

**Title**

Are focus groups a useful way of obtaining information on barriers to library use?.

**Focussed Question:**

Does this paper provide evidence for focus groups as a way of obtaining qualitative information about library services?

**Citation:**

Chamberlain, D and Brook, R. (2011) Focus groups for allied health professionals and professions allied to technical services in the NHS – marketing opportunities, lessons learnt and recommendations. *Health Information and Libraries Journal*, **28** pp178-187

**Summary of the aim and methods of the study**

The study aimed to investigate the use of focus groups as a method of exploring non-use of the library by particular groups of staff. It also offers recommendations on how to use focus groups as an engagement and marketing tool.

Five focus groups were held. Two with staff members from Biochemistry, one with the education leads from Pathology and two with staff members from Occupational Therapy. Some groups were held in the Education Centre and some in departmental training rooms.

Each focus group had a facilitator and a note taker who also operated the recording equipment. The facilitator and note taker were both drawn from library staff.

Five questions were used with each focus group aimed at eliciting information about users' awareness of library services.

After the focus groups transcripts were made of the recordings and notes made on the transcripts were analysed.

**Main Results**

Several significant issues emerged from the analysis of transcripts.

- Registration and induction
- Awareness and usage of library services
- Electronic resources
- Library ambience
- Multidisciplinary service
- Out of hours access and workplace delivery
- CPD
- Time
- Resources

From these results the library service concluded that previous marketing campaigns had been ineffective in reaching non-users and that many staff were unaware of the services offered by the Library. They also identified some areas in which services could be improved. They present these conclusions in a table:

**Table 2** General Lessons learnt

- Nothing beats face to face contact with users and non-users
- Do not make assumptions about the service
- Never rest on laurels
- Time saving services are essential – promote these (ie you can take a search/requests over the phone and e-mail the results
- Ensure remote requests are dealt quickly with
- Library staff chatting in the office is off-putting to users
- A warm welcome is important
- Market locally
- Maintain departmental contacts

As a result of the focus groups the library carried out a marketing campaign and is building on the contacts made. They have reviewed their customer service skills and plan to maintain and extend their presence at organisational and departmental induction. Further focus groups are planned in the Midwifery and Mental Health departments.

**Comments.**

It was not clear from the paper whether the focus groups had originally been intended as research or as a marketing exercise. We felt that possibly the paper would have been better presented as a short practice paper rather than as a piece of research.

The recruitment strategy was clearly stated. As non-users were being studied it was appropriate to hold focus groups in those departments. The use of education leads as representatives for their departments could have lead to untypical issues being raised.

The researchers used focus groups because they wanted to collect qualitative data which seems appropriate. It was quite difficult to determine from the narrative how the focus groups had been run and how the data had been obtained.

The researchers considered the possibility that the presence of library staff could result in participants being inhibited in making criticisms of the library and hoped to overcome this through open dialogue.

Participants were assured that confidentiality would be observed.

There does not appear to be any consideration of contradictory data and it is not clear if any themes emerged which are not mentioned in the results summary. There is little discussion of the validity or credibility of the results.

There is no evidence that techniques such as content analysis or thematic analysis have been used on the data and the researchers do not mention data saturation. It would also have been interesting to see some actual comments from the various focus groups.

There is no evidence of triangulation of the results with other research although the authors do state that they already have some quantitative measures.

There is no indication that a comprehensive literature review was carried out.

The research is useful as it offers some corroboration of the barriers to library use which many librarians would probably have identified through observation. It is very practical as it is relevant to the researchers' own situation.

Bottom Line: Focus groups can be used as a way of investigating why particular groups of staff do not use library services.

Appraised by: Oxford Health Librarians Journal Club 26/6/2012