CHAPTER 1

The Importance of Interviewing in Design

This is a great time for the design researcher. Within user-experience design, service design, and to a lesser extent, industrial design, user research has gone from being an outsider activity, to being tolerated, to being the norm. Across industry events, conferences, online forums, school curricula, and professional practice, there's a tacit agreement that designing for the user is the preferred way to think about design. As with any generalization, there are exceptions. Maybe you aren't feeling the love right now, but you probably can agree that things are much better than they were in the past. To design for users, you must begin with a deep understanding of users. If you don't already have that understanding, you need to do some form of user research.

TIP **YOU ARE NOT YOUR USER**

You may be a user, but be careful of being seduced into designing for yourself. Jared Spool calls that "self design" and identifies the benefits and risks at **www.uie.com/brainsparks/2010/07/22/uietips-self-design/**. I think he's too easy on self design. Lots of niche companies make the snowboards, outdoor equipment, and mixing gear that they, as enthusiasts, would want. But some have trouble expanding their offering in an innovative way, because they are so caught up in being the user.

NOTE **GAINING INSIGHT VS. PERSUADING THE ORGANIZATION**

While doing ethnographic research in Japan, I sat with my clients while they conducted another study. They brought users into a facility and showed them the most elegantly designed forms for printer ink cartridges. They were smooth, teardrop shapes that were shiny and coated with the color of the ink. They also showed users the existing ink cartridges: black rectangles with text-heavy stickers.

Can you guess what the research revealed? Of course. People loved the new designs, exclaiming enthusiastically and caressing them. Regardless of methodology, there was no insight to be gained here. I've gone back and forth about whether this was *good research* or *bad research*. It didn't reveal new information, but it provided tangible evidence to persuade someone else in the organization. This team's approach suggests that there are other issues with their design process, and while their research might have been the best solution in that situation, ideally this isn't the best use of a research study.

User Insight in the Design Process

Although there isn't a clear alignment about how much time and effort to invest and what approach to use, at least we, as user researchers, share a common goal: to gather information about users in order to support the organization when creating products, services, and more.

What I'm calling *interviewing* is also referred to by other names: user research, site visits, contextual research, design research, and ethnography, to name a few. Regardless of nomenclature, these are the key steps in the process:

- Deeply studying people, ideally in their context
- Exploring not only their behaviors but also the meaning behind those behaviors
- Making sense of the data using inference, interpretation, analysis, and synthesis
- Using those insights to point toward a design, service, product, or other solution

We go to visit our users (in their homes, their offices, their cars, their parks, and so on) most of the time, but not always. When planning a project, we ask ourselves if it's more insightful to bring participants in to see our stuff (say, prototypes we've set up in a facility meeting room) than it is for us to go out and see their stuff. Overall, our objective is to learn something profoundly new. There are points in the design process where quickly obtained, if shallow, information is beneficial, but that's not what we're focusing on here.

NOTE IS THIS ETHNOGRAPHY?

If you are interviewing users, are you doing *ethnography*? I don't know. What I do know is that if you refer to your use of interviewing of people as ethnography, someone will inevitably tell you that no, you aren't doing ethnography (you are doing contextual inquiry, or site visits, or in-depth interviews, and so on). The term *ethnography* seems to be particularly contentious for some folks, but…whatever! That's really their problem, isn't it? I'd rather we move on from definition wars and focus on what it is I'm getting at when I say *interviewing*—which means conducting contextual research and analyzing it to reveal a deep understanding of people that informs design and business problems.

Of course, there are varying perspectives on any "best practice." Everyone from Henry Ford to Sony to 37 Signals has offered up their reasons *not* to incorporate direct customer input into the development process. The subtext of those claims is that people in those organizations possess an innate talent for building stuff that people love. Yet some companies that publicly make those claims have hired me to interview their users. The insights that come from studying users not only inform design but also inspire it. Across organizations, different design cultures have more or less of an appetite for inspiration or information, although in my experience it's hard to interview users without taking away a hearty dose of both.

Sometimes, the stated goal of interviewing users is to uncover their *pain points* (often known as *needs*). Embedded in this mindset is the mistaken notion that research with users is a sort of scooping activity, where if you take the effort to leave your office and enter some environment where users congregate, you'll be headed home with a heap of fresh needs. People need an X and Y, so all the designer has to do is include X and Y in their product and all will be good. What? No one really thinks that, do they? Well, take a look at Figure 1.1

Microsoft's ad campaign for Windows 7 implies an unlikely approach to research, design, and product development. The customer asks for some feature—in this case, for the OS to use less memory. Microsoft, seemingly unaware of the need—or opportunity—to optimize the memory footprint, smacks their corporate forehead as they see the light, sending their engineers scurrying to fulfill this surprising new need.

Without endlessly debating what Microsoft and their ad agency knew and when they knew it, suffice it to say that this advertisement reinforces this semi-mythical scooping model of user research.

FIGURE 1.1
Microsoft's ad for Windows 7 suggests that their approach to innovation comes from fulfilling user requests.

I'm calling it a *semi-mythical* model because this is exactly what some teams do. Although it may be better than nothing, the fact is that a lot of important information gets left behind. Insights don't simply leap out at you. You need to work hard and dig for them, which takes planning and deliberation. Further complicating the scooping model is the fact that what the designers and engineers see as "pain points" aren't necessarily that painful for people. The term *satisficing*, coined by Herbert Simon in 1956 (combining *satisfy* and *suffice*), refers to people's tolerance—if not overall embracing—of "good enough" solutions (see Figure 1.2).

Frankly, I discover satisficing in every research project: the unfiled MP3s sitting on the desktop, ill-fitting food container lids, and tangled, too-short cables connecting products are all "good enough" examples of satisficing. In other words, people find the pain of the problem to be less annoying than the effort to solve it. What you observe as a *need* may actually be something that your customer is perfectly tolerant of. Would they like all their food in tightly sealed containers? Of course. But are they going to make much effort to accomplish that? Probably not.

Beyond simply gathering data, I believe that interviewing customers is tremendous for driving *reframes*, which are crucial shifts in perspective that flip an initial problem on its head. These new frameworks (which come from rigorous analysis and synthesis of your data) are critical. They can point the way to significant, previously unrealized possibilities for design and

FIGURE 1.2
In my family room, you can see a telephone (with cord askew) stored near the floor on a VHS rack that I also use to store CDs (which don't fit) and empty CD cases. (Why am I keeping them?) Incidentally, the orange cord goes through the floor to an outdoor sump pump. And why do I even have these nearly-obsolete VHS tapes and CDs?

innovation. Even if innovation (whatever you consider that to be) isn't your goal, these frames also help you understand where (and why) your solutions will likely fail and where they will hopefully succeed. To that end, you can (and should!) interview users at different points in the development process. Here are some situations where interviewing can be valuable:

- As a way to identify new opportunities, before you know what could be designed
- To refine design hypotheses, when you have some ideas about what will be designed
- To redesign and relaunch existing products and services, when you have history in the marketplace

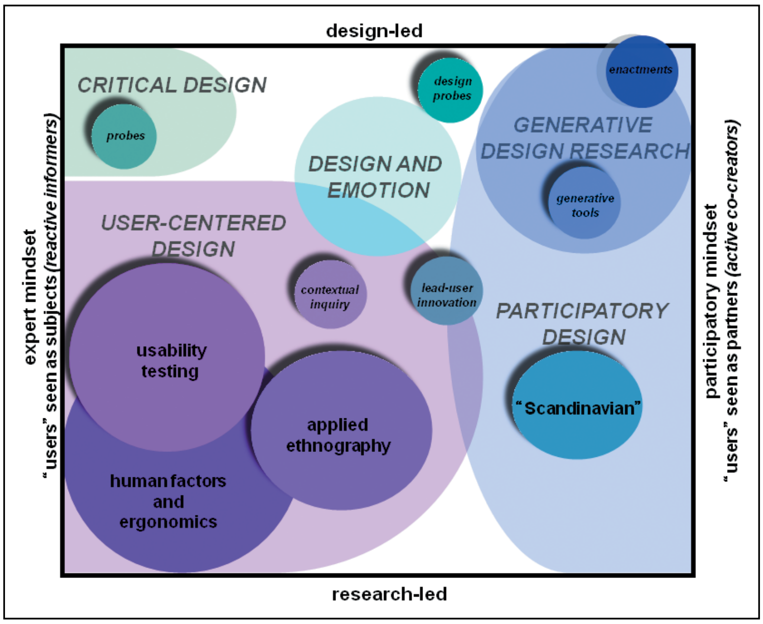
NOTE THE CASE OF THE iPOD PEOPLE

Our company began working with a client after they had completed a quantitative study about where people used iPods. They had a list of top environments (such as Home, Work, In the Car, and so on), and they asked us to uncover the unmet needs that people had in those particular environments. It turned out that the specific within-environment needs people had were just not that big a deal, but what people really struggled with was moving between environments, or moving between contexts: from being alone to being in a social situation, from being stationary to being mobile, and so on. These were the real challenges for people. For example, if you've worn one earbud and let the other dangle so you could stay somewhat engaged, you've dealt with this particular issue.

So, we excitedly reported to our client that we had found the "real" problem for them to solve. We were met with uncomfortable silence before they told us that they had committed organizational resources to addressing the problem as it currently stood. In our enthusiasm, we had trouble hearing them, and for a few minutes, the conversation was tense.
Finally, we stated definitively that we *had* learned some specific things about the environments, *and* we saw a rich and complex opportunity in this new problem. And that was all it took. We delivered findings about each environment, and then we delved into the harder problem. It turns out that our client was eager to innovate, but they just needed to have their initial brief addressed. It became an important lesson for me: Reframing the problem extends it; it doesn't replace the original question.

