

Getting participants for website research can be difficult, but a few simple steps can help make the process go much more smoothly.

This article outlines steps modelled on the approach taken to recruiting users for a recent website redevelopment project for a tertiary education institution. The research activities included interviews, focus groups and usability testing.

Gather available information

As outlined in the previous article *Start user research by talking with staff*, an ideal place to start is with a series of staff interviews.

These can provide an excellent initial picture of website users and some of the relevant issues. Staff are also able to suggest users who might participate (in our case, students).

Your marketing or customer service department may very well have lists of clients (and other groups of users) that you can make use of. For instance, there may be a regular newsletter on which you can piggyback a message.

There may also be less well known channels to your audience, for example through student clubs, industry associations or partnerships.

Of course, the website itself is a channel for attracting participants. A suitably designed notice can be very effective in this regard.

Call for volunteers

Broadcast a 'call for volunteers' via all channels, including email lists, website notice, help desk sign and student noticeboards.

The message should give a brief overview of the project and then direct people to a central point of contact. A few alternatives may be needed, so give a phone number as well as email address.

This means volunteers will need to take steps to get back in touch with you. Not only does this act as an 'opt in' but it is also an easy way to ensure the accuracy of their contact details.

Use basic demographics

Use a quick survey to get a little more information from each person who responds to the ini-

tial message. This survey could be web-based, or it could just be via email.

The questions should aim to place the person in one of a few rough user groups or 'segments'. For example, are they a current student? how often do they use the website? where do they live?

Don't go overboard - you just need enough information to allow you to choose participants for research (but this will also be good practice if you go on to create 'personas' for your audience).

You will now have a pool of known participants that can be used for most types of research.

Invite users to specific activities

This involves a second message sent to those individuals you want to involve in a particular research activity. A separate invitation should be sent for each activity.

Keeping all correspondence as email is convenient, but may not be possible with users who are uncomfortable with technology (itself a handy fact to know when designing a website for them).

This is also when you should introduce the prospect of an incentive. This could be as simple as a free cup of coffee or gift voucher for everyone who participates. For a large number of participants, a better choice might be a prize draw.

Execute research activities

Now you can do the actual research, with more than enough participants. Time slots will need to be organised around participants' schedules, but persistence should pay off.

More difficult to accommodate are remote users (perhaps interstate or overseas) and users with disabilities. You will need to decide, based on the research you have performed so far, how important these segments are. Their input is likely to be crucial, as the website may be their only practical means of dealing with your organisation.

Other approaches

There are other methods for recruiting users for research, including recruitment agencies, but as a simple, low-cost and in-house approach this is hard to beat.