

TIPSHEET: NEEDS ASSESSMENT

Why are users' needs important?

Apart from other reasons, the specific objective of stage one of the project is:

To provide public library users with innovative¹ services that are important to the community.

The purpose of the user needs assessment is to show that the new or improved service[s] to be funded by the grant are needed.

The user needs assessment is basically evidence related to the work your library wants to do with the grant.

What kinds of evidence can demonstrate "need"?

Evidence of "user needs" can be pre-existing or it can be gathered specifically for the project application. Acceptable evidence can be provided in various different ways including for example one of or a combination of the following:

- Interpreting evidence such as statistics
- Interviews with users, non users or stakeholders [e.g. community leaders]
- Focus groups² with users, non users or stakeholders [including relevant community organizations]
- Surveys of users, non users or stakeholders
- Anecdotal evidence/ hearsay/impressions
- Evidence of limitations on existing services [e.g. poor open hours if project will extend open hours, or high charges if project will abolish charges].
- Pointing to success of similar services elsewhere ["benchmarking"].
- Web statistics [if an existing web service is to be improved]
- Observation of users' behaviour.

What about quality of evidence?

Please provide the best quality of evidence you can with the time and resources available to you. For example, if you do a survey, we do not require that it be large for purposes of the application.

¹ Innovative can mean:

- Completely new;
- Never done in this place before;
- Never focused on this client group before;
- Never done in this partnership before;
- Never done properly before (say why); or
- Never used technology (or a particular kind of technology) before.

² See guidelines on running focus groups

Whose need should be demonstrated?

The evidence of user needs should be about the target group[s] that the project aims to reach and serve.

Your project may aim to serve the whole community [e.g. all residents of an area] or at a subset or subsets defined by for example:

- Age or
- Income level or
- Ethnicity or
- Language or
- Employed/unemployed or
- People lacking basic skills [e.g. literacy/numeracy or computer literacy] or
- Occupation [e.g. business people, students, school children, retired people, farmers, health workers etc] or
- Physically challenged people or
- Gender or
- Objective-oriented segmentation [e.g. people looking for a job].

The users your project aims to help could be defined by multiple characteristics, for example “women of employment age from ethnic minority communities lacking computer literacy skills”.

Where can the evidence come from?

Evidence of "need" could come directly from the target group to be served or it could be more indirect or circumstantial. Possible sources of evidence include one or more of the following:

- Users of a related service [e.g. existing library users]
- Non-users of libraries
- Members of specifically targeted groups [e.g. old people, children, farmers, health workers etc]
- Stakeholders related to the targeted groups [e.g. teachers, parents, social workers, relevant organizations] and speaking on their behalf
- Political or financial stakeholders/ funders
- Work done successfully in other libraries [e.g. known projects which the library wants to replicate in a new place etc]
- Authoritative statements of policy priorities by local, regional or national government [e.g. the regional chairman says “Our top priority this year is to help unemployed people find work”].
- Known facts or statistics such as those found in a community profile [e.g. many schoolchildren and little provision for them after school].

Guidelines on running focus groups

“Marketing is that function of the organization that can keep in constant touch with the organization’s consumers, read their needs, develop products that meet these needs and build a program of communication to express the organization’s purpose.”

—Philip Kotler, author, *Strategic Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations*

What is a focus group?

A focus group brings together a homogenous selection of 8-12 people to gather their opinions and to get feedback on specific products, services, messages and/or other concepts—qualitative research. Focus groups are led by an objective moderator who follows a carefully developed discussion guide, encourages conversation, works to involve all members of the group and never interjects a personal viewpoint. Normally, the session is audiotaped and a transcript is prepared. Names are not used in the report to ensure confidentiality. While focus groups do not provide “scientific” consumer data, they are an excellent means for listening to customers and getting feedback on strategies.

