# Transforming Publishing User Research: Initial User Engagement

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1. Introduction

This document provides ISD analysts with advice on conducting user research when transforming publications into a new interactive format. It covers one of the two main types of research to be conducted during this process: initial user engagement (IUE). Guidance on conducting user tests can be found in the “Usability Testing” document [here](#).

It should be noted that the guide is not exhaustive, nor is it prescriptive. Rather, it covers the basics that should be considered when conducting this type of user research. It also links to supporting documentation and resources that are useful for further reading.

2. Initial user engagement

IUE – also known as the discovery phase - is the first contact with users of a specific ISD publication, and should take place before (or very early in) the development phase. This is an opportunity to understand the context of our users, why they access our publications, and their experiences in doing so. It facilitates the creation of outputs such as user scenarios and user personas. Of particular importance, it highlights some the key pain points or barriers users face when accessing our publications. Each of these elements helps to guide future development work.

The following sections contain advice on the specific stages of initial user engagement.

2.1.1 Planning stage

Meetings to discuss IUE should take place at the outset of the research process. At a minimum they should cover the following topics:

1. The definition of a goal.
   It is important that the team agrees the purpose of speaking to customers at the IUE sessions. The goal (or goals) should be remembered throughout the IUE process (from planning to implementation and analysis), to avoid going off at a tangent and/or generating unusable outputs. A pragmatic approach should be adopted whereby all activities undertaken contribute towards achieving the ultimate goal of the IUE (Example goal: to find out how we can improve our publication to meet the needs of customers).

2. The creation of research questions.
   These will operationalise your goal(s), and guide the design of your research i.e. the methods that you use to gather data from users. For example, one of your questions could be “How do customers engage with our product?” To answer this question, you
may decide to ask participants to describe a typical occasion when they have accessed data from your publication. Aim for between 3-5 research questions.

3. The designation of a project manager.
The individual (or individuals) placed in charge should be tasked with delivering the IUE goal. This is an important role, as conducting user research involves multiple tasks which can be time-consuming and challenging. The intensity of work will ebb and flow throughout, and busy periods can be difficult to predict. This is because a significant proportion of the work requires the input of individuals from inside and outside of the organisation.

4. Agreement on general principles and next steps.
It may not be a productive use of time to create a thorough plan for the implementation of the initial user engagement. Conducting research can be a complex and largely iterative exercise, where it is necessary to react to various situational factors. Instead, it would be useful to agree general principles (e.g. relating to the documentation of activities, providing periodic feedback to the team, a support network, and agreed communication channels), and on initial tasks that need to be undertaken. It is particularly important that the project manager has access to support – many activities will require input and feedback from the team.

Remember that the scope of your project has to be reasonable. To this end, always be sure to aim for depth rather than breadth when defining goals and research questions. You will not be able to cover every topic during the user engagement, and this may mean creating a list of priorities.

Further reading: User research kick off meeting checklist and project management basics.

2.1.2 Recruiting participants

In order to gain valuable and truly meaningful feedback from the IUE sessions, it is important that as many different customer groups as possible are represented in the sample. If the sample is limited, then the new product will be designed to meet the requirements of only a small proportion of users.

When recruiting participants to your study, it is important to ask the following questions:

1. Who are your users?
First you must identify the potential pool of people who access your publication. These can be internal (e.g. service managers, senior management) and external (e.g. academics, clinicians, information managers, journalists, nurses) groups to the organisation.

2. How can you access users?
Some user groups will be more accessible than others. To reach out to a broad range of customers, it will be necessary to pursue a variety of leads. This may
involve speaking to knowledgeable/connected contacts inside or outside of the team, and conducting online research to identify organisations/individuals that are likely to use the publication. It also pays to be opportunistic when seeking participants e.g. snowball sampling can be a very effective method of recruitment when dealing with elusive customer groups.

3. **How will you contact users?**
Think about the most appropriate method of contacting potential participants. In some instances, it may be worth sending out generic emails to multiple companies at a time. In others, personalised emails or phone calls may be more appropriate. Some advice on wording correspondence can be found here.

In general, it is advisable to make life as easy as possible for participants. They are giving up their valuable time to become involved in the project, so it is important to make this experience as pleasant as possible. Also, can you provide any incentives for taking part? What about travel expenses? Will you provide potential participants with updates of your progress after they have taken part? These are all important things to keep in mind when communicating with users.

Some participants are likely to call off or become non-responsive after initially registering interest. You can mitigate for this by being flexible, open, and available at each stage of the recruitment process. It is also important to be organised. For example, before contacting participants be sure to have an idea of when the research will take place, and keep your calendar (and those from your team who may also be assisting with the session) free on those date.

**Participant recruitment should start early in the IUE process. Do not underestimate the time it will take to identify, contact, and recruit users – it may take 3-4 weeks from initial contact to the actual session itself.**

2.1.3 **Design and implementation**

Design of the IUE should start early in the overall process. In essence, this involves creating a series of open-ended questions to be discussed at the focus group or interview. The question should be inputted in a document (i.e. a ‘schedule’ or ‘script’) which can then be used by the individual(s) moderating the session.

