

The column

Each issue, an expert gives BPMS readers a takeaway action plan about a key measurement topic.

Pre-testing and “starch tests” are two focus group methods that can help organizations save time and resources.

How to keep focus groups focused

Focus groups often explore a rather broad range of themes. This month I'd like to explore the benefits of conducting focus groups on a very narrow issue: exactly what your audience thinks of a particular communication, either one that's currently available or one you're planning to distribute soon.

“Starch test” on an existing publication

When researching a publication, you can adapt a technique used in advertising research called the “starch test” to obtain in-depth information on many of the topics that are glossed over in a typical readership survey. In a starch test, you can convene a focus group of people who say they have read the latest issue. First, show them the cover of the publication and ask them to write down what they remember having read or seen in that issue. This is known as “unaided recall.” You can then track the responses to see which items have the greatest recall.

Then hand out to each participant a copy of the publication and a worksheet that asks them to identify how much of each article or section they read. This is called “aided recall.” After you collect the worksheets for further analysis, you can discuss each article with the group to identify the specific reasons that encouraged and discouraged your readers from getting the most out of each article. See Figure 1, right, for an example of starch test worksheet.

Pre-testing imminent communications

By the time an important announcement is ready to be distributed, it's likely to have gone through more revisions than anyone can count. All the reviewers are intimately familiar with the material and can't possibly anticipate with any accuracy how the intended audience will respond to the communication.

In these cases, especially for announcements that are likely to affect the audience directly, it's worth taking the time to pre-test the nearly final materials in focus groups before going into the final production stage. (However, due to the likelihood of rumors about the announcement, I recommend keeping the number of pre-test focus groups to a minimum and conducting them very close to the distribution date.)

For example, in one situation, we conducted the focus groups on a Friday and distributed the first announcement in the campaign on Monday morning. In another case, the announcement e-mail we pre-tested on a Tuesday was distributed at 5:30 pm the same day. For this timing to work, you may need to have your required reviewers available on stand-by about an hour after your last focus group to approve the changes suggested by your research.



Angela Sinickas is president of Sinickas Communications, Inc., and author of the manual “How to measure your communication programs.”

Articles/Columns	Skipped it	Skimmed it	Read it all	Why?
Cover		X		To see what's inside
Inside this issue	X			Didn't notice it
CEO's column	X			Too long; hard to read in reversed type
News from the regions		X		Only look for my region
3rd quarter financial results			X	The graphics caught my eye

Figure 1.
Sample starch test worksheet

Below are the findings from a focus group starch test about a publication that had just been published for employees of a newly-merged company:

- The headlines needed to be more descriptive and less clever. People were interpreting the headlines to be about one subject when the article was actually about another.
- The longer items, about half a tabloid page, were being skipped due to length.
- Articles that prominently mentioned any one business unit in the title were being skipped by anyone not in that unit, even though the ideas described in the body of the article were of interest and potential use to readers in other units.

Saving resources by pre-testing

Pre-testing and refining a key announcement can have significant bottom-line impact. In one instance, a client was announcing a major change to their retirement program that would automatically apply to new hires and could be chosen as an alternative for all current employees. The initial announcement was an e-mail, which would be followed up by a series of written, online and face-to-face communications over the following several months.

Based on the experiences of other companies that had made a nearly identical change in their retirement programs, my client was anticipating at least hundreds of phone calls to its benefits information call center, and potentially leaks to the media as well. Instead, only three calls were received from a potential group of 30,000 employees in the first 24 hours after the e-mail was sent, and none of these calls were from the media.

This satisfyingly low level of concern and confusion resulted because we made about 20 critical changes suggested by employees, including re-focusing the "subject" line of the e-mail, completely rewriting the first paragraph, altering the sequence of some points and changing the amount of detail in various sections of the e-mail. Because we allowed some time between the focus groups, we were able to pre-test even some suggested changes from the first two sessions with the third group of employees to make sure our edits didn't create any new, unanticipated problems. This saved untold hours of potential lost productivity for the HR department and employees having questions. **BPMS**