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ABSTRACT

Marketing in the business world has long used focus group interviews and survey techniques to explore the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of their customers. In the college setting, these same techniques are now being used to improve program quality, assess the effectiveness of publications, and explore the image of the college. At Durham College (DC) in Oshawa, Ontario, focus groups with secondary school students, guidance counselors, and DC students have led to significant positive changes in the college calendar. In DC's Program Review Model for Evaluation and Review, focus groups are used to obtain initial feedback, while surveys provide measures of attitudes toward programs, curricula, and instruction. Focus groups, involving loosely structured interviews with small groups of 5 to 12 people, allow for close, face-to-face contact with customers. Group interaction, facilitated by a moderator, allows for the free flow of ideas and opinions. The moderator should encourage people to express themselves, ensure topics are addressed, control dominant individuals, and avoid giving personal opinions. Taping of focus group sessions can assist in the subsequent process of analysis. Surveys are more complicated and costly than focus groups, but they provide important quantitative data. Steps to conducting an effective survey include determining the research topic, listing the needed data, conducting a preliminary investigation if necessary, determining who is to be surveyed and how to survey them, selecting the type of survey, creating and testing a questionnaire, and collecting and analyzing data. Survey types include mail and telephone questionnaires, and personal interviews. (PAA)

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Using Marketing Research Techniques to Improve Quality and Service

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Using Marketing Research Techniques to Improve Quality and Service

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Abstract: *Marketers have long used Focus Group Interviews and Surveys to explore the attitudes and perceptions of their customers, and to understand their behaviour. These same techniques can be used to examine and improve program quality, assess the effectiveness of college publications, and to explore the image of the college.*

The Quality Movement and Marketing Research

The Quality movement has moved into the North American educational sector in the last few years. A key component of that quality revolution is the identification of students and other clients as customers. As many colleges become more committed to a marketing orientation, they have come to realize that colleges that succeed in the 1990s will do so by staying close to its customers.

Staying close is achieved by continuously consulting customers and clients and learning their opinions and attitudes on the quality of products, programs and services. To the marketers of some giants of the industrial world, such as Proctor and Gamble, Johnson and Johnson and Hewlett-Packard, this is not news. This has always been a central marketing idea; stay close to your customer.

Who are the customers of colleges? The list can be made surprisingly long. One possible list is:

1. Students; current, graduates, early leavers, potential — full-time & part-time;
2 employers;
3 organizations that refer or sponsor students or use colleges' services and programming; government, business and industry, labour, community and accreditation associations;
4. the community;
5. internal customers

Ongoing input from these sources contributes to improved quality of colleges' programs and services. As well, experience shows that these various clients are usually pleased to be asked for their opinion and expertise. Many express appreciation for a college's efforts to be responsive to their needs.

Two effective methods of consulting that have long been the mainstay of marketing research are focus group interviews and surveys. Both methods can be general or specific, depending upon the requirements of the situation. They can be used separately, together, or with other forms of research; they can yield valuable input on a variety of issues important to colleges' customers and clients.

Staying Close to Your Customers — Examples

1. College Calendar

Up to a few years ago, our college presented a conservative face to its primary customers, secondary school students, their teachers and guidance counsellors.The calendar cover was low key, with little colour. The interior was not designed for ease of reading, though much information was packed into it.

We decided to move to a new format; the question was what should our calendar be. We needed feedback from some our key customer groups; guidance counsellors, secondary school students and some of our own students. So, we designed a series of focus groups sessions.

We asked guidance counsellors their opinion on calendars; what they liked; what they didn't like; how they used them; which sections they used most; what impact covers had — and much more.

We asked secondary school students to evaluate calendars from a variety of institutions. We were particularly interested in their perception of these institutions from the appearance of the calendars; which institution would they choose based on appearance. We also explored how they used the calendars and the information they felt was important.

