



# **Gathering Evidence: Practical Uses of Focus Groups to Prove Your Library's Worth**

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**Presented by Michel-Adrien Sheppard  
Head of Library Assessment & E-Access**





# Without data, you're lost



**Mike Bloomberg** ✓

@MikeBloomberg

 Follow

In God we trust. Everyone else, bring data:  
[on.nyc.gov/oHMCK0](http://on.nyc.gov/oHMCK0) #NYC #Smoking  
#PublicHealth

RETWEETS

107

LIKES

31



5:17 PM - 15 Sep 2011





# What is wrong with surveys?



- Excessive reliance on surveys limits types of questions libraries are asking (Halpern et al., 2015)
- How many, how much, how often but no real answer to “why”
- Wide disparity between findings of surveys and focus groups – focus groups reveal “patterns of deep concern” (Shoaf, 2003)



# What is a focus group?

- **Definition:** “a carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment” (Kruger & Casey, 2000)
- Common in web usability, product testing, political opinion research, Hollywood movie endings
- Earliest use in LIS in early 80s



## OK then, what are focus groups for?



- Learning more about a few people's experiences
- Gathering beliefs and attitudes about an idea, product or service through open-ended questions
- Finding ideas left unvoiced in one-on-one interviews / surveys



# Focus groups at the SCC Library

- Have used them for a number of years with law clerks
- In the past, questions about range of services & products
- 2015 Q – “Would a listing of major research resources related to each hearing be useful?”
- New “Case Guides” product launched Fall 2015
- FG with law clerks Feb. 2016





# What are Case Guides at the SCC?

Starting place for materials relevant to cases on appeal:

## Case Guides / Guides sur les appels

April / avril 2016

*Disclaimer: The content below provides a starting point only, and does not represent exhaustive research.*

*Mise en garde : Ce qui suit constitue seulement un point de départ pour la recherche et ne représente pas un guide exhaustif.*

36460

2016-04-01 Information and Privacy Commissioner of Alberta v. Board of Governors of the University of Calgary (Alberta) (Civil) (By Leave)

University of Calgary v. R. (J.), 2015 ABCA 118

Date: 2015-04-02 Docket: Calgary Appeal 1301-0368-AC

Parallel citations / Références parallèles: [2015] 7 W.W.R. 213, [2015] A.W.L.D. 1741, [2015] A.W.L.D. 1742, [2015] A.W.L.D. 1777, [2015] A.W.L.D. 1795, [2015] A.J. No. 348, 12 Alta. L.R. (6th) 272, 251 A.C.W.S. (3d) 367, 382 D.L.R. (4th) 299, 602 A.R. 35, 647 W.A.C. 35, 81 Admin. L.R. (5th) 257, 2015 CarswellAlta 574

URL: <http://www.canlii.org/en/ab/abca/doc/2015/2015abca118/2015abca118.html>

<a href="#">Nature of the Case / Nature de la cause</a>	<a href="#">Note-up / citeur</a>	<a href="#">Relevant Research Guide(s) / Guide(s) de recherche suggéré(s)</a>
<a href="#">Articles, Books, Looseleafs and Annotated Legislation / Articles, livres, feuilles-mobiles et législations annotées</a>	<a href="#">Suggested Research Strategies / Stratégies de recherche suggérées</a>	<a href="#">Table of Authorities / Recueil de sources citées par les parties</a>



# Moderator



- Pro moderator can cost a lot
- **We chose Court employee who does not work for the library and who does not use the case guides**
- Look for friendliness, sense of humour, curiosity about new insights, non-judgmental





## Developing Questions



- Open-ended
- Clear meaning
- One topic per question
- Any hidden biases?
- Lead to practical answers that can be easily implemented
- If time, do pilot study



# What did we want to find out?

- At what pt. in research process are guides used?
- Useful / useless sections?
- Do suggested materials directly answer the research question?
- Delivered too early / late in the research process?
- Continue / terminate project?



# Recruitment

Finding people takes a lot of work:





## Recruitment (2)



- Group size : 8-12  
common practice in N. America
- Do not mix people with different power levels
- Recruit more than you need to offset no-shows
- Incentive – payable only upon attendance – pizza, coffee card, etc.



# Running the session



- **You must never be in the room, ever!!!**
- **Feed them quickly!!!**
- Circular seating is best
- Beepers and phones off!!!
- Welcome script – mod does not work for you, feelings won't be hurt
- Print outs
- Questions on flipchart or PPT



## Running the session (2)

Question sequence from broad to narrow:

- Ice-breaker question to launch, put people at ease
- Exploration questions
- Silences, boredom: re-energizing questions
- Ask to compare, sort, rate, give examples...





# Analysis

- Transcribe notes: tone, heated moments, surprise, when felt positive or negative
- Listen to tapes to fill in info blanks
- Combine responses into common themes, exclude anything that does not fit research questions i.e. not everything is worthy of analysis
- Report – background, results, discussion – **include interesting direct quotes if you can: “Your librarians are amazing. Can you clone them?”**



# Lessons learned



- Test audio in advance
- Don't skimp on food
- Not too many questions
- People want to be liked, say nice things -  
**We're in luck: lawyers, law pros & students are outspoken, opinionated, blunt**





## Possible drawbacks



- Can't generalize without corroboration
- Not for emotionally charged topics
- Groupthink, social desirability bias
- Unwillingness to accept negative comments: 1985 New Coke marketing disaster was predicted in disregarded focus group sessions



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# Contact me



Michel-Adrien Sheppard

613-944-7723

[Michel-Adrien.Sheppard@scc-csc.ca](mailto:Michel-Adrien.Sheppard@scc-csc.ca)

<https://twitter.com/613mash>

<http://micheladrien.blogspot.ca>