Are You On Target? The Basics of Audience Research & Field Testing

“I read the brochure and stared at the words ‘dead tissue’ for a long time. I thought to myself, ‘My daughter has dead tissue. Does this mean she is worse than I thought and she’s going to die because her tissue is dead?’ I got so upset about it that I called the doctor immediately to ask what was going to happen since her tissue is dead and what this meant for my daughter long term.” Mother of a burn victim

“We were supposed to design a brochure to help the families of burn patients understand what was happening to them. We felt it was important to tell them about necrotic tissue and eschar, but we made the mistake of using the term ‘dead tissue’ to explain this concept. We did not realize this term would evoke such emotion in the families. Thank goodness we field-tested the brochure. We almost caused families more heartache and stress then they already had.” – Medical Center Field Tester

What is audience research and field-testing?

According to the Department of Health and Human Services, audience research is defined as any communication research that is conducted on specific audience segments to gather information about their attitudes, knowledge, interests, preferences, or behaviors related to a certain topic. Segments may be based on various grouping strategies, such as race and ethnicity, age, education, or disease state. Field testing is a type of audience research that is conducted once an initial pilot test has taken place. It is testing something (information, materials, etc.) under the conditions in which it will actually be used.

Why is audience research important?

Audience research is essential for several reasons. Mostly importantly, audience research increases the chances that the information will be meaningful, valuable, and well utilized, and it decreases the chances that the information will be poorly received and fail in producing the anticipated effect in the target audience.

It is also essential that the message intended for the audience is the message delivered to the audience.
People often view the same thing and see it in completely different ways. (This is especially true across cultures!) This is why it is imperative to get opinions from people who are the intended audience before printing/giving information on a large scale. By having the message get to the intended audience in an understandable, acceptable fashion saves both time and money. Audience research is also important in order to learn about potential or current audiences and the types of incentives and barriers that the audiences perceive about the issue, as well as which incentives and barriers that might be addressed effectively. In addition, information often is obtained about the audience's preferred methods or formats of communication and respected or credible sources of information.

Once audience research has been conducted and analyzed, the results can be used to create concepts and/or messages to achieve the objectives, such as increasing knowledge, changing attitudes, enhancing motivation to change behaviors, and increasing the perceived benefits of new behaviors. Audience research can also help to ensure that the information is understandable and compelling, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and supportive to the relevant issue.

**What do you want to learn from audience research?**

You want to learn whether or not your information is:

- Readable
- Content appropriate
- Cultural / Language appropriate
- Understandable
- Relevant / easy to use
- Acceptable / Appealing
- Convincing, believable
- Suitable in format, graphics, and illustrations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>Appeal</th>
<th>Utility</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ask: “Can our audience read and understand main points and objectives?”</td>
<td>Ask: “How does the audience respond? Is the information relevant and easy to read?”</td>
<td>Ask:” Will the reader use this information? Is it applicable to real life situations? “</td>
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**Ask questions like the examples in the table above to determine if the information is meeting the criteria for the area in question. Also see the Ways to Make Your Written Material More Effective section below. **
Advantages and Disadvantages of Audience Research

Advantages include:

- Exploring a topic or idea with target audiences
- Gaining insight into what and how people think and feel about a topic or idea
- Understanding the language individuals use to talk about a topic or idea
- Observing the adoption of new behavior within the context of peoples' daily lives
- Discovering motivations that underlie behavior
- Identifying common themes within the group
- Determining whether information is relevant, understandable, and accepted
- Improving the planning and design of a new piece of material

Disadvantages include:

- Significant amount of time and preparation required
- Incentives for participants are often necessary
- Moderator must be experienced and skilled for maximum benefit to take place
- Participants often are not randomly selected
- Some participants tend to express views that are consistent with social standards and try not to present themselves negatively; therefore, they do not give an accurate picture of the target population
- Often the number of participants in typical audience research is too small to be representative of the population.

