	interdisciplinary

There are unexpected benefits to using focus groups, versus 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 receptorhere

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

Debriefing after each session and coding of responses are each timeintensive processes which require much discussion.

Focus group format allows users to say why they are satisfied with library services-often a more useful measure than findings from quantitative surveys.

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