We asked our own students for their opinion of our current calendar and the influence it had on their choice. We asked about the quality of the information and the ease of finding information they needed or wanted.

During all these interviews, we also explored the impact of images -- photographs and illustrations and layout. We did not conduct a survey.

Some initially controversial decisions were made. Detailed course descriptions were dropped, salary ranges for graduates were included; the size was changed from a convenient small book size to a large 8½ x 11" format. Full colour was used throughout and we designed a dramatic new cover.

The result surprised even us. The reception of our new calendar at the secondary schools was overwhelmingly positive. It had an impact on our image among secondary students, presenting a vibrant, exciting, more modern image. It was a great feeling to visit the schools for presentations and find that the calendar was very popular; not the least because of its dramatic cover.

Very pleasing to us was the recognition by our peers. This calendar won a Trillium Award of Excellence From the Ontario College's Communications and Public Relations Group. And this year we were awarded a first place Paragon Award by the National Council for Marketing and Public Relations (NCMPR) of the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges.

Feedback from our customers certainly led to startling changes. We have followed up this year with some further work; the results will be incorporated into our next calendar.

2. Program & Curriculum Review.

In the past few years, Durham College has placed more emphasis on providing quality programs and services to our students. Our Program Review Model for Evaluation and Review makes extensive use of surveys and focus groups.

Students, faculty, service providers, graduates, employers are included in the evaluation of our programs. Focus groups often provide much of the initial feedback; surveys are used to provide measures of attitude towards programs, their curriculi and instruction.

In a recent Curriculum Review of our Legal Administration Review program changes to the curriculum have been made to reduce the overlap and redundancy in the administration portion of the curriculum. What is interesting is that we were aware of overlap, but not of its extent and the negative impact it had on our students.

It is also encouraging to see what is being done well. Feedback from employers and graduates is often a good boost to those delivering the program as they see the good results from their efforts.

Example Overload

Other ares where focus groups and surveys can be used to improve quality and service through feedback:

1. Student services — review of services from admissions to placement; helpfulness, satisfaction, areas of concern.

2. Adult students — barriers faced in pursuing entry into programs, experience as a mature student, suitability of information provided.

3. Non-Traditional careers — experience of women graduates in skilled trades & technology, barriers faced during program, help given in finding employment.

4. Employer groups — hiring practices, levels of awareness and knowledge of college programs, training needs, satisfaction with graduates.

Focus Groups: Getting close to the customer

With Focus Groups you can get close to your customers by dealing with them, face-to-face, live people whose reactions and perceptions can be explored on the spot. They are an excellent way of asking your students, clients and other stakeholders, what they think and feel about your college's programs and services.

A focus group interview is a loosely structured, free-flowing interview of a small group of people whose attitudes and opinions are considered relevant to the issues being researched. The interview is usually conducted by a trained moderator. The emphasis is on group interaction *focussed* on a selected series of topics introduced by the moderator.

Uses of Focus Groups

Focus groups can be used in a variety of ways. They are often used in the exploratory stage of any research project as an aid to defining the research problem or problems. When you are not sure exactly what it is you need to research, or how to go about it, focus groups are an ideal starting point.

A major difficulties in conducting surveys is ensuring that the words and phrases used mean the same thing to the respondents as they do to the researchers. Focus groups can be used to establish the vocabulary of the target group.

They allow you to explore the awareness and knowledge of a groups, any expectations they may have of your programs & services, and their attitudes and satisfaction. Surveys used for evaluation, satisfaction and attitude measurement require that the attributes be known in advance. These can be determined through a series of focus groups.

Advantages & Disadvantages

They are a fast and efficient means of gathering information. The large number of people being interviewed at once allows the gathering of a great deal of information. A key advantage is group interaction; as individuals speak, they often spark ideas in the minds of other members of the group. Conversation snowballs as a topic is discussed, often allowing unexpected issues to come to the surface. Group conversation allows for a great deal of spontaneity by group members.