Different Types of Audience Testing

Surveys

Surveys are often a simple way to collect information or opinions about an idea, belief, or current behavior of a sample population. When conducting a survey, a group of people is selected, they are asked the same group of questions, and their answers are documented. For the best results,
the survey questions and answers should be simple, but very specific and should be administered to a large group of the target population. Surveys can be administered face-to-face, written, via telephone, or via email. The advantages and disadvantages of each technique are listed in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Face to face</th>
<th>Telephone</th>
<th>Written</th>
<th>Internet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cost</strong></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Very low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speed</strong></td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Fast</td>
<td>Slow</td>
<td>Fast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Prerequisites</strong></td>
<td>Interviewers must be able to reach respondents</td>
<td>All must have telephone</td>
<td>All must be literate</td>
<td>All must have internet access</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main problems</strong></td>
<td>Organizing interviewer tasks</td>
<td>Getting telephone numbers</td>
<td>Dealing with poorly completed questionnaires</td>
<td>Strong computer skills needed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Dennis List [http://www.sysurvey.com/tips/audience.htm](http://www.sysurvey.com/tips/audience.htm)***

**Interviews (in-depth & central location intercept)**

There are two types of interviews that are commonly conducted in audience testing: individual in-depth interviews and central location intercept interviews. In-depth interviews are conducted on a one-on-one basis and usually last 30 minutes to one hour. These interviews offer you the opportunity to gather information from individuals in the audience of interest in a more private setting in which group dynamics and social conformity are less likely to influence responses than they are in other settings. In this method you need to obtain a sample of respondents and, whether in person, by telephone, or through the Internet, pose a preset series of questions that explore relevant issues. These interviews often are recorded for later review. The results of these interviews are analyzed and reported with respect to the common themes that emerge, as well as to insights gained from specific individuals. Interviews frequently are used when it is difficult to bring together people in a focus group, when the subject may be embarrassing, or when participants may find it difficult to be candid in a group setting. Interviews also are more useful when the type of information being sought is of a confidential nature.

Central-location intercept interviews consist of stationing interviewers at a point frequented by individuals from the intended audience and asking individuals who appear to meet recruitment criteria to participate in the survey. If they agree to participate, they are asked specific screening questions to determine whether they fit the intended
audience profile. If they meet the screening criteria, the interviewer takes them to an interviewing station (a quiet spot at an office or other site), poses a short series of questions, or shows them prototypes of materials, and then administers a brief questionnaire (usually resembling a closed-ended survey) about their reactions to the materials. Unlike in-depth interviews, mall intercepts are usually fairly brief (10 to 20 minutes) and are not designed for spontaneous interactions between the respondent and the interviewer. Responses to the questions are tallied and/or summarized in a final report.

**Ethnographic Methods**

This method is meant to be unobtrusive and is conducted merely by observing a targeted population. Typically, researchers visit an area where they discreetly observe behaviors of interest. They supplement these observations with informal conversations with the intended audience who represent a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives. Data from other records (documents, recordings, photographs, and more) are used to "triangulate" and report on common themes and issues that emerge from these various sources. These methods are useful when you seek to understand the cultural context in which health beliefs and behaviors occur, how activities and interpersonal interactions give meaning to these beliefs and behaviors, and how these beliefs and behaviors fit (or do not fit) with the rest of an individual's daily life.

**Professional Input / Provider Reviews**

This method of audience research works specifically with those who will be distributing or administering the information to the target population. For example, the physician or nurse practitioner who would be handing out a brochure on a particular topic would be interviewed and/or would fill out a questionnaire about his/her opinion regarding the brochure. This type of audience research helps to ensure content accuracy and appropriateness of the information.

**Follow-up Techniques**

There are many options to test whether the audience understood the information they received. **Post tests** can be administered either orally or in written form to test whether the information was understood. See an example of a post test question to the right.

**Example:**
Circle snack foods that will help avoid cancer:
- Apples
- Popcorn
- Cupcakes
- Cookies
- Carrot sticks
- Cheese
The **listening test** can also be administered to test for understanding. To perform a listening test, read the information out loud to the participant. Pick key points from the passage and ask the participant to answer questions about those key points. Determine the amount of correct answers by dividing the number of questions answered correctly by the number of total questions. If the percentage is 70% or less, the information is too complicated for the participant. For more information on the listening test, see content in *You Can’t Tell By Looking!*

Another way to determine whether the readers understood the information, you can ask the them to read the information and **highlight or circle words** that they do not understand or have trouble reading. This is a great way to discover where the problem areas of the information are and what sections need more work. Asking the intended audience to **answer questions on an evaluation form** is another way to evaluate their understanding of the information. The form should have a set of standard questions with opportunities to make comments about certain aspects of the information. For an example of an evaluation form see [handout evaluation](#).

