Query-Based Evaluation

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WHAT IS IT?

Essentially this is the collection of feedback by a query method rather than observation. There are three approaches: questionnaire, Interview or focus group.

Always bear in mind that with query data recording human nature generally means that what you receive is three steps removed from the truth:

- People bend the truth, to bring it closer to what they think you want to hear.
- People tell you what they remember; they cannot always remember the detail.
- People tend to rationalise behaviour perhaps saying things like *they would have seen the button if it was bigger*.

WHY DO YOU NEED IT?

Self-reported data does have value. It is the most practical way of collecting data on perception and emotional response. For brand and businesses that rely on the experience or trust, e.g. gaming houses and banks, these responses are arguably more important than usability. Just remember that what is reported may conflict with what was observed.

WHEN DO YOU NEED IT?

The use of query evaluation as with any evaluation should be determined by the goals of your research. You may choose to use it when you know that what you want to know is not readily observable, i.e. feelings or where observation is not possible, e.g. remote testing.

HOW DO YOU DO IT?

QUESTIONNAIRES

Questionnaires have two key purposes: to gather background/demographic data and for direct feedback on usability. But you can only find out about what you ask, so you should always focus on any areas of concern and construct a good, clear questionnaire.

An individual should be able to complete your questionnaire in five minutes or less. Any longer (especially if online) is more likely to result in an incomplete or not started questionnaire.

Closed versus Open Questions

Closed questions are common in summative (end of development) testing, with more open questioning at the formative stage (discovery and execution). It is much easier to analyse closed questions, but they are inflexible and may exclude the correct option the participant wants to select.

Scalar Questions

These are a variant of closed questions devised as a simple way to measure *how much?* There are two types:

Likert – rate how much you agree or disagree with a statement on an odd number rating scale (5, 7 or 9).

E.g. *the navigation is confusing*

Strongly agree	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*Strongly disagree*

Semantic Differential Scale – a pair of bipolar adjectives, a neutral statement with two extreme responses.

E.g. the arrangement of icons was

Poor	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*Good*
Inconsistent	*1*	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*Consistent*

In any questionnaire it is important to include some open questions, for example: *please state the three best and three worst things about the site.* Too many open questions will make the form look overwhelming; a small number allows the participant to effectively articulate useful feedback.

INTERVIEWS

An interview is very similar to a questionnaire except that the researcher will record the responses of the self-reporting. Interviews are excellent for eliciting facts, behaviours, belief and attitudes. They are comprised of mainly open questions and the approach is structured, semi-structured or unstructured. The more structured you are, the easier it is to compare responses across participants.

An interview should never last more than an hour. Plan it for up to 45 minutes so you don't have to miss out any questions and instead allow for a more relaxed, flowing interview.

Respondent Biases

You should always be aware that when conducting an interview, especially face-to-face, you may not always be hearing 100% truth. There are some well documented biases at play:

- **Acquiescence bias** – the person replies what he/she thinks you want to hear.
- **Central bias** – on the fence – responds choosing the middle option, no extremes.
- **Sociability bias** – they tend to agree with everyone else over having their own opinion.

As the interviewer it is important to remain engaged and respond effectively to the interviewee for a productive session. You should consider using the following techniques:

- **Non-verbal** – note taking and encouraging facial expressions.
- **Acknowledge** – show interest but stay neutral, e.g. *OK*, *I see* or *Uh-huh*, not *I agree* or *that's not right*.
- **Paraphrase** – this shows you were listening while also confirming your notes are accurate.
- **Probing** – find out more, *tell me more about ...*
- **Focusing** – redirect a response that's going off-topic.
- **Show me** – get the interviewee to step through a process on paper or at the computer rather than just verbalising it.

FOCUS GROUPS

A focus group is essentially the interview of a group of people guided by a facilitator and a topic. They are pretty low cost, quick to conduct and scalable. The approach is flexible and may allow you to capture information missed through other evaluation methods. Group sessions tend to be designed to discover what users want rather than for discussing design or assessing usability.

It should be noted that a well-run focus group is dependent on a skilled facilitator. It is very easy for a dominant participant to become the sole voice, influencing others or not allowing others to feel comfortable enough to speak. In addition, scheduling a focus group can be tricky as you have to juggle multiple calendars for an available timeslot.

The sessions tend to last up to three hours. In addition to the query focus, they may also include a collaborative exercise and a review of concepts – to provide a bit of variety and keep the participants engaged. In addition there will normally a break to allow for any urgent office calls, drinks and snacks.

Preparation

- Plan the event, ensure your script/activities focus on specific issues, goals and the information you want to cover.
- Select participants who are involved or have a good understanding of the areas to be covered, for most sessions hands-on users have more valuable information to impart than the company account director!
- Think about balancing out known vocal individuals with quiet ones and think about how you're going to bring everyone's comments to the group.

In Session

- Try your hardest to keep the discussion going without inhibiting the flow.
- Ensure all contribute, invite the more quiet participants to add their comments.
- Use whiteboards, sticky notes, and large pads to document and display the comments, ideas, suggestions generated through the conversations; for summarising, probing and eliciting further feedback.