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# From 'How satisfied are you?' to 'Tell us what matters': user evaluation at the Wellcome Library



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To make any meaningful attempt to evaluate a user experience, it is vital to let the users express what matters to them, and to avoid making any assumptions. It is also important to continually seek out negative user experiences and address them. Improving negatively perceived services can have an explosive effect in terms of meaningful dialogue, and it rapidly builds a community of users.

## THE PROBLEM WITH SATISFACTION

At the Wellcome Library we had conducted annual satisfaction surveys for some years and were pleased with, but also slightly sceptical about, the high satisfaction ratings. We felt that there must be areas where we could improve, and we knew anecdotally that our users did have issues to raise. We were concerned that because we were creating the questions there was a risk of bias. Were we asking the users to score what mattered to *us*, based on *our* aspirations about service value?

## COLLECTING ROBUST DATA

Because we are part of the Wellcome Trust, an organisation known for its scientific rigour, we needed a robust and valid qualitative evaluation that would both withstand internal scrutiny and act as a tool for monitoring and managing performance improvement over time.

## NEW AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS

We were also conscious that we were becoming exposed to wider audiences and increased scrutiny. In April 2007, the Library opened in a refurbished building as part of Wellcome Collection – a new London venue for medicine, history, science and art. The building combines exhibition galleries, bookshop, café, conference centre, events forum, members club, an academic research centre and the Wellcome Library, which includes a conservation studio. We knew that this exposure meant that we needed to match the best of what was on offer on 'the cultural high street'. So it was important to capture users' views from the first day of opening in the new environment, so that we could monitor trends over time.

## METHODOLOGY

We engaged a small consultancy team to review our previous surveys and advise on the methodology. They assessed the proposed user satisfaction survey questionnaire we had prepared and suggested that it would not tell us much that was new. Instead, they proposed a novel approach that was immediately easy to understand and very appealing to us. Called the Profile Accumulation Technique (PAT), it elicits free responses from the users of any service or customer experience.<sup>1</sup> The data collected are easy to read and understand and can also be quantified to give a measure of the importance of particular features of the service and its components.

Essentially, the technique accumulates responses from users until there is no new information being recorded – a point called saturation. Users can respond about anything that they think is good or bad, and say why; anything they want to raise is recorded, so that there are no limits on the number of aspects or topics. The consultants also suggested that focus groups could add context to the survey responses.

By the time all the responses have been analysed, the Library has a ranked list of those aspects which matter to users – and a positive to negative (+/-) ratio for each one.

## THE SURVEY

We sent out the PAT forms to users who had agreed to be contacted, and we allowed two weeks for responses. We achieved an 11% response rate, which was good for a postal survey and demonstrated a high level of engagement from the users. During that time, we also ran three focus groups with three representative user constituencies. In all, there were a total of 2,005 comments of which 1,568 were positive and 437 were negative, giving an overall +/- ratio of 3.58, a more than satisfactory result (see 'Results' below for details). In many cases, the negative comments actually suggested confusion or lack of awareness about our services, and that in itself was useful data.

## RESULTS

The users' comments fell into 22 groups, or 'aspects', and for each aspect the +/- ratio was calculated. The technique suggests that where +/- ratios are below 1.9 the organisation needs to take strategic remedial action. In our case there were 10 aspects at 1.9 or below (and therefore in need of attention), 3 aspects between 2.0 and 2.9 (satisfactory) and 7 aspects above 3 (excellent). We were very encouraged by users' affirmation of key aspects of excellence (quality of space, scope and 'browsability' of the collections and helpfulness of staff) and are taking remedial action on the ones where we scored below the 1.9 +/- ratio.

### Monitoring performance over time

These data will now be used to formulate a validated, user-focused questionnaire. This will permit the Library to monitor how well the important services are delivered, and how satisfied the users are. By repeating that survey over subsequent years, the Library will also have a robust longitudinal assessment of performance improvement.

We do not believe we would have reached this level of clarity about our users without this methodology. We gathered new data such as age profile and how users categorised themselves, in addition to basic and subtle messages about our Library.

This evaluation tool has been used successfully within education, professional services and elsewhere, and we have been impressed by the speed of implementation and the easy fit of the methodology to the requirements of libraries.

The authors would be very happy to answer any questions about the process and outcomes as we roll it out over time.

## REFERENCES

- 1 N. Johns and D. Lee-Ross, 'Profile accumulation: a quality assessment technique for hospitality SMEs', in R. Teare and C. Armistead (eds), *Services management: new directions and perspectives*, London: Cassell (1996); N. Johns, D. Lee-Ross and P. Tyas, 'SERVQUAL and PAT: alternative disconfirmation approaches to the measurement of service quality in the foodservice industry', *Journal of quality assurance in hospitality and tourism*, 1 (1), 2000, pp 13-29. See also N. Johns and J. Henwood, 'Tracking student satisfaction in an uncertain education market', *Tourism*, 54 (4), 2006, pp 345-54, and N. Johns, 'Importance-performance analysis using the profile accumulation technique', *Service industries journal*, 21 (3), 2001, pp 49-63.