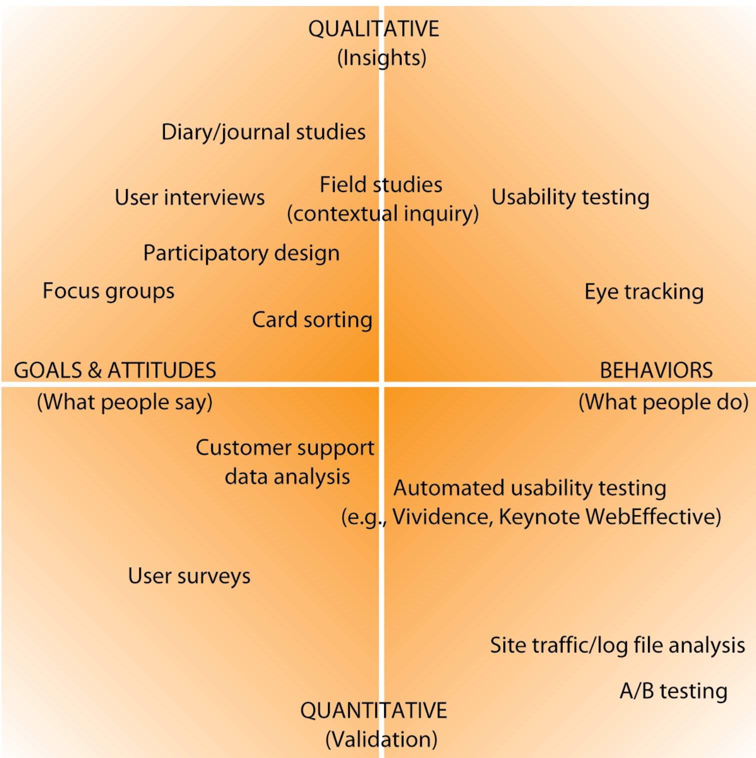
When to Use Interviewing

There are numerous ways to gather data about users: usability testing, A/B testing, quantitative surveys, Web analytics, interviewing, focus groups, and so on. For the closest thing to a "Grand Unified Field Theory of User Research," see these examples by Elizabeth B. N. Sanders (see Figure 1.3) and Steve Mulder (see Figure 1.4). Both do a nice job of creating an organizing structure around the surfeit of research techniques we are blessed with.



ELIZABETH B. N. SANDERS, MAKE TOOLS, LLC 2012

FIGURE 1.3
A framework for different research techniques, factoring in different philosophical approaches toward the design process and the user's role in that process.



STEVE MULDER

FIGURE 1.4
Different research techniques, organized by what is being examined and which style of research objective we're addressing.

NOTE **EXAMPLES OF USER RESEARCH APPROACHES**

- **Usability testing:** Typically done in a controlled environment such as a lab, users interact with a product (or a simulation of a product) and various factors (time to complete a task, error rate, preference for alternate solutions) are measured.
- **A/B testing:** Comparing the effectiveness of two different versions of the same design (e.g., advertisement, website landing page) by launching them both under similar circumstances.
- **Quantitative survey:** A questionnaire, primarily using closed-ended questions, distributed to a larger sample in order to obtain statistically significant results.
- **Web analytics:** Measurement and analysis of various data points obtained from Web servers, tracking cookies, and so on. Aggregated over a large number of users, Web analytics can highlight patterns in navigation, user types, the impact of day and time on usage, and so on.
- **Focus group:** A moderated discussion with 4 to 12 participants in a research facility, often used to explore preferences (and the reasons for those preferences) among different solutions.
- **Central location test:** In a market research facility, groups of 15 to 50 people watch a demo and complete a survey to measure their grasp of the concept, the appeal of various features, the desirability of the product, and so on.

Interviewing isn't the right approach for every problem. Because it favors depth over sample size, it's not a source for statistically significant data. Being semi-structured, each interview will be unique, making it hard to objectively tally data points across the sample. Although we are typically interviewing in context, it's not fully naturalistic. A tool that intercepts and observes users who visit a website is capturing their actual behavior, but sitting with users and having them show you how they use a website is an artifice.

Interviews are not good at predicting future behavior, especially future purchase intent or uncovering price expectations. Asking those questions in an interview will reveal mental models that exist today, which can be insightful, but won't necessarily be accurate.

But interviewing can be used in combination with other techniques. In a note earlier in this chapter, I described how a quantitative study helped focus our contextual interviewing and observations. In other situations, we've used an exploratory interviewing study to identify topics for a global quantitative segmentation study. We've combined a Central Location Test (where larger groups watched a demo in a single location such as a research facility and filled out a survey) with in-home interviews simultaneously and used the results of both studies to get a deeper understanding of the potential for the product. It can be valuable to combine a set of approaches and get the advantages of each.

Is interviewing considered to be user research? Is it market research? Is it design research? I can't answer those questions any better than you can! The answer is: it depends. Whether or not you ally yourself or your methods with any one of those areas, you can still do great work uncovering new meaning and bringing it into the organization to drive improvement and growth. At the end of the day, isn't that what we care about? I'll let someone else argue about the overarching definition matrix.

To Interview Well, One Must Study

Much of the technique of interviewing is based on one of our earliest developmental skills: asking questions (see Figure 1.5). We all know how to ask questions, but if we asked questions in interviews the way we ask questions in typical interactions, we would fall short. In a conversational setting, we are perhaps striving to talk at least 50 percent of the time, and mostly to talk about ourselves. But interviewing is not a social conversation. Falling back on your social defaults is going to get you into trouble!

CHERYL PORTIGAL-TODD, 2008

FIGURE 1.5
Childhood is marked by frequent, inevitable question-asking.

Interviewing users involves a special set of skills. It takes work to develop these skills. The fact that it looks like an everyday act can actually make it harder to learn how to conduct a good interview because it's easy to take false refuge in existing conversational approaches. Developing your interviewing skills is different than developing a technical skill (say, milkshake-machine recalibration) because you would have nothing to fall back on if learning about milkshake machines. With interviewing, you may need to learn how to override something you already know. Think of other professionals who use verbal inquiry to succeed in their work: whether it is police officers interrogating a suspect or a lawyer cross-examining an opposing witness or a reference librarian helping a patron, the verbal exchange is a deliberate, learned specialty that goes beyond what happens in everyday conversation. For you as an interviewer, it's the same thing.

The Impact of Interviewing

Interviewing creates a shared experience, often a galvanizing one, for the product development team (which can include researchers, designers, engineers, marketers, product management, and beyond). In addition to the information we learn from people and the inspiration we gain from meeting them, there's a whole other set of transformations we go through. You might call it *empathy*—say a more specific understanding of the experience and emotions of the customer—which might even be as simple as seeing "the user" or "the customer" as a real live person in all their glorious complexity. But what happens when people develop empathy for a series of individuals they might meet in interviews? They experience an increase in their overall capacity for empathy.[1]

This evolution in how individual team members view themselves, their design work, and the world around them starts to drive shifts in the organizational culture (see Figure 1.6). This capacity for empathy is not sufficient to change a culture, but it is necessary.

More tactically, these enlightened folks are better advocates for customers and better champions for the findings and implications of what has been learned in interviews.

The wonderful thing about these impacts is that they come for free (or nearly). Being deliberate in your efforts to interview users will pay tremendous dividends for your products, as well as the people who produce it.

---

1 In http://rfld.me/SzBioQ, William Hamilton Bishop describes a process for interactions between couples that sounds a lot like many of the best practices for judgment-free listening that I'll outline here. He observes that as his clients go through this process, their overall capacity for empathy increases significantly. If we substitute user interviews for the process Bishop outlines, it's good evidence that we can expect our own empathy to increase as well.

MIRIAM HOME

FIGURE 1.6
Team experiences that are challenging and out-of-the-ordinary create goodwill and a common sense of purpose.

Summary

It's become increasingly common, perhaps even required, for companies to include user research in their design and development process. Among many different approaches to user research, interviewing (by whatever name you want to call it) is a *deep dive* into the lives of customers.

- Interviewing can be used in combination with other techniques, such as identifying key themes through interviews and then validating them quantitatively in a subsequent study.
- At a distance, interviewing looks just like the everyday act of talking to people, but interviewing well is a real skill that takes work to develop.
- Interviewing can reveal new "frames" or models that flip the problem on its head. These new ways of looking at the problem are crucial to identifying new, innovative opportunities.
- Interviewing can be used to help identify what could be designed, to help refine hypotheses about a possible solution that is being considered, or to guide the redesign of an existing product that is already in the marketplace
- Teams who share the experience of meeting their users are enlightened, aligned, and more empathetic.


ASHRAFIYA
Chips

CHAPTER 2

A Framework for Interviewing

When Wayne Gretzky apocryphally[1] explained his hockey success as "I don't skate to where the puck is, I skate to where the puck is going to be," he identified a key characteristic of many experts: the underlying *framework* that drives everything. This platonically idealized Gretzky could have revealed any number of tactics such as his grip, or the way he shifts his weight when he skates. Keith Richards explains his guitar sound, which involves removing the 6th string, tuning to open G, and using a particular fretting pattern, as "five strings, three notes, two fingers, and one asshole." Even though Keith is explaining the tactics, he's also revealing something ineffable about where he's coming from. The higher-level operating principles that drive these experts are compelling and illustrative.

