

INSIGHT



UX in Libraries

User research interviews: learning to embrace the silence

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IN previous issues I have focused on observational techniques. Methods that will generate crucial behavioural research data about what our users actually do in library spaces as opposed to what they tell us they do. However, this does not mean that we should ignore attitudinal (what our users say) data. On the contrary, UX research best practice involves balancing both approaches. However, when we employ the latter we must consider that we might only be accessing a version of reality. The participant may want to present a picture of themselves to impress or please the researcher. They may choose to embellish, exaggerate or even lie about their experience. There may be biases inherent in their answers, and despite our best efforts, in our questions too. Provided we bear these possibilities in mind it is still possible to gather some rich and valuable insights into user experience.

Learn to be silent

Undoubtedly the most valuable attitudinal research method is the user research interview. However, despite our familiarity with the concept of an interview, they are deceptively difficult to execute well. The most common mistake is to think that an interview is essentially a conversation. In percentage terms, conversation by its very nature involves an approximate 50/50 split of talking and listening time. However, when interviewing for user research, the target should be something more like 80/20, with the interviewer talking only 20 per cent of the time and listening for the remainder.

This means embracing the power, and value, of silence. Learning to be silent after an interviewee responds to your question, thereby giving them thinking time and permission to tell you more, is

vital. Just as important is not endlessly restating, and elaborating upon, your question. The interview is not about you, it’s about your subject, but you can only fulfil this aim if you let the user speak and become comfortable with your own silence.

This is why relating your own experience during the interview is also inappropriate. It will feel difficult at first to keep quiet, but for this technique, silence is the most powerful tool at your disposal.

Body language

Of course, the silence will not be comfortable for you or your subject if you don’t concurrently obey some simple rules around friendliness, rapport and body language. You should start by thanking them for their time and showing genuine gratitude for turning up. You need to communicate that you are listening, understand them, and are interested in what they have to say, as they relate their experience. This can be done surprisingly easily with nods, smiles, head tilts, and eye contact, rather than words. Open body language is also a must to demonstrate that you are receptive to what they have to say.

Flexible and off-script

You can also convey both your understanding and interest by avoiding a script of questions. Ideally you should be responding to what interviewees say in order to better understand their world, by asking them for more detail, seeking clarification and asking follow-up questions in response to what they have just said. There should definitely not be a set number of questions that everyone is asked. This is not a job interview. Instead user research interviews should be as flexible as possible, with only a few questions prepared in advance relating to your research study. The objective is to allow the interviewee the floor, to open up and share their unique experience and tell



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their story, and this is just not possible if questions are constantly being fired at them. Flexibility should also apply to the length of the interview. A useful rule of thumb is that it should last as long as the subject is comfortable talking to you. And that amount of time can be extended to surprising lengths provided you become practised at making interview conditions favourable.

Silence is golden

Obviously, there is a lot more to successful user research interviews: the environment chosen, types of questions, how you record and code interview data, and so on, but if I had to pick just one golden rule that has helped me to get more out of my subjects, it would unquestionably be learning to embrace the silence. **IP**