Better Results for Smarter Decisions: Practical Research & Evaluation Tips and Techniques

Glenda Morgan, PhD
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Joshua Morrill, PhD
Morrill Solutions Research

Presentation at the Wisconsin Association of Academic Libraries Conference, Lake Geneva WI, April 2012
WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

SCENARIO

RESEARCH SCENARIO? AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT? Dunno’ yet---maybe cut this?
PRAGMATIC SCOPING
Life of a Research Project

1. Think about the research question
2. Think about the scope and scale of the research question
3. Think about what data you need to answer your research question
4. Design your research protocols
5. Choose a method or methods
6. Think about what data you have / are able to collect
7. Gather data
8. Analyze and report the data
9. Fame and fortune!
## Project Scope Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Rigor/Effort</th>
<th>Data Source(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deluxe</td>
<td>Publications or Grants</td>
<td>Probaby Extensive</td>
<td>Totally &quot;Bulletproof&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>Institutional presentation</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Limited Test/ Limited data collection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic +</td>
<td>Department planning</td>
<td>Limited and Few – <em>maybe just you.</em></td>
<td>Examination of data you already have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basic Basic</td>
<td>Internal / Limited Audience</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>&quot;Which way is the wind blowin?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pragmatic Research Maxims

• Your problem is not as unique as you think
• You have more data than you think
• You need less data than you think
• An adequate amount of new data is more accessible than you think
• Time spent scoping and planning will pay dividends later.
INTERVIEW / FOCUS GROUP
Focus Groups vs. Interviews

INTERVIEWS

Takes MORE TIME---talking to several individuals rather than one group

Great for DEEP EXPLORATION and CLARIFICATION

Somewhat EASIER TO IMPLEMENT (You are having a chat rather than “facilitating”)

FOCUS GROUPS

EFFICIENT --- You can talk to a group of people all at once

Great for CREATION/INNOVATION ---- Less effective for deep EXPLORATION

Must manage GROUP DYNAMICS (speaking apprehension, conformity, etc.)

Interviews -vs- Focus Groups
Who Should You Talk To?

• A set of interviews or focus groups do not necessarily need to be representative. Think about your goals. You need a group that will produce some information you can use.

• Sometimes focusing who you talk to can provide a much clearer interpretation of what was said.

• While interviews and focus groups need not be representative—make sure you have thought through the implications of who you DO talk with. (i.e Regular Library Users vs. Non-Users)
OBSERVATIONS
Why do Observations?

• Self-reporting
• Awareness
• Certain kinds of data

Two Kinds of Observation
1. Direct
2. Indirect
Advantages and Challenges

**ADVANTAGES**

- Can get to ACTUAL behavior rather than self report
- CAN make identifying participants EASIER
- CAN be COST EFFECTIVE & EFFICIENT

**CHALLENGES**

- Can be TIME CONSUMING
- Can produce GIANT amounts of data – DIFFICULT to analyze
- Needs a CAREFUL RESEARCH PLAN

**OBSERVATIONS**
Participatory Design

an approach to the assessment, design, and development of … systems that places a premium on the active involvement of users of the system) in design

• Process
• Content analysis
• What to do with the data?
Spot Sampling

Researchers appear at a random selection of places at a random election of times and record what people are doing

- Useful for physical spaces
- Need a research design and schedule
- Recording protocol
OBSERVATIONS
Giving Life to a Survey

1. Define Topic, Mode, Audience. What you NEED to accomplish.
2. Review question file of interest/past reports, etc.-------- What you WANT to accomplish.
3. Write Survey. Ideally not in isolation
4. CUT SURVEY DOWN.
5. Test Survey

2. This point is constricted a bit by length. But it is still good to flesh out what you want—then cut back later.
3. The loop between 3 & 4 is often constrained by time. This process will always take longer than you think it will.
5. Soft Test vs. Hard Test. The most important thing is to do some kind of test before going live.
Survey Modes

- First Choice: Web Surveys
- Second Choice: Mail/ Paper Surveys
- Third Choice: Telephone
- Up and Comers: Facebook and Cell Optimized Surveys
Surveys are at their best—when results can be contrasted or compared

- Look for groups within your data to contrast with each other. Resist “un-tethered” reporting!

- Borrow / steal then assimilate questions from other sources into what your are examining.

- Look for new, unexpected sources for data/ questions (PEW, MacArthur Foundation reports, etc.). Create an interesting question file.

“I have been an unabashed fan of NPR for many years, and have stolen untold excellent ideas from its programming” - Ted Koppel
Surveys are at their best when results can be contrasted or compared.

Educational Attainment – No Comparison

- Bachelors: 49%
- Masters: 28%
- Doctorate: 23%
Surveys are at their best when results can be contrasted or compared.

Educational Attainment – Comparison to U.S. Census Data

- **Survey**: 69% (Bachelors), 28% (Masters), 23% (Doctorate)
- **U.S. Census**: 49% (Bachelors), 26% (Masters), 5% (Doctorate)
Individual behavior

- Conflict & crisis
- Value of individuals
- Cultural ambassadors
Parsimony

par·si·mo·ny  /ˈpærsiˌmənə/  
The idea that the simplest explanation of a phenomenon is the best one

Making a point with simple research can be infinitely more powerful than the same conclusion reached through more complicated means.

No need to crack a walnut with a jackhammer!