Expert researchers also have their own operating principles. In this chapter, I'll outline mine, and I hope to inspire you to develop your own interviewing framework. As you develop, the process evolves from *a toolkit for asking questions* into *a way of being*, and you'll find that many of the tactical problems to solve in interviewing are simply no-brainers. As George Clinton sang, "Free your mind…and your ass will follow."

Check Your Worldview at the Door

I've been asked, "What was the most surprising thing you ever learned while doing fieldwork?" I scratch my head over that one because I don't go out into the field with a very strong point of view. Of course, I'm informed by my own experiences, my suspicions, and what my clients have told me, but I approach the interviews with a sense of what I can only call a bland curiosity.

As the researcher, it's my responsibility to find out what's going on; I'm not invested in a particular outcome. Even more (and this is where the blandness comes from), I'm not fully invested in a specific set of answers. Sure, we've got specific things we want to learn—questions we *have* to answer in order to fulfill our brief. But my hunger to learn from my participant is broad, not specific. I'm curious, but I don't know yet what I'm curious about. My own expectations are muted, blunted, and distributed. Although I will absolutely find the information I'm tasked with uncovering, I also bring a general curiosity. Now, the people I work with don't have the luxury of bland curiosity. Whether they are marketers, product managers, engineers, or designers (or even other researchers), they often have their own beliefs about what is going on with people. This makes sense: if there's enough organizational momentum to convene a research project, someone has been thinking hard about the issues and the opportunities, and has come to a point of view.

1 In fact, it was Walter Gretzky, Wayne's dad, who said it, as "Go to where the puck is going, not where it has been," according to Fast Company's Consultant Debunking Unit. http://rfld.me/Rj6XpR

The Brain Dump

At the beginning of the project, convene a brain dump (see Figure 2.1). Get what's in everyone's heads out on the table. Whether it's real-time, face-to-face, in front of a whiteboard, or asynchronously across offices on a wiki, talk through assumptions, expectations, closely-held beliefs, perspectives, and hypotheses. Contradictions are inevitable and should even be encouraged. The point is not establishing consensus; it's to surface what's implicit. By saying it aloud and writing it down, the issues leave the group specifically and enter an external, neutral space.

PHOTO BY LENA BLACKSTOCK (2012)

FIGURE 2.1
Capture everything that everyone thinks they know so that it's not stuck in their heads.

It's also not about being right or wrong; I encourage you to anonymize all the input so that people don't feel sheepish about expressing themselves. I wouldn't even go back and validate the brain dump against the resulting data. The objective is to shake up what is in your mind and free you to see new things. Think about it as a transitional ritual of unburdening, like men emptying their pockets of keys, change, and wallet as soon as they return home (Figure 2.2).

FIGURE 2.2
Transitional rituals are actions we take to remind ourselves that we are shifting from one mode of being to another.

TIP **WORK IT OUT**

Chicago's DD+D (who bill themselves as "a theater-based design team") offers a Design Empathy workshop. Using improv and other theater techniques, this workshop "helps designers to check in and acknowledge their own biases and to explore assumptions before going out and doing research."[2]

2 Touchpoint, the Service Design Network publication, Volume 4, Issue 2.

Make the Interview About the Interview

Another transitional ritual is to make a small declaration to yourself and your fellow fieldworkers in the moments before you begin an interview. If you are outside someone's apartment or entering their workspace, turn to each other and state what you are there to accomplish. If you were in a movie, you'd probably growl purposefully "Let's do this thing." Sadly, fieldwork is not quite that glamorous, so you might want to clarify what you mean by "this thing." Remember, even if you consider the fieldwork part of a larger corporate initiative to "identify next-gen opportunities for Q3 roadmap," that's not where you should be focusing as you start your interview. Set aside the underlying goals for the duration of the session. "This thing" might instead be learning about Paul and how he uses his smartphone or GlobeCorp's IT department and how they deploy new routers. It's important to take that moment to tangibly confirm—and affirm—your immediate objective.

Embrace How Other People See the World

If you've effectively purged yourself of your own worldview, you are now a hollow vessel waiting to be filled with insights. Lovely image, isn't it? It's not quite accurate. You need to not only be ready to hear your participant's take on things, but you should also be *hungry* for it. This willingness to embrace is an active, deliberate state.

Go Where the People Are

Rather than asking people to come to you to be interviewed, go where they are. In order to embrace their world, you have to be in their world. Inviting them into your realm (and let's face it, even if a neutral market research facility isn't technically *your* realm, that's how your participants will perceive it) won't cut it. You'll benefit by interviewing them in their own environment—this is the environment you are interested in, where the artifacts and behaviors you want to learn about are rooted. By the same token, you'll also benefit from your own first-hand experience in that environment. The information you learn when going into other people's worlds is different from what you learn when bringing them into yours.

To that end, try not to bring your world into theirs. Leave the company-logo clothing (and accessories) at home. Wearing your colors is fine when you're rooting for the home team or taking your hog to Sturgis, but it has no place in the interviewing room (see Figure 2.3).

HELLS ANGELS, A CREATIVE COMMONS ATTRIBUTION (2.0)
IMAGE FROM BRIMELOW'S FLICKR PHOTOSTREAM

FIGURE 2.3
Displaying your affiliation may be appropriate in some settings, but not typically during fieldwork.

Be Ready to Ask Questions for Which You Think You Know the Answer

You already know how *you* plan a balanced meal, prepare your taxes, or select an aspect ratio on your HDTV. You may already have an idea about how your participant does those things (because of what you've learned about them during the screening process, or implied by something they said earlier in the interview, or assumed by what you've seen other people do in the past). However, you need to be open to asking for details anyway. I'll have more to say in subsequent chapters about asking questions, but for now keep in mind that to embrace their world you need to explore the details of their world. Some people fear that they are being false by asking a question if they think they know the answer. But don't be so confident with your own presumptions. Interesting tidbits can emerge when you ask these questions, as this hypothetical example suggests:

Question: When are your taxes due?

The answer (which you already know): April 15

The response you fear: Why are you asking me this stuff? Everyone knows that it's April 15. Get out of my house, jerk face!

The type of answer you are just as likely to get if you swallow your discomfort and ask the question anyway: I always complete everything by March 1. I *think* it's April 15 this year, but I never really pay attention to that.

The goal here is to make it clear to the participant (and to yourself) that they are the expert and you are the novice. This definitely pays off. When I conduct research overseas, people tangibly extend themselves to answer my necessarily naïve questions. Although it's most apparent in those extreme situations, it applies to all interviews. Respect for their expertise coupled with your own humility serves as a powerful invitation to the participant.

Nip Distractions in the Bud

Tactically, make sure that you are not distracted when you arrive. Take care of your food, drink, and restroom needs in advance. When I meet up with colleagues who are coming to the interview from a different location, we pick an easy location (such as a Starbucks) for a pre-interview briefing. It gives us time to acclimate into interview mode, review the participant's profile, catch up on what's been happening in the field to date, and address our personal needs. If your brain is chattering, "Lord, am I famished! When's lunch?" you are at a disadvantage when it comes to tuning into what's going on in the interview.

Needless to say, silence your mobile phone and don't plan on taking calls or checking texts or emails during the interview. I say "needless," but I met a team that took a different approach. Sensitive to the commitment their internal clients were making in leaving the office for fieldwork, they allowed mobile device usage during the interview, within limits. Although they were inspired by one colleague who had the stealth-check-below-the-table move down cold, most people weren't able to handle it quite so deftly. It was a good lesson to learn; they won't be allowing cell phones in the future. Mind you, even if one were successfully stealthy, that's beside the point. Figure 2.4 is an evocative depiction of the multitasking potential of technology, but during an interview (and probably during a date), you should be fully engaged with the other person.

FIGURE 2.4
Just because you *can* multitask doesn't mean you *should.*

Building Rapport

I often leave an interview with my head slightly swimming, in a state between energized and exhausted. In addition to all the useful information that will impact the project, I've just made an intense connection with a new person. I've established a rapport with someone. That's a powerful feeling, and likely as not, my participant is feeling the same way. Our quotidian transaction to learn about breakfast making has turned into something else.

The rapport is what makes for great interviews. You won't leave every interview walking on a cloud, but getting to that state with your interviewee is something to strive for.

It's your job to develop that rapport over the course of the interview. By all means, recruit participants who are articulate, outgoing, and eager to be part of the interview, but remember that creating that connection falls to you, the interviewer. As in life, you'll meet some people who you'll connect with easily, and others who you'll have to work hard for. Some of my best interviews have been with people who are visibly uncomfortable or disinterested at the outset.

Be Selective About Social Graces

Your participants have no framework for "ethnographic interview," so they will likely be mapping this experience onto something more familiar like "having company" (when being interviewed at home) or "giving a demo" (when being interviewed about their work). Sometimes when you visit people in their homes, they will offer you a drink. For years, I resisted taking the drink, trying to minimize the inconvenience I was causing. I was well intentioned but naïve; one time I declined a proffered drink and met an ongoing undercurrent of hostility. The drink offer was made again, so I accepted, and suddenly everything thawed. The issue wasn't my pursuit or denial of refreshment, it was acknowledging my participant's social expectations—guests should act like guests. This experience took place in the U.S.; in other parts of the world (say, Japan), these rituals are even more inflexible and failure to adhere to them will likely doom the interview. Be sure that you're aware of the social expectations in the country in which you conduct your interviews.

In addition to accepting a drink, allow for some small talk as you get settled. But don't dwell on the chitchat, because your participant may find this confusing.

