

Understanding Audiences with Focus Groups

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The Crescent is an arts centre and cultural hub in central Belfast. They run a wide range of courses and workshops including language-learning, arts and crafts, dance, music, drama, and creative writing. They also programme live cultural events and have a theatre, multiple workshops, two dance studios, working spaces, and a café on-site.

The Crescent (then known as the Crescent Arts Centre) approached us to run focus groups as part of a re-brand and the design of a new website.

They wanted to know how their audiences felt about The Crescent, and if their proposed new brand and website would reflect this and make accessing their wide-ranging programme easier.



Designing the Focus Groups

We sat down with the team at The Crescent to build a picture of what they wanted to find out from the research. As well as getting feedback on the new brand and website designs, they wanted to know what people thought about The Crescent and its offering, and what it meant to them.

We then designed the content and structure of the group to ensure we would meet the research objectives for The Crescent, create an atmosphere which encouraged people to give their view point and used techniques that would draw out the information we want to get within the 90 minute timeframe. The final guide was agreed with The Crescent's Marketing Manager.

We created four distinct focus groups to capture the variety of audiences for The Crescent. The Crescent is well used and has some very loyal attenders, but because they wanted to attract new people to the centre too, we created focus groups that included both current and potential audiences. It was more challenging to get new audiences to participate - but existing audiences, across all age-groups, were very keen to get involved and really appreciated being given the chance to contribute.

- Group 1: Existing Audiences 18-30
- Group 2: Existing Audiences 30-64
- Group 3: New and Current Audiences 30-64
- Group 4: Existing Audiences 65+

The Crescent themselves recruited the focus group members, and we ran the focus groups during the day and evening, to make sure everyone had a chance to attend.

Running the Focus Groups

There is a technique to running a group discussion like this which balances getting through everything you need to ask with ensuring everyone in the group can have their say and that you don't fall into the trap of group-think. As you might imagine, a focus group needs a bit of warming-up. Especially those who may not be confident speaking in front of a group of strangers. We started by getting each person to introduce themselves, what they do, and what they had for breakfast. There was coffee, tea, and snacks available, and at this stage we explained the consent form and that the recordings were for our use only.

During the focus groups, we tried to keep things relaxed and interesting, rather than barraging people with question after question.

Here are some strategies to help keep your own focus groups lively and interesting:

- Use pictures or objects to start a discussion.
- Ask people for as many words as possible to describe something.
- Use flip charts or whiteboards so group can see everyone's ideas.
- Present a new idea such as a brand template and get initial reactions – then dig deeper with specific questions.
- Explore differences between old and new designs or ideas.
- To check practical design of websites ask 'where would you go to find out...'?
- Introduce a tactile element with magazine clippings or post-its. People can brainstorm first and then organise and group their ideas.

What We Found Out

A huge amount of information came out of the focus groups. Some of the information fed into the final brand and website design, and other information gave an insight into how audiences view The Crescent overall.

Positive Perceptions of The Crescent

“It is a freeing and creative place” - female, 18-30

The words warm and friendly were used by almost all groups to sum up the atmosphere in The Crescent. The feeling of creativity and being in a creative place came through strongly too. This comes from staff, tutors, fellow participants and creates a sense that The Crescent has an open ethos

“This is a friendly place to come and make friends” - Male, 65+

Diversity was something that the group members felt made The Crescent a special place – diversity in terms of what was on offer, the class tutors, and seeing all ages, types, backgrounds of people in the things they were attending.



People used both the website and the brochure

In terms of customer behaviour, we found that most people used **both** the brochure and website to find out information about the workshops and classes. Almost everyone booked their courses and tickets online.

Thankfully, the majority of group members felt the new site was an improvement on the old one. We were able to ask more specific questions too and come up with some image, copy, and layout tweaks for the new site.

Importance of the Building and the Café

A number of participants commented on the café and regarded it as part of their use of The Crescent – sometimes before or after a class, and sometimes just to be in the café.

The role of the building was also cited as really important in participants' perceptions and experience of the Crescent. A significant number of people knew The Crescent had a rich history and felt that helped create the atmosphere.



Recommendations and Results

After the focus groups we created a comprehensive report and presentation of the results and recommendations. There were lots of practical recommendations on how to tweak the new brand and website. Colours, wording, pricing strategies and layout were all changed as a result of the focus groups. Simple things like changing 'engage' to 'live events' can make a big difference when a consumer is pressed for time and quickly looking for information on their smartphone. If your offer isn't clear and attractive – potential customers will go elsewhere.

The focus groups gave The Crescent specific feedback on their new brand and website, but they also highlighted what aspects of their cultural offer and customer experience were working well and what could be improved.

Many organisations inherit websites and improve them bit by bit over time. The input from the audience is either small or non-existent. By taking the time to consult with your

audiences, and putting their recommendations into practice, you can learn a huge amount about how your audience sees you, and create a website that is friendly and makes it easy for your audience to engage with you.

We often find when running surveys and focus groups that audiences very much appreciate the chance to feedback and participate in the design of their cultural organisations.

We think that The Crescent's new brand and site are really inviting and vibrant, and easy to navigate and use too. You can take a look at [The Crescent's website](#) and see the new design for yourself.

Top Tips on Running a Focus Group

1. Know what you're looking for.

Keep focused, you've only got a short amount of time with the group participants. Try to ask 'why' questions that can't be answered using quantitative data from ticketing info or surveys.

2. Choose your groups carefully.

Make sure your groups reflect what you want to know. Think about where and how you will recruit them. Hold your focus groups at times and locations that suit the lifestyle of your group members – be flexible.

3. Keep it relaxed

Don't discount the importance of a good location and lots of refreshments. You want people to feel like they are free to share their opinions, not like they're being interrogated or examined. An experienced facilitator will be able to get the group relaxed and interested – and uncover the most valuable information too. It can be tempting to save money but facilitating groups by the in-house team but this can skew what is being said and you may find yourself defending rather than listening.

4. Implement the findings

There's no point doing any kind of audience research if you're not committed to making some changes. It can be hard to hear that what you've put lots of work into isn't as valued by your audience as you thought. But if you've asked, you've got to be prepared to listen and amend your plans.

5. Follow up and preserve connections

Remember to thank your participants for their hard work, and share some of the project findings. Through your focus groups you might even identify some new audience advocates who are willing to feedback in the future. One of The Crescent's focus group members even offered to test their website for them.