It is a great advantage to hear what your students and clients have to say about their experience, receive feedback about their satisfaction with the programs and services offered, and to listen to their concerns and their ideas for change.

For colleges, especially in these times, a major advantage is that focus groups are relatively inexpensive, requiring few resources. Tthey can be designed and conducted with relatively little experience. They are also easier to conduct than surveys and have less risk attached.

There is a down side, of course. Though easier to conduct than surveys, they are not as easy to conduct as it appears. Since they are not statistically designed — statistically designed probability samples are not used — the results cannot be generalized. They cannot have the same validity as properly conducted surveys.

Focus Group Participants

Usually, five to twelve participants are needed for an effective focus group. Two to four focus group sessions are usually adequate. This means you need anywhere from ten to forty-eight individuals. Since many people you ask to attend a focus group do not appear, you will need to draw your focus groups from a pool of 20 to 100 people.

Participants are recruited from the population of interest. If you are interested in the attitudes of full-time postsecondary students, then you will draw your participants from that group. These individuals do not have to be randomly chosen from the target group, as with surveys, but some thought has to be given to how representative the participants of the focus group should be. Group members should be relatively homogenous, though some contrast is desirable.

The research purpose and the topics selected for the focus group discussion should be the primary factors that determine who are ideal participants. It is important, however, that individuals chosen to participate should be willing and able to contribute.

Conducting Focus Groups — The Moderator

The moderator plays a key role They need to be "people people," that is those who seem readily able to make others feel at ease in their company; warm; friendly. Yet, moderators need to be able to take and keep charge; it is the moderator who controls the group. In the most successful groups, the participants talk to each other with the moderator directing only when necessary.

The moderator creates a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere, describes the process and outlines the "rules." Rapport with the group should be established at the outset.

Moderators need to listen carefully and show genuine interest in all opinions expressed. A few caveats: there is no need to adhere slavishly to the agenda, the conversation should be allowed to flow naturally; jargon should be avoided; and head-nodding should be controlled.

The main job for the moderator during a focus group, besides ensuring the topics are addressed, is to keep the discussion focussed and flowing. Moderators must be able to: encourage all participants to express themselves; maintain a smooth flow in the conversation; move the conversation along when it appears to bog down; sense when topics are exhausted;

sense when topics become threatening to the group, or any individual; control any group influences; avoid letting dominant individuals or sub-groups take control; avoid comments that might signal approval or disapproval of comments made; and avoid giving personal opinion.

Focus Facilities & Props

An advantage of conducting focus groups is that not much is needed in the way of facilities. You need a room suitable for twelve people and any others present (observers.) Choose a place where background noise will not interfere.

I se an audio-tape to record all my focus groups. I explain why I need the help — my handwriting is deplorable, and I can pay more attention to the group. Video-taping a session also can be useful. You will find that almost no one objects. If you do intend to tape the sessions, don't forget to bring extra batteries, extension cords, tapes etc.

It also helps to plan topics for small talk. This will help the opening sessions and you can influence the atmosphere and create the right amount of rapport and trust.

If you know your participants ahead of time, it helps to seat experts and loud participants next to the moderator, and set shy and quiet participants directly across from the moderator.

Analysis & Interpretation

Any analysis of the focus group sessions should relate to the research purpose and objectives that have been set. Get transcripts made of any tapes and notes. Where possible, you should read all the summaries at one sitting.

Examine one question or topic at a time. Try to capture the range of impressions and observations; consider the words used and how they were used. Try to put comments into context so that the implications are obvious. You should search for the big ideas; and if your focus group is a prelude to a survey design, look for hypotheses for further testing, or the attributes of importance.

A few thoughts to keep in mind: people discussing a new concept tend to be conservative; if critical on one issue, group members tend to be less critical on the next; participants in focus groups tend to be more outgoing individuals than the average. And last, but not least, keep in mind that a high degree of judgement is involved. Do not give any particular comment more importance than it deserves.