Lastly, a great way to start a discussion or conduct a follow-up is to have the participants **circle or write down words** that portray their feelings regarding the information. This can be a non-threatening way to open discussion about opinions or feelings that participants would not normally voice. For an example, see the [Here’s What I Think](#) evaluation sheet.

### Focus groups

Focus groups are typically comprised of 5 to 12 individuals who are recruited from the larger audience of interest. Like most other audience research, the goal of the focus group is to collect data that are of interest to the researcher so the discussion is carefully planned and guided to focus on a certain topic. The focus group offers a more real life environment where participants can interact and influence each other.

The number of groups convened varies with the number of subgroups or segments that one wishes to sample, time and resource constraints, and the ability to recruit sufficient numbers of participants. The researcher should aim for at least three focus groups for most accurate results. Recruiting may be difficult if the condition or disease is of low prevalence, if few members of the audience reside in a specific geographic area, or if the subject matter is personal or particularly sensitive.

These group sessions last from 1 to 2 hours and can be held in-person, by telephone, or through the Internet (e.g. blog or webcast). Each modality presents its own strengths and weaknesses. A trained moderator leads the group discussion using a moderator's guide. The discussion is often video and/or audio recorded for later analysis. Depending on the setting, the groups may be observed or listened to by other researchers or observers. The proceedings of the groups are reviewed and analyzed for common themes as well as for specific insights that may emerge from individual comments.
Preparing To Do Audience Research

You are probably wondering, “Where do I start?” Before you go any further, you need to decide on a goal for conducting the audience research. For example, do you want to find out how Asian immigrants view their healthcare and/or do you want to determine what can be done to improve Asian immigrants’ healthcare? Once your objectives are decided, you need to determine what method of audience research you are going to use. When determining which method to use, you must consider all of the following: participants, cost, timeframe, environment, availability of participants and other observers/researchers, and analysis/reporting. Once your method has been decided, you need to develop a plan and estimate your needed resources.

Developing Good Questions

Whether you are conducting focus groups or doing telephone surveys, the whole key to audience research is the questions that are asked. If you ask well planned, relevant questions, your follow-up and analysis will be simple. Here are some tips for how to write good questions:

1. Prepare questions beforehand! Your audience research will not be structured and organized if you do not prepare everyone involved before you get into the field. The questions should be predetermined, but should seem spontaneous to the participant.
2. When designing questions, ask yourself what problem, opinion, or need will be addressed with this question. If it is not relevant to the research objective(s), do not waste time asking it.
3. Limit the number of questions asked in one time period. If you have a lot of questions, hold two sessions to avoid boredom and frustration. Try to ask no more than 5-6 questions in one session. However, if you are running a 2 hour focus group, a good rule of thumb is 12 sequenced questions.
4. Ask general questions first so people can “warm up” to you and start to feel more comfortable. Ask specific or “uncomfortable” questions later or near the end of the session.
5. Ask neutral questions without any lead-in statement. For example, you would never say, “Ninety-five percent of people interviewed have never tried any illicit drugs. Have you ever tried any illicit drugs?”
6. When possible, try to ask open-ended questions, instead of closed-ended questions. Asking “What do you know about the nicotine patch?” will give more information than asking “Have you heard of the nicotine patch?” However, incorporating a mix of different kinds of questions is very effective. See examples listed below.
7. Ask questions in a logical order.
8. Make sure questions are clear, concise, and easy to understand.

### Types of Frequently Asked Questions & Examples

- **How old are you?** *(Closed-ended Question)*
- **What do you know about heart disease?** *(Open-ended Question)*
- **Why do you think it is difficult for you to lose weight?** *(Probing Question)*
- **Have you heard that diet pills are dangerous?** *(Leading Question)*

### Planning the Session

Remember the acronym SSARR when planning the session: schedule, setting, agenda, rules, and recording.

