Why Is Cognitive Testing Useful?

Cognitive testing is essential to producing an effective report because it provides important insights into how people interpret the language and graphics in your report and how they connect what they see in the report to their own experiences. Used properly, this method can help determine the extent to which the information in your report is:

Readable by your intended audience.
Perceived to be relevant and salient.
Understood in a way that is consistent with what you intended to communicate.
Presented in a way that enables people to easily find what they are looking for.

When done skillfully, cognitive testing can help identify problems that even seasoned report developers cannot anticipate. While you may know a lot about the issues that your report deals with, you cannot rely solely on your own judgment, that of your colleagues, or even extensive experience to determine whether your report contains clear and useful information. Details that seem trivial to you may be important to your audience, or things that you consider important may seem inconsequential or even distracting to your audience.

For example, report sponsors often think they need to provide detail about the methods used to generate the performance scores; however, lay audiences often find information about statistical methods confusing and off-putting. Testing what you plan to present about methods can help strike the right balance for the audience you are trying to reach. If you do not solicit direct feedback from your intended audience, you are simply guessing about what will work.

What Cognitive Testing Allows You To Learn or Do

Learn whether readers can understand the information that is presented and appropriately interpret its implications. The questions should be designed to reveal differences between what you, the sponsor, think the materials mean and how different people from the intended audience actually interpret them.
Get an early indication of whether the intended audience will be able to use the information to make a decision.
Identify what may be missing from your report. As they review the report, participants can specify whether they would like any additional information or require any to clarify the quality measures and scores.
Explore people's reactions to different approaches you are considering. For example, you could provide people with two versions of a chart to see which one is easier to understand, which they prefer, and why.
Try out possible solutions to problems. For example, if you are considering different formats for a data display, you can test out several versions to see which is most clear to the intended audience. You can use respondents' insights and reactions to refine your messages and materials so that they communicate more clearly and effectively.

Also in "The Purpose and Process of Cognitive Testing"

Page last reviewed February 2016
Page originally created February 2015