Surveys — How & How Not To

At some point you will decide you want to survey your customers. If you are like most people, you will simply make up a questionnaire, and ask people to complete it. If you are lucky, you will learn how not to do it, the hard way. If you are not lucky, you will not realize that the information you obtained is useless. There are so many ways to "how not to" conduct a survey, and they can lead to disastrous results.

Yet, surveys need not be difficult. Yes, there are many pitfalls, and things to avoid. However, knowing the "how to" of conducting surveys and taking a "research design" approach to your survey, will give you a better chance of getting the information you need, and in a form that you will be able to use.

The following "research design" model will help you put together a successful survey project:

1. Determine the research objectives.
2. List the needed data.
3. If necessary, make a preliminary investigation.
4. Determine who is to be surveyed, and how they will be selected and how many.
5. Select the appropriate type of survey
6. Create the questionnaire and test it.
7. Collect the data.
8. Analyse the data.

The Why of the Survey

With focus group research, you can afford to be unclear about the purpose or the results. You may not even know quite what to study, yet still be able to design and conduct useful focus groups. Not so with surveys.

You must identify the purpose for the survey; what are you trying to accomplish. Identify the fundamental nature of the specific issues, problems or situation to be investigated; elements, relationships involved; background information.

You should think in terms of the uses to which the information will be put. What decisions might be made?What actions may follow?

Since surveys are relatively more time consuming and expensive than focus groups, you will also need to consider timing and costs.

List the needed data

Make an inventory of the data you need to meet your research objectives. List specific research questions. It is important to make a distinction between questions to which you want answers, and questions you may ask of people. It may take two or more questions on a questionnaire to answer one research question.

Make sure you note the difference between qualitative and quantitative data. This will influence the manner in which you ask questions. A survey is a quantitative measuring instrument an should contain questions that gather primarily quantitative data.

You May Need A Preliminary Investigation

Where possible, examine any previous data that may be available. This can save asking unnecessary questions, or making sure that you ask the right ones.

Focus groups can help refine your questionnaire. As mentioned, they can be used to determine the list of topics to be explored, the attributes and attitudes to be measured, and ensure you are using the language — common words and phrases — of your survey population.

If time allows, conduct a pilot survey. You can use a small non-random sample, or a focus group. Using a focus group has the added advantage of exploring defects in the survey, and how and why questions were answered the way they were.

Whom and How Many Should be Surveyed

You must identify your target population. Sometimes it may be obvious, such as students currently attending a full-time post-secondary program. You will be choosing a sample from this group, a sample that is to represent the group. This implies you must know the population from which the sample will be drawn. Define the population in terms of those people who have the information you seek; identify the qualities that qualify someone as a respondent.

You will need a means of choosing individuals from the population of interest. A good sample is one that provides a systematic and unbiased method of selecting respondents. Usually, you should use some form of probability sample; simple random sampling where each individual has an **equal** chance of being selected; stratified random sample, where the population is first divided into sub-groups and then a simple random sample is taken from each sub-group; cluster sample, where the population is divided into sub-groups and a simple random sample is taken from the **sub-groups**, and each individual in a sub-group is interviewed; a combination of methods.

For our annual survey of student experience and satisfaction, we use a stratified cluster random sample. The college's divisions are identified as strata from which samples will be drawn. Each class within a division is identified as a cluster. We take a simple random sample of classes within each division and ask each member of the sampled classes to complete a survey.

Sampling error results because the people in a sample are not *perfectly* representative of the average for the population. Sampling bias, or non-sampling error is due to extraneous factors, and is usually systematic. It is more important to control sample bias than sampling error.

Sampling error is controlled by the size of the sample, the number individuals interviewed. You need a sample large enough to meet your needs. A good number to start with is 100 respondents. But, if there are many subgroups, you should try to make sure each subgroup has at least thirty individuals in the sample group. (This is only necessary if the sub-group is to be analyzed separately from the other groups.)

