Collecting Data in a Cognitive Interview

There are three main ways that feedback is collected during a cognitive interview. These techniques can be used to test one report format or to evaluate a variety of alternative formats within the same round of testing.

Observation

The interviewer watches the respondents to see what they look at and how they navigate the document.

> Where do they begin reading?
> Where do they go next?
> How long do they spend on each topic?

Experienced interviewers recommend giving respondents a colored highlighter to mark any confusing words, sentences, or sections. After they go through all of the materials, the interviewer can probe further into the things they highlighted.

Listening as Respondent "Thinks Out Loud"

The interviewer asks respondents to share every thought and opinion as they go through the document, a process known as "thinking out loud." Respondents are asked to:

> React to specific sections or pieces of the report (such as charts).
> Tell when they find something confusing.
> Explain what they've seen in their own words.
> Point out unfamiliar terms or concepts.

If respondents seem to be having trouble thinking out loud, seem confused, or pause, interviewers sometimes ask "Tell me what you are thinking" or "What are you thinking right now?" as a prompt. While using this technique, it is often useful to provide nonverbal reinforcement to let the interviewee know that you are listening, such as nodding your head or saying "mmmm hmmm," "okay," or "I see."

Asking Questions

The interviewer asks direct questions to learn how respondents interpret what they're looking at. For example, the interviewer might ask a question such as "Given the data in this graph (or in the report overall), which provider would you say performed best? Which would you choose for yourself and why?"

It is important for questions to be open-ended and not leading. It is easy to unintentionally ask a question that may constrain and bias answers. For example, the question "What do you think of this legend?" presumes the participant noticed it and tells them what it is (or at least what it's called), making it less likely that they'll tell you they didn't see it or don't know what it is.

Instead, the interviewer could ask "Is there anything on this page (or in this report) that helped you understand the information?" If the respondent mentions the legend, then it was noticeable. If not, it might be necessary to make the legend more prominent. Once the interviewer determines whether the respondent noticed the legend, open-ended questions can probe other topics like legend format and utility.

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