Be Selective When Talking About Yourself

You are bound to hear stories in the field that you strongly identify with, whether it's someone's frustration with a broken part of Windows or their passion for Pre-Code Hollywood. Although it's important to connect with your participant, it's not the best idea to get there by sharing your common interest. Remember that the interview isn't about you. If you also love Pre-Code Hollywood, you may think "OMG! Another fellow Pre-Code Hollywood enthusiast!" *But you don't have to say that!* Think about when to reveal something about yourself (and when not to). Putting a "me too!" out there changes the dynamic of the interview. It may work to develop some rapport in a difficult situation, or it may imply you are more interested in talking about yourself than listening to the other person. Although this approach might work in social settings, where "see how interesting I am!" is a way we establish our worth in new situations, it can be detrimental in an interview.

You should definitely talk about yourself if doing so gives the other person permission to share something. As an example, early on in my career I was part of an interview team where my role was to hold the video camera and ask only a few supporting questions. As our participant was telling us about her family and their history, she stopped and looked at both of us and said, "Well, you know, my family is Jewish." She was hesitant to continue. I piped up, explaining "My family is Jewish as well." She said to me, "Well, then you understand." She then turned to my colleague and proceeded to explain the specific details she wanted to convey. I don't always tell my Jewish interviewees, "Hey, I'm Jewish, too! I have a menorah, too!" but in this case a small revelation gave the interviewee permission to move forward with the interview.

Adventures in Rapport Building

As we rang the doorbell, my colleague and I unconsciously straightened, preparing ourselves for that all-important first impression, that moment when our research participant would come to the door and size us up. We waited for a moment, looking at each other as we heard footsteps, mustering a smile as the inside door opened.

"Hello," I offered, "Are you Brian?"

As I began to state the obvious, that we were here for the interview, he grunted, opened the screen door, and as we took hold, he turned around and walked back into the house. We glanced at each other and stepped into the foyer. What did we know about Brian? Our recruiting screener told us he was 22, lived with his parents and brother, and was employed part-time. The rest would be up to us to discover.

It was 7:30 in the morning, and we were taking our shoes off in a strange house. Eventually, someone beckoned from the kitchen, and we went in. But already we were out of sync. The kitchen was small, with an L-shaped counter and a small table for dining. Brian's mother was at the end of the L, working with bowls and dishes and burners on the stove. Brian's father was perched against the counter, while Brian and his younger brother sat at the table. His father was a small man, while the other three were quite large. The room wasn't big enough for the six of us, so we managed to set up for the interview in the only place we could—at the far end of the counter. We wedged ourselves (one behind the other) on small chairs, pulling our knees in, our paraphernalia of notepads, documents, video cameras, tapes, batteries, and so on clutched in close. It wasn't ideal, but we hoped we could make it work.

The real challenge quickly became clear: Although Brian had agreed to be interviewed, he was actively disinterested. We had recruited Brian specifically, but here we were with the entire family. We pressed ahead, explaining our study, and starting in with our planned questions. Since Brian was the person with whom we had the arrangement, we focused our attention on him. He responded with one-word answers (which sounded more like grunts) and the occasional glance at his brother, causing them both to giggle.

My colleague and I avoided looking at each other (it may not have been physically possible, given the tight quarters) for fear of displaying our despair. Sure, we had arranged this interview, but the cues we were receiving were making it clear the arrangement wasn't worth much. At this point, we had already awoken quite early to conduct this interview, so there was no point in giving up. If they changed their mind explicitly, they'd let us know, and we'd leave. Meanwhile, what else was there to do but press on? I asked questions with very little response. I tried the brother, at which point Brian bolted out of the room for a few minutes, without a word. The brother was only slightly more amenable than Brian, mostly interested in making critical comments about his parents (to Brian's great grunting enjoyment), rather than providing any actual information.

Indeed, it appeared that Brian had not informed his parents that we were coming. Although I directed some of the questioning toward his mom, she reacted with pretty serious hostility, informing us (in the context of an answer to a question) that they did not welcome strangers into their house, and (while she was preparing food) highlighted the intimate nature of food preparation as a symbol, which was even less open to strangers. The message was very clear.

But again, what could we do? Pressing on until we were specifically asked to leave, under the explicit agreement we had made, seemed the best approach. We asked our questions, following up on the information they had shared, listening closely, looking for clarification, offering up as much space as we could for them to talk, all in trying to build some flow and dialogue.

Even though the message was negative, at least the parents were willing to talk to us. And so the young men faded out of the conversation, and the interview eventually switched over to the parents. Two hours later, it turned out that we had completed an excellent interview with them; they each had great stories about our topic area and revealed a lot of background about their family, about growing up, about their activities, and even their perspectives on what made the United States the country it had become. By not giving up, by ignoring our own discomfort, and by being patient in building rapport, a near-failure turned into a triumph.

Indeed, before we left the house, the mother insisted on cooking up some fried bread, fresh and hot for us. She stated that "No one comes here and doesn't get food," thus reiterating the intimate nature of food she had mentioned at the beginning, but this time as a compliment rather than a warning.

As soon as we left the house, my colleague turned to me and said, "I don't know how you pulled that off; I thought we were done for and would have to leave." I was very pleased with how the interview turned out, especially because it began so poorly, but there was little magic to it. I didn't try to solve the big problem of the complex dynamic we had walked into; I just focused (especially at first) on the next problem—the immediate challenge of what to say next. I was certainly keeping the larger goals in mind of how to cover all the areas we were interested in, but I was focusing my energy as an interviewer on the next point. And by working at it in small pieces, bit by bit, the dynamic shifted. As interviewers, we had to compartmentalize the social experience of the event—the extreme discomfort and awkwardness of the early part of the interview—and stick to our jobs. We didn't handle the situation that differently than any other interview, and it served as a testament to our approach—listening, following up (and showing that we were listening by the way we followed up), building rapport and trust bit by bit, until there was a great deal of openness and great information.

Looking back on this experience years later, it's obvious that there are better ways to communicate with the participants ahead of time to screen out the unwilling. I should have spoken directly to the person we were visiting before the day of the interview, in order to get that person-to-person communication started early. But, given the diversity of people, there's still a good chance that you'll end up with someone sometime who isn't initially comfortable with the interview process, and it's your job to make them comfortable. Doing so may make you uncomfortable, but with practice, you'll learn to set aside social dynamics and focus on the question asking and listening that will make the interview a success. See Chapter 8, "Optimizing the Interview," for more on troubleshooting this type of common interview problem.

Work Toward the Tipping Point

There's often a visceral point in the interview where the exchange shifts from a back-and-forth of *question-and-answer, question-and-answer* to a *question-story* setup. It's such a tangible shift in the interview that I feel as if I can point to it when it happens. Stories are where the richest insights lie, and your objective is to get to this point in every interview.

The thing about this tipping point is that you don't know when it's coming. So you have to be patient in the question-and-answer part of the interview because you don't necessarily know that what you're doing to build rapport is getting you anywhere. You have to trust in the process, which is easier with experience.

Acknowledge That the Interview Is…Something Unusual

Although your participants are using "social call" or "vendor meeting" as their initial framework for their experience with you, it's not a perfect model. Strangers don't typically visit us and take video of us grinding coffee beans. Falling back on naturalistic observation is disingenuous; it's not easy for participants to pretend you aren't there and just go on as they would normally. If we make the generous assumption that people on reality TV shows are in fact behaving naturally, that is typically due to an extensive amount of time surrounded by cameras, where what is *natural* shifts to something different. You won't have enough time in your interview to accomplish that. Instead, leverage the constructed nature of your shared experience. You are empowered to ask silly-seeming detailed questions about the mundane because you are joined together in this uncommon interaction. Frame some of your questions with phrases such as "What I want to learn today is…" as an explicit reminder that you have different roles in this shared, unnatural experience.

Listening

When you engage in conversation, you're often thinking about what you want to say next and listening for the breathing cues that indicate it's your turn to speak. As you jockey for your 51% of the conversation space, listening becomes a limited resource. Although we all like to consider ourselves "good listeners," for interviewing you must rely on a very special form of listening that goes beyond the fundamentals, such as "don't interrupt."

Listening is the most effective way you can build rapport. It's how you demonstrate tangibly to your participants that what they have to say is important to you.

Listen by Asking Questions

In addition to demonstrating listening by what you *don't* say, you can also demonstrate that you are listening by what you *do* say. The questions you ask are signifiers that you are listening. Try to construct each question as a follow-up to a previous answer. If you are following up on something other than what the participant just said, indicate where your question comes from. For example, "Earlier, you told us that…" or "I want to go back to something else you said…." Not only does this help the person know that you're looping back, it also indicates that you are really paying attention to what they are telling you, that you remember it, and that you are interested. If you are going to change topics, just signal your transitions: "Great. Now I'd like to move on to a totally different topic."

Be Aware of Your Body Language

Make and maintain eye contact with your participant. If you find eye contact personally challenging, take breaks and aim your gaze at their face, their hands, and items they are showing you. Use your eyes to signal your commitment to the interview. Acknowledge their comments with head nods or simple "mm-hmm" sounds. Be conscious of your body position. When you are listening, you should be leaning forward and visibly engaged (see Figure 2.5). When you aren't listening, your body tells that story, too (see Figure 2.6).

FIGURE 2.5
Good listening body language.

FIGURE 2.6
Not so much.

The listening body language is important because it not only gets you in the state, or reflects the state that you're in, but it also very clearly tells the person you're talking to that you are listening.