Surveys are used to gather a breadth of information from a statistically significant portion of the client population, and a focus group is used to yield deeper and more comprehensive information regarding the thoughts of your clients. By carefully selecting and balancing the focus group attendees, you can elicit from the group participants:

- an in-depth picture of their current concerns, frustrations and needs;
- reactions to an idea or service;
- their evaluation of the effectiveness of a service or program;
- community support for a potential program or service.

How to do focus groups?

Focus groups are ideally run by skilled professional researchers, who are not involved in the organization and can therefore be totally objective. If it is not possible to hire a research team, we offer the following general guidelines to suggest how your library may make use of this research technique.

Do . . .

- Use the group technique as part of a larger marketing plan.
- Develop a clear goal for the group session.
- Use a two person team to plan and carry out the focus group sessions- including an objective moderator and a partner to help and take notes.
- Take good notes. Include relevant observations about the mood of the group, tenor of the conversation, body language of participants
- Keep groups small—ideally 6-8 people, no more than 10.

Don't . . .

- Attempt to run focus groups for your own branch or department of the library.
- Run groups with participants you know personally (which may affect their comfort level as well as yours).
- Forget to debrief with your partner. Ask yourselves what worked, what didn't. What were the key points made? Were there any questions that need to be changed/refined/added? Any surprises? Anything that could be improved on next time?
- Consider the feedback from a few groups as representative data. Focus groups are qualitative not quantitative, and should be used as only one means of market research.

General Guidelines

Preparing for the discussion

- Write a discussion guide with clear, open-ended questions. Questions that begin with "how," "why" or "what do you think" are generally good conversation starters. Try to avoid questions that lend themselves to yes/no answers, or be prepared to probe for the reason behind the answer. Include some warm up questions: What's the toughest thing about being a teenager? Why is that? Do you like to read? Why/why not?
- Have other staff and contacts outside the library review the discussion guide. Test it.
- Provide some small gift or token to thank participants.
- Plan for a one to one and a half hour session for each focus group.
- Determine who should be part of the group. It's better if participants don't know each other and there is enough homogeneity that people are comfortable speaking up.
- Send out invitations to participants 3-4 weeks in advance.
- Invite a few more people than needed (8-10) to ensure you will have a group of 6- 8.
- Call to confirm participation one or more days before the event.
- Prepare the partner to act as note taker, run the tape recorder, monitor time, provide other assistance as needed. It's a good idea to have a transcription made. If that isn't possible, the tape will allow you to go back and check key points or gaps in the notes.

Room set up/Supplies

The room should be quiet, with no distractions. Chairs should be set up around a table with the tape recorder in middle. Use a flip chart and markers, if desired. Restrooms should be convenient. Have name cards for participants. Provide water, treats.

Before the session

- Take a few minutes to clear your mind. Try to mentally disassociate yourself from the library.
- In addition to reviewing the discussion guide, be prepared with some neutral responses to comments that may either be positive or negative, e.g., "That's interesting. Can you tell me more about why you feel that way? Can you give me some examples?"

Leading the session

- Begin by presenting the ground rules.
- Try to keep the conversation informal, but make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- Call on those who are not participating or use the old “Let’s hear what someone else has to say” to avoid the conversation being dominated by one person.
- Remain neutral. Don’t insert your own opinion. Probe for more information.
- Ask follow up questions, especially if someone answers “yes,” “no” or is ambiguous.
- Keep an eye on the clock. Know approximately how much time you have for each question/group of questions, so that you don’t miss getting key information. Have your partner signal you if you need to move the discussion on.

Writing the report

Reports generally consist of three parts:

- I. Introduction: The purpose and nature of the group, description of participants and any noteworthy information that may have affected the outcome (interruptions, noise, distractions, bad news).
- II. Summary of discussion and bulleted list of key points
- III. Discussion guide

Resources

http://www.isixsigma.com/vc/focus_groups/Default.asp

This Web site offers several helpful resources including “10 tips for running successful focus groups” and a brochure “What Are Focus Groups?” from the American Statistical Association.