CHAPTER 3

Getting Ready to Conduct Your Interviews

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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. Responses 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.
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.

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://rift.me/QYGII8.
2. Do you own a portable MP3 player that you use regularly?

   Yes  DISMISS
   No   

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  DISMISS
   No   

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

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**FIGURE 3.4**
One page from a screener.²

² See the complete document at http://rfid.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
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 (follow up on specifics from overview). 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.  

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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
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.
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.

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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).
Getting Ready to Conduct Your Interviews

Summary

It takes a lot of preparation—perhaps a surprising amount—to set up successful field research. I don’t recommend leaping into the fieldwork 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.