If your brain is listening, your body will naturally follow. But it works the other way, too! Just as therapists and life coaches encourage people to "act as if," you can also put your body into a listening posture and your brain will follow. Consider the example described by Malcolm Gladwell in his article *The Naked Face*. He describes the work of psychologists who developed a coding system for facial expressions. As they identified the muscle groups and what different combinations signified, they realized that in moving those muscles, they were inducing the actual feelings. He writes:

> **Emotion doesn't just go from the inside out. It goes from the outside in…In the facial-feedback system, an expression you do not even know that you have can create an emotion you did not choose to feel.**

TIP FEEDBACK IS BACK

If you are recording your interviews on video for later editing, you may find the "mm-hmm" noises incredibly aggravating. Unless you are miking your participants, your affirmations may be much louder than their responses (see Figure 2.7). For novice interviewers in particular, it's still good to let the "mm-hmm" fly and really work on developing rapport, even if the resulting video is going to suffer a bit. It's better to have abrupt audio changes in the deliverable than fail to achieve the maximum possible rapport in the interview. As you gain experience interviewing, learn to silently affirm with facial expressions and head-nods, and throw in the vocalization only occasionally.

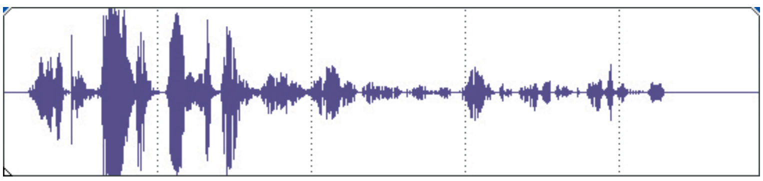


FIGURE 2.7
The interviewer's affirmations can be louder than the participant's comments.

Summary

Experts have a set of best practices—tactics, really—that they follow. But what really makes them expert is that they have a set of operating principles. This looks more like a framework for how *to be,* rather than a list of what *to do.* You will have your own framework, but mine consists of the following:

- Check your worldview at the door. When you begin fieldwork, don't fixate on what you expect to learn, but rather cultivate your own general, non-specific curiosity.
- Embrace how other people see the world. Do your fieldwork in their environments—not in yours. Before you head out to the field, get the team together and do a cleansing brain dump of all the things you might possibly expect to see and hear, leaving you open to what is really waiting for you out there.
- One of the factors that makes for great interviews is the rapport that you establish between you and your participant. Don't forget that it's up to you to build that rapport. Focus on them and be very selective about talking about yourself.
- Your job is to listen beyond "Keep your mouth shut and your ears open." Your choice of questions and how you ask them demonstrate that you are listening. Pay attention to how your body language cues your participant—and you—as to how well you are paying attention.

CHAPTER 3

Getting Ready to Conduct Your Interviews

Anyone who has ever painted a room knows all too well the amount of time it takes to prepare before you ever brush a single stroke—you have to tape off windows and trim, move the furniture, spread out the drop cloths, and so on. Sometimes I find this preparation tedious and unrewarding (I wanna see paint on the wall!), but I also know from experience that all the prep work has a dramatic impact on the quality and efficiency of the painting process itself. I know you see this coming, but here it is: Interviewing users requires the same level of prep work. There's a significant amount of preparation involved before you begin asking the users anything. This may make some teams anxious if they've assumed the launch of a research project means fieldwork tomorrow. But these projects are by nature vaguely defined. You probably don't know what you don't know, which is why you are using interviews as your research method. The time spent creating alignment and developing a plan pays off tremendously.

In this chapter, I'll review the key issues to address when putting together a study, including who to interview (and where to find them), uncovering specific goals and defining the technique that will help address those goals, and refining the basic logistics that will make your time in the field go smoothly.

Establishing Your Objectives

Clarifying the objectives—what you hope to get out of the research—is an extremely challenging aspect of many engagements. Even though I begin capturing objectives in the initial conversations with the client, when it's only a potential project, the objectives are further clarified while we are planning the research, executing the study, and even up until the delivery of results. Sometimes the objectives are not a fit for the approach. Researchers are often asked to find out how much participants would pay for a product, often when that product doesn't yet exist. Reponses to that question will not be valid, and it's good to clarify for stakeholders as early as possible the limitations of contextual research (or any research method, for that matter).

At the outset of a project, make the objectives your initial priority. The first interviews you conduct should be with the stakeholders—these are often consumers of the research findings who are less likely to be involved in the day-to-day study. I typically aim for 6–8 stakeholders, although some clients ask for twice that amount. These are one-on-one conversations either on-site or on the phone. They run between 30 and 60 minutes and are used to dig deeper into objectives and establish collaboration. You should ask the stakeholders about:

- History with the organization and the research topic
- Current beliefs about the customer, the user, and the proposed solution
- Organizational or other barriers to be mindful of
- Business objectives for the project and specific questions the research should answer
- Concerns or uncertainty around the methodology

You should also review other material, such as previous research reports, existing products, and in-development prototypes.

Even though what you're learning will undoubtedly inform all of the activities throughout the project, the immediate output is the research goals—articulating what you want to learn from the interviews.

On a project that dealt with reviewing products and services online, the team arrived at five research goals. Here's one of them:

> *Structure of Social Network.* How is decision-making driven by the structure of people's social network (on and offline)?
>
> More specifically:
>
> - What do people's social networks look like? What tools do they use and how are their networks structured?
> - How do people leverage social networks for shopping and other kinds of decision-making? Who has influence with them currently?
> - Who among their social network (and beyond) are trusted sources of information for various decisions and purchases (particularly within the client's area of business)?

My team created a document that summarized the project as we understood it at the time, including the agreed-upon methodology and the complete set of five research goals. I shared this document with our client to ensure that we were aligned. In most cases, the goals come easily and are not controversial. In rare cases, the goals may be wide-ranging and exceed the planned scope of investigation. In some cases, the goals are not a good fit for the approach you are planning. Use this checkpoint to realign, reprioritize, or expand the work.

When the Seat of Your Pants Is Enough

by Nate Bolt and Cyd Harrel

Nate Bolt is a design research manager at Facebook. Previously, he was CEO of Bolt | Peters and an adjunct professor at SVA iXD.

Cyd Harrell is an advisor to Code for America and other civic projects. She was previously VP of UX Research at Bolt | Peters.

FIGURE 3.1
Nate Bolt, UX Research Manager, Facebook

FIGURE 3.2
Cyd Harrell, Citizen Experience Advocate

There are two ways to approach a road trip. At one extreme, you can just go. At another, you can spend months planning the whole thing. Which approach will lead to a deeper exposure to the region you're traveling in? It's certainly open to debate, and the same can be true of planning user research.

From our time at Bolt | Peters, we're fans of minimal preparation for research because it allows for maximum serendipitous revelations and maximum speed. We frequently do successful interview studies with a single day of preparation, and that includes plenty of time for lunch. For start-up clients, we can then complete the research and generate useful recommendations in one more day. Some researchers would call this reckless and irresponsible, but we don't think so. For us, it's efficient, realistic, and fun.

An Example: Blurb.com

When our clients at the self-publishing site Blurb.com first approached us a few years ago, they didn't have the time or budget for a large UX research project. Yet they needed to understand why some of their customers were abandoning half-created books and what they could do to improve the publishing process. We proposed a single day of remote interviews followed by a directed workshop to generate recommendations, on one condition: their entire core team had to attend the interviews. This meant we were all in the same conference room at Blurb's office with their stakeholders present, but the participant was remote, sharing their screen and audio using GoToMeeting. Prior to that day, we had a couple of one-hour calls with our key contacts, and we presented two short documents for their review.

We did not write a facilitator guide in advance, but instead honed it the day of the interviews, and since we were intercepting people from Blurb.com for the research, half the script was simply just asking them to continue doing what they set out to do on their own. So our live recruiting strategy took care of half the planning process.

The study resulted in several actionable recommendations about both the book-creation tool and how to present it to users, as well as some striking insights into users' mindsets/mental models.

Several key factors made this study work:

- **The entire client team attended.** We weren't doing our interviews in isolation away from the people with the biggest stake in the project, so we had the right group available to approve changes if needed. This meant that we could adjust the interview flow on the fly, even during a session.
- **We didn't write a script, but we did spend our call time getting a solid understanding of the main questions to be answered.** With two experienced interviewers on the project, we had confidence that we could guide an unscripted conversation in such a way that it answered those questions. (And if those had turned out to be the wrong questions based on users' reality, we could have made the shift right away—see previous bullet.)
- **We live-recruited study participants using a Web intercept.** We were confident that participants who answered "What did you come to Blurb.com to do today?" with one of the tasks we were interested in were actually engaged in the task at that moment. Without much direction from us, we'd be able to observe interactions that were important to the study simply by asking them to continue what they had been doing and think aloud.
- **We used an observation and recording method that we had a lot of experience with.** While we ran a solid pre-flight check, we didn't need to do a more extensive proof of concept. We simply used the online meeting tool GoToMeeting to observe users' screens, and Mac screen recording software iShowYouHD to record their screens and phone audio.
- **We managed client expectations.** We made sure our clients knew that findings would emerge from individual (and possibly very differently triggered) behavioral moments that would build into consistent themes. We made everyone promise to ignore the self-reported quotes and focus on behavior. We also didn't provide percentages, severity scales, or other pseudo-quantitative outcomes. With the major players in the room all day, we knew that consensus on observations would be easy.