Mail, Telephone or Personal Interview

The three primary methods of conducting a survey are through the mail (or any kind of self-conducted survey, where a person completes a questionnaire without the presence of an interviewer), telephone interview, or personal, face-to-face interview. No one method is superior. It depends on several factors; cost; time; quantity of data collection; type of data to be collected.

Generally, telephone surveys are the fastest, personal interviews allow the collection of a large quantity of data, and mail surveys are the cheapest. These must be weighed against the impossibility of asking certain types of questions on the phone, the large non-response rate of mail, and the high cost and length of time to conduct personal interviews.

Designing the Questionnaire

Start with a list of topics you wish to study. If you have done focus groups before the survey, you will be able to check this against the list developed. List the research questions, keeping in mind you may need more than one question to answer one research question.

Prepare your questionnaire so that it can be interpreted and used in the same way by each interviewer and respondent. The most effective surveys are ones that are easy to fill out. Make sure you give adequate instructions to both the interviewers and the respondents. You should determine how the answers will be tabulated before formulating the questions.

Place demographic questions, like income and age, at the end of the questionnaire This way they won't distract your respondents, or annoy them. You will need to decide if respondents can be anonymous or not. Usually, the response rate is better for anonymous questionnaires. In any case, at least give a guarantee of confidentiality.

Question wording is critical. A few guidelines:

- Keep questions as short as possible .
- Use everyday words.
  Ask only necessary questions
- Ask only questions that have a reasonable chance of being answered, and answered truthfully.
- Use structured questions with list of alternatives that can be checked off; use scales where possible.
- Avoid too many open-ended and YES/No questions.
- Avoid ambiguous, embarrassing, confusing, threatening or offensive words.
- Avoid biased questions — more difficult than it seems.
- Avoid questions that invite respondents to seek prestige.
- Start with general or more interesting questions before moving to the specific.
- Don't ask respondents to rely too much on memory.

Collecting the Data

This is straightforward, though the means depends on the survey method chosen. If interviewers are to be used, make sure they receive adequate training. You must take every opportunity to ensure as full a response as possibility.

It is often thought that response rates from surveys are low, 10% to 30%. This should not be so. A good introduction, cover letter, etc. with good follow-up should move response rates over 60%. Our student survey usually comes in at an 80 - 90% response rate.

Now That You Have The Numbers, What Are You Going To Do With Them

Most people are intimidated when faced with statistics. This need not be so. True, complex statistical analysis of surveys can look intimidating, but any analysis must be of use to those using the data. Statistics are only use to suppress unimportant detail and reveal important findings.

In analysis you should follow a systematic approach. Following is a simple way to approach data analysis.

- Verify the sample size, representativeness and validate the sample (may be necessary where interviewers are used.)
- Edit the returns; legibility; completeness; consistency; accuracy; freedom from obvious error.
- Classify the data — especially the open-ended answers.
- Code responses, if not already done.
- Tabulate the data; frequency distributions; cross-tabulations; graphs.
- Summarize the data; frequency/proportions; means, medians, modes; variability: standard deviation, range, maximums & minimums; distribution shape: skewness, kurtosis.Association: correlation, regression, contingency tables. Recode data where useful
- Draw inferences: estimation, hypothesis testing.
- Other descriptive techniques: regression analysis; factor analysis; cluster analysis ...

Conclusion

Marketing research techniques have long been used by marketers to keep in touch with their customers.

Quality and service can be improved by obtaining feedback from those using your services.

Focus groups are easy to run, take little time and resources, and provide excellent feedback, especially on attitudes, feelings and ideas.

Surveys are measurement tools. They provide quantitative data in terms of how many, what proportion and so on, about a population of interest. They are more difficult to conduct than focus groups, but must be used when you need quantitative information from representative samples.

The success of these techniques in my own college has led to a growing desire to learn more about the people we serve and how best to serve them.

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