

Focus Group Research Techniques

***How you can get started in applying
research techniques to identify business
issues your employee communication
strategies can impact***



© Copyright 2014. Communication At Work.
Reproduction in whole or in part by electronic,
mechanical or chemical means, including
photocopying, recording or by any information
storage and retrieval system, in any language is
strictly prohibited.

First published in 2009 by Communication At Work
PO Box 48, Camberwell VIC 3124 Australia
Email: service@communicationatwork.com
www.communicationatwork.com
Phone: +61 3 9889 9685
Fax: +61 3 9889 9686

Often senior management are focussed on the external affairs of the company, the competitive strategy in the marketplace, the financial viability, the plans for expansion into the new product lines and markets. Often they leave the issue of employee and customer relations to someone else and they become isolated from the real concerns of both groups. Unless you have data to support your theories, it is unlikely that they will change strategy and tactics in the marketplace. To have credibility when discussing strategic employee communication, proposals need to be supported by facts. For instance, when it comes to justifying how a new business policy will impact customers based on employee opinion and experience, you need research and feedback to support your view.

Research into customer and employee opinion of the brand, the level and quality of services and products the company provides is important. By linking the two and tracking results against business initiatives you will be able to measure whether business objectives are being met. Research into employee opinion about the external focus of the company will also provide you with the following:

- ◆ You can research the attitudes of employees towards the business and identify whether there is a difference between job categories and levels
- ◆ If you are conducting focus groups it is easy to make the mistake of listening to the views of a small group of employees and assume that this is the opinion of the majority. You need to ensure that you have a representative sample
- ◆ Research can also provide the opportunity to identify the key influencing factors in your company's external communication strategy with customers. Research should aim to identify what is working and what isn't
- ◆ In order to have a solid employee communication strategy it is more and more necessary to justify costs. Customer satisfaction research can support new employee communication strategies in those areas where improvement is needed
- ◆ Employee / Customer research also indicates to the employees that the company is serious about involving them in the business process and encouraging feedback. However it is essential that the key items that are raised in research are acted upon, otherwise it will be difficult to encourage employees to participate in your strategies.

Focus Groups – this is the most popular way of gathering information and is generally used as a basis to identify the major issues and then to design a questionnaire to explore aspects of the issues further. Basically groups of 8 – 10 people are selected with the same selection parameters such as job level, type of job, or with customers of the market segment they represent.

When interviewing employees using focus groups you need to compare the outcomes of different groups, i.e., sales managers, sales representatives, call centre sales staff. This will provide a more accurate indication of what all levels of employees who interact with a particular customer segment consider an accurate reflection of customer opinion.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are usually held to gauge opinions about certain issues and ideas for solutions to problems. On occasion they are used to form the basis of the questions on staff surveys and customer surveys.

Externally research firms use focus groups either to gauge public opinion about products or services. It is a good format as it allows you to explore issues further and sometimes you will discover issues or ideas you hadn't considered prior to session. As the facilitator, your role is to lead the discussion but leave the actual dialogue to the participants, bringing them back to the main issue if they have gone off on a tangent or ensure that all the topics that you wanted to cover within the allocated timeframe are covered.

Checklist for Implementing Focus Groups

When implementing focus groups for an employee communication strategy you need to do the following:

- ◆ Be aware that focus groups are not the same for each organisation, they need to be tailored to suit individual circumstances
- ◆ The focus groups should be held in like groups, for instance managers in one team, supervisors another, employee groups by department in others
- ◆ You should interview 10% of the employee base to form an accurate sample of employee views
- ◆ When focus groups with employees are held there is a perception that something will happen as a result. Therefore you need the support of the CEO and reinforce that the reason for the focus groups is supported at the highest level in the organisation. For instance you maybe about to implement a customer focussed strategy and the focus groups will provide you with the data you need to set the platform for the project. The worse case scenario is setting expectations amongst employees and then not delivering and with focus groups as the employees have taken time out from their work and participated in discussions they will expect to see an outcome
- ◆ Greater objectivity is achieved when the focus groups are conducted by an external firm as participants are more likely to open up and express the way they really feel

The Main Steps in Focus Group Research

1. A planning meeting to identify the objectives, problem areas and scope of the research
2. Guideline timetable to develop the selection of focus group participants and timetable for interviews
3. Individual management interviews
4. Preparation of the employee communication strategy
5. Presentation of findings to senior management
6. Implementation of recommendations

STAGES OF THIS RESEARCH

Management Interviews

A minimum number of individual half hour interviews with management are held to find out what they think about the issue you are researching and what level of employee involvement they would support.

Employee Focus Groups

Ten percent of employees from all areas of the company are interviewed in focus groups, eight to ten participants in each group. Each session is of one and one half hours duration and rather than a structured questionnaire being used, a subject outline is introduced and questioning follows on from this point.

Focus Group Research Interpreted

This area is that of interpreting the research. With the management interviews you need to identify what they will support in terms of employee involvement programs and why or why not, opinions on the business issue you are researching and the basis for that view. The focus groups will provide you with trends in answers and also indicate which areas of the organisation are most supportive and enthusiastic and will be a good starting point for your strategy.

Identify and list current customer satisfaction tracking research.

Lined area for notes, consisting of multiple horizontal dashed lines.

List how you think employee communication could significantly impact on the business objectives linked to that issue.

Series of horizontal dotted lines for writing.