But why do it this way instead of pushing stakeholders for more time and more preparation? The easy answer is that many organizations truly don't have the time or budget required for full-blown research. We often simply have to work lighter and faster. But there's also a way that a script, in itself, can limit your observations, and so can a strict user profile. When we're working without a script, we're not wedded to a strong presumption of how we'll elicit the answers we need, and when we don't have participants scheduled in advance, we're not wedded to our original idea of the right participant profile. If, after six enlightening interviews, the team feels certain findings are solid and decides to recruit someone from an outlying demographic for extra perspective, that option remains open. Many times, that outside-the-box question or that slightly off user generates the most important finding in a study. One of the reasons we do this is that we hate to miss those times.

Group Therapy

by Julie Norvaisas

Julie Norvaisas is a senior researcher at LinkedIn. She was previously a researcher at Portigal Consulting.

FIGURE 3.3
Julie Norvaisas, senior researcher at LinkedIn

The project started innocently enough. At kick-off, our client presented us with a series of hypothesized and storyboard-illustrated consumer needs, along with several early but well thought-out concepts being built to address those needs. Our job was to explore the needs and test the concepts. This seemed straightforward enough, but internal tensions were revealing themselves, even at this meeting.

Some folks on the team were focused on gaining a deeper contextual understanding of the consumer's experience in order to validate and deepen their understanding of their hypothesized consumer needs. This faction had legitimate questions about their hypotheses (which were not based in formal research) and were hungry for insights that could create more texture in their understanding, and inspire further conceptual design. This group was more comfortable with ambiguity in the research and was open to exploratory techniques.

Another group of strong voices was determined to simply gather reactions to the early concepts and prototypes they'd developed. This group had a very high degree of confidence that with their years of experience, they understood the market very well and had already nailed the consumer needs. These people were committed to the concepts and interested in specific feedback to prototypes, down to the level of form factor, mechanical design, materials, interaction, and GUI.

Predictably, the former group was user-experience designers and marketing executives, and the latter was software and hardware engineers and technologists.

Prior to departing for fieldwork in Minnesota, the team needed to ensure that our interview guide met the competing objectives of the stakeholders. We also had to be economical, with only 90 minutes allotted for each interview.

To build consensus, the team met in the only room that happened to be available, a vacant office. We gathered our chairs in a circle in the otherwise empty room. It felt much more like a group therapy session than a meeting!

Rather than painstakingly reviewing the interview guide, we asked everyone to speak about how they felt about it. What were they most excited about? Nervous about? What questions did they still have? What aspects of the interview guide made them feel uncertain? What would make them feel better? We went around in a circle, and we shared. We listened. We acknowledged concerns and addressed them. We mirrored. We prodded.

The be-sure-to-get-us-context folks needed to know that we were going to gain some meaningful understanding of users while asking such specific, granular questions about the concepts. They would not be happy unless we were delving into behavior and motivations, even while talking about the size of a screen. The test-our-concepts faction required assurances that the early getting-to-know-you portion of the interview would not serve as a distraction from critical time spent on the concepts. They stated strongly that we were absolutely not to waste time asking questions regarding needs and usage that they already knew the answers to.

The therapeutic approach worked wonders to surface and resolve what seemed like a real impasse. In the end, everyone felt heard, and together we calibrated the priorities for the interviews. Inclusive conversation established a level of comfort on the team and a shared understanding of our objectives.

Of course, as is so often delightfully the case, our careful intentions were blown up in the first interview. Our first participant told stories that touched the team deeply and immediately had us rethinking the needs and the concept, in the context of her reality. This effect built through subsequent interviews, ultimately changing the thinking of all of the members of the team. The prototypes served more as props to foster discussion about visions of the future than actual artifacts to be evaluated.

In the end, the concept-oriented members led the team to broaden their perception of needs and possible solutions. Original concepts were abandoned. The more reluctant group became the most vocal advocates for a new direction. The fact that all parties were heard and acknowledged prior to the fieldwork created trust despite concerns, and allowed us to be open to what was revealed in the field.

Finding Participants (aka Recruiting)

Finding participants is a crucial part of preparing for fieldwork, yet some teams treat it very casually, relying on friends and family (an approach that is sometimes justified with the "guerilla" rhetoric) or even worse, grabbing barely-screened participants on the street or in a store (this is known as an "intercept"). On the other hand, some UX teams (such as those at Intuit and Salesforce.com) have a full-time staff member whose key responsibility is to manage recruiting.

The first step (sometimes this takes place early on, as you are scoping a project) is to identify the key characteristics for your sample. For example:

- Six active users of blogging software (WordPress, LiveJournal, Blogger, or MovableType) in Chicago, Lisbon, and Tel Aviv

  Two have been blogging for two years or more

  Two have been using their current platform for less than a year

  All between ages of 25 and 55
- Two active blog readers with more than 100 feed subscriptions

A few things to note in this example:

- We're looking at several parts of a transaction (in this case, blog writers and blog readers); even if we are designing only one part of the experience, we can gain a deeper understanding by looking at it from multiple points of view.
- We have a mix of the specific (the list of blogging platforms) and the descriptive. (We don't know yet what makes someone an "active" blogger or reader.)
- Criteria are based more on behavior ("active," "more than 100") than attitude ("dramatic storytellers").

As with the research goals, these criteria should be shared with the project team and iterated so that all parties are on the same page. Also, aligning on these criteria can require "group therapy" (see Julie's "Group Therapy" sidebar). When teams ask themselves who their customers are (or could be), this question surfaces any number of disconnects: hypotheses masquerading as facts, aspirations, and mass hallucinations. You should resolve those issues as tactfully as possible.

For example, in a study that focused on online shopping for athletic apparel, we spent four weeks (of what was supposed to be a six-week project) actively negotiating, among an ever-increasing set of stakeholders, the basic archetypes of customers to look at. It was daunting, but essential for having any success further down the road. We were not able to change the underlying cultural issues that were causing this issue (nor were we trying to), but we were able to use our expertise in planning and executing these sorts of studies to help resolve the deadlock. Although these four weeks were exhausting and frustrating, we did get the team unstuck and moving forward on the research itself.

NOTE RECRUITING IS DATA

Recruiting draws heavily on the project management skill set, but keep your researcher's eye open for surprises. If it's very challenging to find the people that you expect (or are expected) to do research with, *that's data*. In one project, the fact that I couldn't find anyone with a luxurious yet functional "smart home" implementation revealed a great deal about how that client was conceiving of the market.[1]

From the criteria, I produced a document called a *screener* (see Figure 3.4). This is much like a survey that is used to qualify potential participants. It includes a mix of question types (including yes/no, multiple choice, and open-ended), and uses responses to direct the flow through the set of questions.

Once you have a finalized screener, you have to find participants. There are many approaches, depending on whom you are trying to find. Some organizations have existing customer lists they can pull from (especially for consumers). Others firms may go to their sales staff or other well-connected people for introductions. For consumer research, I almost always use an external market research recruiting agency. They will use our screener and either their own database or customer lists provided by our clients.

This is a time-consuming process; it always takes a week or more to align on the recruiting criteria and the finalized screener (on one project, it took us about four weeks!); a specialized recruiting agency will need about two weeks to recruit participants.

For more on recruiting, check out Chapter 3 of Bolt/Tulathimutte's book called *Remote Research*. Although their context is different (they are recruiting, well, remote participants, and we're recruiting face-to-face participants), the general principles certainly apply here.

1 For more on the power of surprises throughout the research process, check out "What to Expect When You're Not Expecting It" by Steve Portigal & Julie Norvaisas, *interactions* March + April 2011 at http://rfld.me/QYGII8.

Portigal Consulting www.portigal.com

2. Do you own a portable MP3 player that you use regularly?

Yes
No **DISMISS**

2a.. If yes, how long have you owned a portable MP3 player?
Less than 3 months **DISMISS**
Between 3 months and 1 year
More than 1 year

2b. If yes, how many hours per week do you estimate you use your portable MP3 player?
IF < 5 THEN DISMISS

3. Do you listen to music on a computer?
Yes
No **DISMISS**

3a. If yes, how often?

Daily
Weekly
Every other week **DISMISS**
Monthly **DISMISS**
Less than once per month **DISMISS**

4. Do you regularly listen to music on any other devices?
Yes (describe________________________)
No

5. How many music CDs do you own? These can be CDs that were purchased or received as gifts. Do not count tracks or albums burned onto CDs.
IF < 60 THEN DISMISS

6. Approximately how many CDs would you estimate you have ripped? (Ripping is the process of copying the audio data from a CD to hard disk)
IF < 20 THEN DISMISS

7. What retail stores do you typically go to when making music CD purchases? Select all that apply.

Circuit City
Best Buy
Good Guys
Wal-Mart

Portigal Consulting: Sample Screener

FIGURE 3.4
One page from a screener.[2]

2 See the complete document at http://rfld.me/VGiHqm.

TIP **WORKING WITH A RECRUITING AGENCY**

For participant recruiting, I typically use full-service market research agencies that have their own focus group facilities. (Although you won't be using those facilities in these studies, their presence is a good indicator.) My best experiences are with agencies that I can work with closely through the process. At the outset, they give the screener a close reading, identify missing elements, and verify what isn't clear. As the recruiting process proceeds, they give daily updates (even when they haven't found anyone), and they point out any criteria that are commonly eliminating otherwise good participants, in case we want to make an adjustment.

Great recruiters will establish an initial rapport with your participants and help them feel comfortable and enthusiastic about the process. They will also support you in creating a comfortable schedule, allowing for driving time and rush-hour traffic. Costs for recruiting will vary, based on the complexity and the difficulty of the assignment, but for U.S. consumers, you can expect to pay the recruiter between $150 and $225 each. Note that this is their fee for finding and scheduling the participant and is separate from the incentive you pay to the participant (more on that later).