The questions in the session should:

- Be clear and understandable
- Flow in a natural and logical manner
- Contribute towards answering the overarching research questions

It is important to avoid closed-ended questions (i.e. that elicit yes/no answers), and instead tailor them to encourage a discussion. For example, instead of asking “Do you like our current publication format?” ask “What are your thoughts on our current publication format?” Be prepared to ask follow-up or ‘probing’ questions (e.g. that sounds interesting, can you tell
me more about it?). It may also be necessary to provide some context before asking a question to make it more understandable – this should be kept as brief as possible.

It is important to note when designing the IUE questions/schedule that focus groups and one-to-one interviews are substantially different in terms of their dynamic and the value they provide. Focus groups create an insight into the consensus, differences, and notable trends among the participants. A crucial part of the focus group is to get the participants discussing the topic with each other, as opposed to one at a time. Meanwhile, individual interviews give you more depth and detail on each individual person.

More on the differences between interviews and focus groups can be found here.

Get feedback from various stakeholders (e.g. your team members) about the questions that will be asked during the session. Do these reflect the goals of IUE, and do they each contribute towards answering a research question? It may be worthwhile creating a table with research questions in column A, and the corresponding interviews/focus group questions in column B so you are clear how each of your questions is useful.

The focus groups and interviews should take up to 2 hours and 1 hour, respectively. There are many possible approaches to implementing the sessions. For example, the focus group could begin with an ice-breaker to acquaint the participants. It is also useful to begin with a question that is easily answerable by the participants, to allow them to settle into the session. However, in any case, the moderator(s) should begin by welcoming the participant(s), reassuring them that their input is confidential, that there are no wrong answers (only differing perspectives), and encouraging them to be honest about their likes/dislikes. A brief reminder of the purpose of the session should be reiterated at this point as well, and why the participants' input is so valuable to the project.

During the session itself, it is important to let the conversation flow naturally and only use the script as a general guide or to bring the discussion back on track if it goes off at a tangent (i.e. it is no longer relevant to your goals/research questions). Crucially, do not impress your values or opinions on the participants, even if they say things that challenge your preconceptions. The research should remain as unbiased as possible to be a truly valuable piece of work that uncovers the genuine needs and wants of your customer.

In terms of gathering data, it is advisable – with the participants consent - to record the session with audio equipment. Video could also be used; however, be aware that this may bias the subjects or make them uncomfortable. At least one additional person should be present at any focus group as an assistant, to take observational notes and to assist with the general set-up of the session. At the end of the session the participants should be informed of what happens next, and how they will be kept involved in the project. This is good practice, as it makes the participant feel valued to be kept informed of progress. Also it is an opportunity to determine whether they would take part in future usability tests or other forms of user engagement. These details should be recorded for future reference.

Please read more about Focus group design and Interview strategies before conducting the IUE.
2.1.5 Analysis and outputs

After the IUE it is important to analyse the data you have gathered to determine next steps in terms of designing your new product. The first step to take would be to transcribe any of the audio recordings and compile any relevant notes to form the basis of your analysis. The results could also be collected through an online survey and the following approach also is applicable. Following the transcription and compilation of responses, you must code (or categorise) the data. It may be helpful to align the results with the aims of the research. For example, when designing the Medicines in Mental Health publication’s research the aims and questions were split into the following categories:

- Establish knowledge on current users
- Establish knowledge on behaviours and content interests
- Identify barriers and enablers
- Consult on future developments

Having done this, it will be necessary to read notes and transcripts thoroughly, and allocate important quotes, insights, or other findings to each of these categories. You may then further code this data, by developing themes e.g. users needs, user motivations, problems identified, content requests etc. Be sure to quantify the comments that underpin themes, to give some indication about the importance of the different issues encountered. For example, count how many times specific problems were identified by different users.

If quantitative data were gathered in a survey, these can be inputted into a simple spreadsheet for analysis. These results can then be used to triangulate the qualitative data (i.e. observation notes/transcripts). For example, if the participants were asked to rate how easy it is to use the PDF report on a rating scale of 1-5, this information will indicate how easy it is to understand the PDF report. For example, the report may have been allocated an average ease of use score of 4 out of 5, whilst the excel tables received a 2 out of 5. In this case, it may be necessary to focus more upon the problems relating to the latter task.

After the analysis has been completed the team should understand their users better, know their behaviours and content interests and know the barriers and enablers their users have accessing the current content.

In addition to the above, it will be useful for any future development and user engagement work – and also to provide evidence of the value of your publications to users - to generate a report on the overall research process. This should include a description of the background, research goals/questions, method, analysis, key results/outputs, and any practical implementations or outcomes. This type of audit trail will also be invaluable to track the evolution of your product, and may also be used by other teams within the organisation.