

Audience Research

A briefing paper for programme, service and research managers

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Researching your audiences is essential to deliver services which provide the maximum public value.

This is a briefing paper for people who are managing programmes, services and research in the public sector, and who would like to understand more about audience research and how it could support your work.

Demonstrating value for money and impact are key themes in government policy across the public sector, and it is essential to deliver programmes and services which make best use of resources and effort. If you do not encourage your projects/ services to research and collect evidence on their audiences, you may not be able to demonstrate value to your managers.

The digital revolution

In the last decade, millions of pounds of public funding has been available to investigate and experiment with digitisation and online services. Digital technologies have fundamentally changed how content can be delivered, presented, exploited and interacted with.

Digital services are now used widely in the delivery of public services, and programmes such as the DCMS and BERR **Digital Britain** seek to focus and stimulate their delivery.

Why is researching digital audiences important?

Advances in technology are matched by rising demands and expectations of the public. Delivering high quality programmes and services which meet the evolving needs of the public is essential.

Getting started with audience research

Find out more about audience research

Audience research can be used to assess the reach, uptake, quality and impact of services, and the outputs of research and work programmes. It can help you answer questions such as: Who are our audience? How many people use our service/ outputs? How and why do they use our service/ outputs? Are they satisfied with the current service? Understanding non-use of a service is also important; for example, your remit may be to meet the needs of a particular audience who are not using your service – why are they not using it?

The Guide to Researching Audiences, developed by the Strategic Content Alliance, provides useful and practical information about researching digital audiences. It provides an overview of good practice and discusses the various research methods available. You can also refer to the **sector briefings** developed by the Strategic Content Alliance; they set out the key drivers and issues for audience research in each sector, and provide links to support and advice. Links to the Guide and the briefing papers are on the next page.

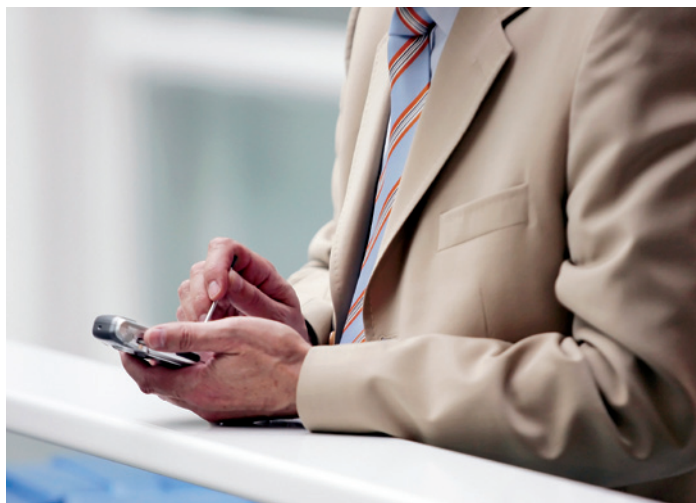
Task your staff

To get the best results from staff undertaking audience research you need to be able to communicate your requirements effectively, and help and guide them undertake the research. This does not necessarily involve having a detailed understanding of audience research yourself, but being able to point them to useful advice and resources in the sector, such as the documentation developed by the Strategic Content Alliance. It is also important to make sure that the purpose of audience research is clear, and that the findings are shared across your team.

Use your central marketing team

If you are part of a larger organisation which has a central marketing team, you may be able to exploit their knowledge to support your work. For example, they may be able to help you obtain feedback on events, obtain results from annual surveys of the wider community, and help you understand cross-organisation activities.





Ask around

Services offered by different organisations often have similar target audiences and may have conducted audience research that is relevant to you. Although the assumption of similarity and transferability of audience research needs to be tested, it can be good to ask around.

Using audience research

Audience research is often an afterthought, but it is more effective when it is an integral part of a project/service.

Service enhancements

Involving the audience in service development is an important way of ensuring that a service is usable and useful for the target audience, and can lead to new ideas for the service.

For example, iterative testing of prototypes or pilot services with known user groups can uncover new and unexpected information about user behaviour and user requirements, or problems with usability and accessibility that had not been anticipated. Audience research might also reveal that the audience is finding novel ways to use a service that could be further exploited, and evidence of potential markets may help you develop new funding streams.

Drafting and assessing tenders

To build audience research into the project/service lifecycle, start by stating your requirements and expectations when inviting people to tender. Their responses may tell you a lot about whether they can deliver a service/project which meets audience needs.

For example, if a project is digitising a collection of work, how have they decided what to digitise? Was the decision based on the needs of their target audience?

You will need to be able to assess their responses, and question whether proposed approaches are the most appropriate, or the best use of resources. For example, is a survey really the best way to collect the data, or would it be more appropriate to run a series of focus groups?

When you have information about your audiences, you can include it in subsequent tenders to help focus the procurement process.

Evaluations

Audience research can be used to identify the outcomes attributable to services and project/research outputs, and provide important evidence to help you evaluate the 'success' of a service/programme.

Evidence such as number of frequent or occasional users, demographics of users and quality of the user experience, will help you understand who is actually using the service and whether users find it appealing, informative, valuable etc. It will also be important to consider non-users – are segments of the target audience not using the service, and if not, why not? Understanding non-use is often the most challenging part, but also the most valuable.

Planning and decision-making

Evidence about audiences can help you plan your programme of work or research. Using evidence about the reach, uptake and success of previous strands of work will help you decide what to fund in new programmes of work. You may wish to continue funding streams of work which were particularly valuable to their audiences, or you may wish to fund projects aimed at particular audience segments which were not appropriately served in the last programme.

Evidence about your audiences can also support better decision-making. For instance, if you are managing a portfolio of services you may be required to decide between funding a project with a large audience, and a service with a small audience which is highly valued (eg a niche service). Knowledge about the value and impact of services and research programmes on their audiences can help you make these types of balance of investment decisions.

Further reading

The Guide to Researching Audiences and supporting documents

<http://sca.jiscinvolve.org/2009/02/05/download-audience-analysis-toolkit>

Briefing papers are available for the following sectors:

- Culture sector
- Health sector
- Education sector

There is also a briefing paper for senior managers and for people wanting to improve their use of digital media.

The Strategic Content Alliance

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This briefing paper and The Guide to Researching Audiences have been prepared by Curtis+Cartwright Consulting Ltd on behalf of the Strategic Content Alliance. They are part of a series of guides developed to support people in the public sector understand their digital audiences and deliver audience-focused services.

This work is part of a wider initiative led by the Strategic Content Alliance, which aims to support UK citizens gain best value from the public investment that has been made in digital content.

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