**S** – It is important to **schedule** the encounter when it is convenient for all participants so that maximum participation is achieved. This is especially important if participation is required in more than one session.

**S** – Make sure your **setting** is appropriate for the encounter. For example, if you hold a focus group, it would be inappropriate to hold it in an open lobby area. A better option would be a conference room with good lighting and an optimal temperature. Name tags and refreshments are always an added bonus to convey importance and appreciation to your participants.

**A** – Part of your preparation should always be to design a set **agenda**. This will help the encounter run smoothly and will help both the researcher and participants stay on track. The recommended pattern for a focus group discussion is welcome, review agenda and topic, ground rules, introductions, questions and answers, and wrap up.

**R** – If there will be more than one participant, it is helpful to prepare some ground **rules**. Some common rules might include: minimize or eliminate side conversations, one person will speak at a time, don't criticize what others have to say, and treat everyone's ideas with respect. An important rule to enforce is making sure participants stick to the topic.

**R** – **Record**, record, record! Prepare to record the encounter by 2 different means such as taking notes and video or audio recording. Never count on just your memory. In a focus group, the moderator should not be the one taking notes; this will take away from his/her priority responsibility of facilitating the encounter.
Facilitating the Session

The first few moments of the discussion are critical. This is the time where the moderator should make the participant(s) feel at ease by explaining the agenda and setting the tone of the discussion. The moderator does not want to be too rigid or too informal since either tone could negatively alter the flow of the discussion. This is also the time when the moderator should disassociate himself/herself from the topic of interest in order to encourage the participant(s) to speak freely.

The “first question” in a focus group should be the ice-breaker. If the participant has something to say early in the discussion, the probability of him or her speaking again greatly increases. This question should draw the group together in their similarities so their comfort level increases. Whatever response a participant gives, the moderator needs to be open and make the respondent feel comfortable. The moderator should avoid any form of persuasion, disagreement, or interruption. Remember the participant is the “expert” on what the target population desires, needs, believes, etc.

Two powerful moderator techniques are often used while doing audience research. The first technique, often called “the pause,” is used after a participant’s comment. Short 5-second pauses can illicit more information and points of view from the participants. The second technique, termed “the probe,” requests additional information from the participant regarding one of his/her comments. An example would be to ask a participant, “Would you explain that point further?” These two techniques can be improved and fine-tuned with experience.

After the Session

Immediately after the session, you need to go over the notes from the discussion and clarify anything that is unclear or unfinished. This is also a time to record any final notes and observations. If a focus group was used, the moderator and note-taker should immediately do a preliminary analysis.

When it comes to the analysis portion of the session, you should review any audio/video recordings. Any additional observations should be noted and a transcript and/or a written summary should be generated. The recordings, transcripts, and summaries need to be examined for any patterns, common themes, consistency, language, intensity, new questions, and conclusions. This is the time to distinguish between any suggestions that should be made and which suggestions should be ignored. Once the final analysis has taken place, the participant(s) should be notified and the results shared with him/her. If possible, a second session should be held to debrief him/her.
Ways to Make Written Materials More Effective

Have a participant(s) from within the target population do the following when reading through the written information:

1. write down any questions they may have
2. underline or highlight any sentence or word they do not understand
3. circle the messages and key points they find important in the material
4. cross out any information they see as not relevant or meaningful to them
5. tell you what the information means in their own words
6. ask participants complete a standardized evaluation form about the material. See the following example.

Unfortunately, audience research and field-testing materials is often a step that is skipped when developing health materials. As health care professionals, we need to understand the population we are trying to reach and the importance of constantly improving the way we communicate with our patients. Effective communication is an important key to quality health care, and audience research and field-testing is the foundation for ensuring that our target population’s needs are met. This module has discussed many different ways to do audience research and field-testing, and now it is up to you to get out into the field and to get on target!

References


“Audience Research: Don’t Forget This Step” Health Literacy Institute. Maine AHEC Health Literacy Center. Sue Stableford, MPH, MSB, director. SSStableford@une.edu www.HealthLiteracyInstitute.net


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