Creating the Field Guide

The field guide (sometimes called an *interview guide* or more formally, a *protocol*) is a document that details what will happen in the interview (see Figure 3.5). Creating this detailed plan is an essential preparatory step. The interviews themselves never happen as you imagine, but having a detailed plan prepares you to be flexible. It also creates alignment among the team (as do other planning tools). In situations where you have multiple teams of people out in the field, this alignment is essential.

To prepare your field guide, start with your research goals and the other inputs. This is the step where you translate "questions we want answers to" to "questions we will ask." Of course, the guide also covers activities, tasks, logistics, and more.

The general flow of most interview guides is:

- Introduction and participant background
- The main body
- Projection/dream questions
- Wrap up

Portigal Consulting LLC
415.894.2001
2311 Palmetto Avenue Suite D1
Pacifica, CA 94044

Portigal consulting
www.portigal.com

Reading Ahead Interview Guide

Introduction

1. We'd like to talk with you today about reading. We have lots of questions to ask you, and we're interested in hearing your stories and experiences.

Overview

2. Can you tell us a little about yourself—what you do, hobbies, etc.?
3. Can you tell me about a recent book you've read? Your favorite all-time book?
4. Why do you read?
5. What is your current reading like?
   [Probe for different types of reading, locations, motivations,etc.]
6. Is your current reading typical for you? How so/how is it different?
7. Do you call yourself a "reader?" What does that mean to you?
   [Look for their categories: could be frequency, importance, etc.]

   If you were telling a new acquaintance about yourself, would you talk about reading? What else would you say about yourself?

Exploring Specifics (locations, subject matter, motivations, etc.)

8. You mentioned (<u>follow up on specifics from overview</u>). Is this always the same, or does it change? Why do you do it this way?
9. Have there been any special circumstances where you've done it differently? Why? How was that?
10. Has anything about the way you do this changed over time? How? Why?

Environment

11. What makes a good reading environment for you? What are the elements? What makes an environment not good?

FIGURE 3.5
One page from a field guide.[3]

3 A complete example is at http://rfld.me/QBeotb.

Be sure to assign durations to the different sections and subsections. Again, you aren't necessarily going to stick to the exact duration in the actual interview, but it helps you see if you've got enough time to cover everything you are expecting to cover. I prefer to write most questions as I might ask them ("Is there a single word that captures the thing you most like about wine?"), rather than as abstracted topics ("A single word that represents what they like about wine?"). As I'm writing the field guide, I'm leading a mock interview in my head. Using more detailed, thought-out questions helps me put together a more realistic plan.

Introduction and Participant Background

In the introduction, you'll spend just a few minutes getting the interview under way, handling some logistics, and setting expectations. This section of the interview guide might contain the following (italicized text indicates instructions to the interviewer):

- *Give out release form and get signature*
- *Turn on video camera*
- *Confirm timing: 90 minutes*
- *Explain who we are and why we are doing this*
- *There are no wrong answers; this is information that helps us direct our work*
- Tell us about your family. Who lives in this house? How long have you lived here?

The discussion of participant background serves as an icebreaker and also provides some context for later in the interview.

The Main Body

As the name suggests, this is the bulk of the interview guide (and the interview). You should create subsections for each of the areas you want to explore (such as configuration, learning about features, downloading new playlists). The main body should also include the exercises and activities that you plan to use (such as mapping, card sorting, demonstrations, and reactions to prototypes or other stimuli).

For a study seeking feedback about a prototype home entertainment device, our main body topics were:

- Revisit concepts
- Map your technology
- Context of use
- Concept discussion

Be deliberate in how you sequence these sections. You can start with the general and then dive into specifics; you can start with present day and move backward; you can start with a previous time and move toward the current state. There's no universal rule here, so much depends on your topic and how you are mentally picturing the inquiry. Remember the participant may take things in a different direction, so don't sweat too much over this. It's easy to revise the overall flow once you've completed a couple of the interviews.

Projection/Dream Questions

Near the end of the interview is a great opportunity to ask more audacious questions. Because you've spent all this time with your participants, talking through a topic in detail, they've become engaged with you. You've earned their permission to ask them to go even farther beyond the familiar. Two questions that work really well here are:

- If we came back in five years to have this conversation again, what would be different?
- If you could build your ideal experience, what would it be like?

Wrap Up

A typical interview guide concludes with some basic questions and instructions:

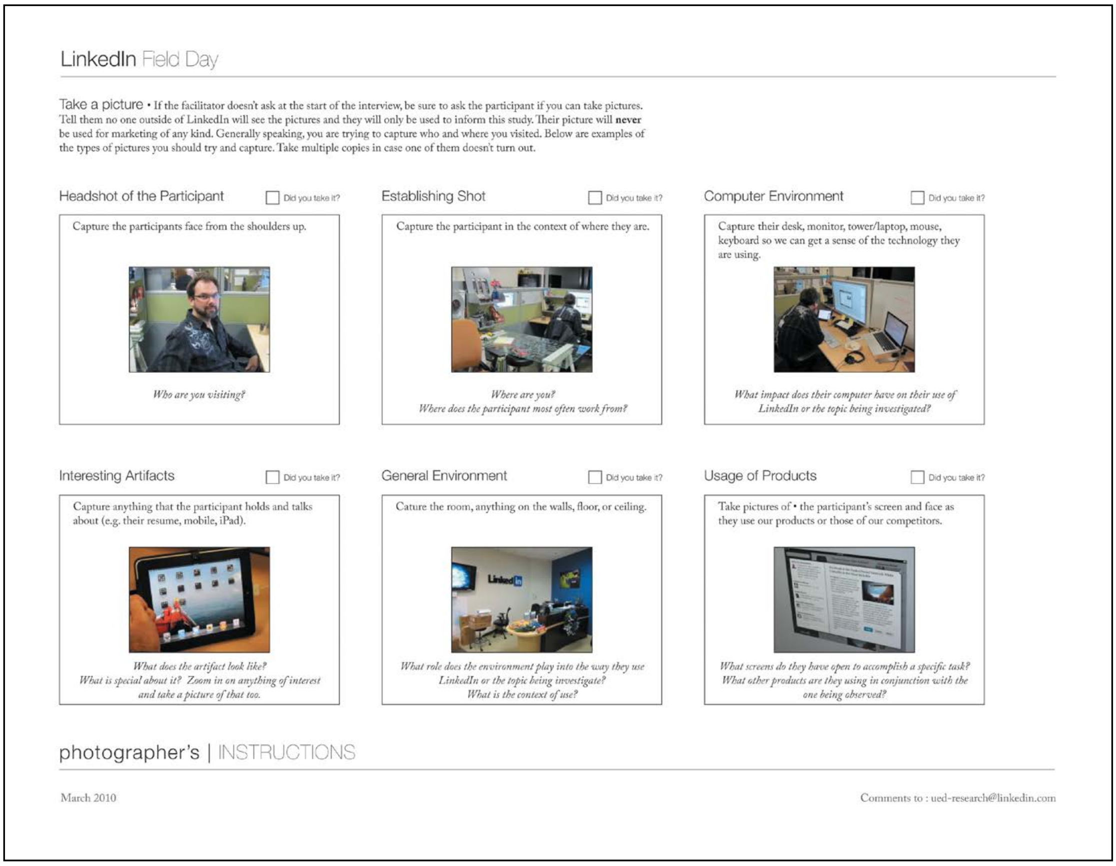
- Did we miss anything? Is there anything you want to tell us?
- Is there anything you want to ask us?
- *Thank then and give the incentive.*

Shot List

As an appendix to the field guide, list the photos you want to capture (see Figure 3.6), such as the following:

- Head shot of participant
- Participant and key piece of equipment
- Close-up of key piece of equipment
- Establishing shots, interior (cubicle or living room) and exterior
- Two-shot of interviewer and participant

IMAGE COURTESY OF LINKED IN



LinkedIn Field Day

Take a picture • If the facilitator doesn't ask at the start of the interview, be sure to ask the participant if you can take pictures. Tell them no one outside of LinkedIn will see the pictures and they will only be used to inform this study. Their picture will **never** be used for marketing of any kind. Generally speaking, you are trying to capture who and where you visited. Below are examples of the types of pictures you should try and capture. Take multiple copies in case one of them doesn't turn out.

Headshot of the Participant ☐ Did you take it?

Capture the participants face from the shoulders up.

Who are you visiting?

Establishing Shot ☐ Did you take it?

Capture the participant in the context of where they are.

Where are you?
Where does the participant most often work from?

Computer Environment ☐ Did you take it?

Capture their desk, monitor, tower/laptop, mouse, keyboard so we can get a sense of the technology they are using.

What impact does their computer have on their use of LinkedIn or the topic being investigated?

Interesting Artifacts ☐ Did you take it?

Capture anything that the participant holds and talks about (e.g. their resume, mobile, iPad).

What does the artifact look like?
What is special about it? Zoom in on anything of interest and take a picture of that too.

General Environment ☐ Did you take it?

Cature the room, anything on the walls, floor, or ceiling.

What role does the environment play into the way they use LinkedIn or the topic being investigate?
What is the context of use?

Usage of Products ☐ Did you take it?

Take pictures of • the participant's screen and face as they use our products or those of our competitors.

What screens do they have open to accomplish a specific task?
What other products are they using in conjunction with the one being observed?

photographer's | INSTRUCTIONS

March 2010

Comments to : ued-research@linkedin.com

FIGURE 3.6
A visual shot list created by researchers at LinkedIn.

As with the other preparation tools, share the field guide with your team. The typical audience for the field guide tends to be broader than for the more tactical tools like a screener. I also try to help the people reviewing it understand what the field guide is (and what it isn't) so that they can effectively help it evolve. I've used the following in an explanatory email:

> Remember, this is not a script. It reads very linearly, but it's really just a tool to prepare to be flexible. Questions don't get asked in the order they're written here, or using this exact language (so it doesn't need to be proofread). If you could look at it with an eye toward calling out anything that we haven't covered—e.g., "We need to ask about how they deal with time zones"—or any larger topic areas that are missing, or anything that seems wildly off base, that would be the most helpful.

Scheduling Interviews

If you are interviewing professionals about their work, you may need to run your interviews during (or just before/after) their work hours. If you are interviewing consumers, you may have to conduct interviews in the evening or on weekends. In the latter case, it can be helpful to set that expectation early on with colleagues who will be participating. Remind them that you're trying to embrace the participant's worldview, and they can begin that process by adapting their schedule and availability to the participant's lifestyle, not the opposite.

When scheduling your fieldwork days, don't be too ambitious. Although focus group and usability moderators tend to set up camp in a facility and run sessions back to back for a full day or more, I think that's generally a terrible idea and especially when doing fieldwork. Quality work doesn't come from being rushed, exhausted, harried, or overwhelmed. Interviewing is hard work. You need time between sessions to reflect on what you learned, adjust your approach for the next interview, get to the next interview location, find food, and find a bathroom. Although this becomes more dramatic when you are driving around a metropolitan area interviewing people in their homes, it's still true, even when moving around a corporate facility during a site visit.

Leave time in between your interviews. Don't pack too many into a day. Depending on the constraints (Are you on-site? Are you on the road? How long are the interviews?), two interviews a day is reasonable. The schedule is at least partly informed by participant availability, so you may end up with an early morning interview, several hours of free time, and then an evening interview on one day, and then two back-to-back interviews the next day. That's fine. Just don't try to do several days in a row with too many interviews.

Travel

The same sanity clause applies to travel situations: if you're travelling locally, try to schedule your interviews so they are close together geographically. If you're working with recruiters, they should take care of this. If you're travelling on a plane, allow time for your plane to be late before your first interview, and avoid having an interview that will run into your head-to-the-airport window, because that will destroy your ability to be present in the interview. Even better, keep travel days and interview days separate. If you are travelling internationally, leave yourself at least a day to adjust to the time zone differences, and to soak up the local culture, before you dive into fieldwork.

Participant Releases and Non-Disclosure Agreements

A *release* is a good idea. A release is a document that you have your interviewee sign. It clarifies the rights that the interviewee and the interviewer (and their organization) have. The text of the release may address a number of issues:

- **Consent:** Being in the study is voluntary, and the participant can stop at any time.
- **Incentive:** The amount of money that will be given, and that the exchange of money doesn't mean that the participant is an employee.
- **Model release:** Images and video will be used without giving the participant any rights of approval.
- **Non-disclosure:** The participant is obligated not to reveal anything about concepts he may see.

Although there are ethical reasons to use a release, it's really a legal document. If your organization has a legal department, they will likely want to create this document for you. You should work with them to strike the right balance between legally efficacious terminology and regular-folks lingo.

In situations where you are not revealing any concepts of artifacts that might be considered confidential, you may want to streamline the release by eliminating the non-disclosure agreement (or NDA).

NOTE RELEASE ME

This is the point in the book where I was going to include a best-in-class example of a release. In the time I spent writing this book, I corresponded with researchers at many different corporations and consultancies. Plenty of them are saddled with a legalese-intense release. For those who had managed to wrangle something more palatable to their participants, I was not able to get access to those documents for inclusion here. My colleagues were all very helpful, but when it came down to it, they couldn't get permission to share their release forms.

Now think about this—it's a document that is given out to members of the public (research participants). As I stated earlier in this chapter, even the recruiting process gives you data, especially when it doesn't turn out as you expected. To me, this highlights the (appropriate, necessary) risk aversion that characterizes a corporate legal department. While sharing best practices or being identified as a thought leader may be appealing to a researcher at a leading corporation, that has less importance than even the remote possibility of legal exposure. For you, as you craft a release that satisfies the needs of these different audiences, be aware of where values intersect and where they don't. Good luck!

If you work for an agency conducting this research on behalf of a client, the release may be an agreement between your organization and the participant, enabling you to keep the study "blind" (which means the participant does not know the name of the sponsoring organization), which is usually preferable. However, if you work for an agency and your client is asking for non-disclosure, you will probably want to use the client's NDA and have that particular aspect of the agreement be between the participant and the client directly.

Incentives

The right incentive amount depends on where you are doing research and what you are asking of the participant. If you are using a recruiting agency, they can advise you on a recommended incentive. Think of the incentive not as compensation but as an enthusiastically demonstrative thank you. In professional situations (interviewing people at their workplace), a monetary incentive given directly to the participant may not be appropriate. It may be prohibited by the participant's employer, it may be unethical or at least awkward if your participant is a customer, and if you are interviewing individuals within a group (say an emergency room) on an ad hoc basis, it may be less clear who to incentivize and at what proportion. In those cases, look for alternatives.

NOTE **BE CREATIVE ABOUT INCENTIVES**

You want a simple and direct way to demonstrate your enthusiasm and appreciation. When interviewing credit-default swap traders in London's financial district, my client escort would stop en route at a Starbucks and load up with Venti drinks and baked goods. Even though we had scheduled appointments, our appearance on the trading floor was a small celebration. We've brought pizza into hospitals when interviewing respiratory techs and made charitable donations on behalf of PR firms.

Crafting the Participant Agreement

by Harry Boadwee

Harry Boadwee is the founder of the Boadwee Law Office in Cupertino, California. He focuses on technology transactions, software, and Internet law.

Participant agreements for user research are simple but necessary in order to protect the study sponsors. Although a contract can be formed by spoken promises or by a loose exchange of emails, the best and most common practice is to sign a contract. Participant agreements must be short, often no longer than a page, so that participants can read and sign them quickly, without negotiation. Even a document with a short-form title, such as "Permission" or "Release," can be a contract.

A typical participant agreement covers two main concerns:

- First, the participant agrees to keep confidential the information disclosed in the study and make no use of the information beyond participation in the study. Such information can include, for example, the questions raised in the study, as well as the details of the product or service being studied. For example, many studies cover early-stage concepts or unreleased products/services. Study sponsors obviously don't want participants to disclose this information to competitors or (even worse) to the public by blogging or tweeting about it.
- Second, the participant will grant permission to the sponsor to record, reproduce, display, and distribute the participant's responses, voice, and likeness without any additional compensation or royalty. A "likeness" can encompass video, photographs, or even drawings. The study may include some small consideration, such as a T-shirt or gift card for a token amount. The release is needed in order to prevent legal claims for compensation under the privacy and publicity laws of many states. These releases often include an explicit waiver of any right to inspect or approve the materials created in the study.

These types of releases most often cover the sponsor's internal use only. Because the concepts and products/services in the study often are in an early stage, the sponsor probably wouldn't want to use a participant's statements as a public testimonial. If it did, the sponsor would need to obtain a separate testimonial release permitting public display and distribution of the participant's responses, voice, and likeness, and if desired, the participant's name and address.

Similarly, if the study sponsor wants detailed testing and feedback concerning a product as used by numerous participants in their homes or offices, the sponsor would use a "beta evaluation agreement" instead.

Participants less than 18 years old generally do not have the legal right in most states to form a contract. Instead, a parent or legal guardian should enter into the contract on their behalf. Participant agreements and the issues that they cover are governed by state law, which might create different or additional requirements depending on the state.

You can have your recruiting agency deal with the incentives. For a handling fee, they will mail out checks to your participants after interviews are completed (although you should follow up with them to make sure they act promptly). However, to convey my enthusiastic appreciation, I really prefer the immediate gratification of an envelope of cash handed over as the interview concludes. Obviously, think carefully about how much cash you are carrying and in what situations. Either way, make sure that your participants know ahead of time when they'll be getting their incentive.

If you deliver the incentive yourself, you can go beyond a plain envelope and include a thank-you note as well. Field researchers from a large financial institution, cognizant that participants are also customers, supplement their incentives with logo-emblazoned goodies (a reusable grocery bag containing an aluminum water bottle and a reusable lunch bag).

Summary

It takes a lot of preparation—perhaps a surprising amount—to set up successful field research. I don't recommend leaping into the field-work without setting yourself up to be successful. The effort in creating alignment, developing a plan, and determining the logistics pays off tremendously in the quality of the experience for you, stakeholders, and participants and in the value of the insights gathered.

- Agreeing to the objectives for field research is crucial, but is often challenging. You may all agree that you are going to interview 12 typical users before you are able to agree on what you expect to learn and how that will inform your business.
- Use the documents you create in planning (research goals, screener, and interview guide) to align with your team.
- Consider broadly and choose specifically what types of participants you want. But treat this as a hypothesis and adjust your approach if necessary.
- Leave time in your project plan to find research participants.
- The field guide is the detailed plan of what you think might happen in the interview, typically flowing from the details to their meaning. Having that detailed plan empowers you to be flexible when you actually go into the field.
- When scheduling interviews, leave adequate time between them for reflection, eating, travel, and the bathroom. Don't overload your day—and your poor brain—with too many interviews.
- Use a release that documents the rights and obligations of both the organization that sponsors the research and the participant.
- Give participants an incentive that conveys your sincere appreciation of their time.