Outreach

What is Outreach?

Outreach is a two-way educational process where staff and volunteers meet with community members to learn about their experiences and concerns. This information is then used to guide the design process.

Benefits

Outreach creates a forum for developing technology that honestly and democratically reflects community concerns and values. It also develops an accurate method of gathering input from community members and front-line staff about what is working and what changes need to be made.

Techniques

- Work with at least two people.

- Use standard survey form with open-ended questions.

- Engage in face-to-face conversations.

- Build trust and rapport with community members.

- Be honest and respectful.

Guiding Principles

- **Respect Privacy**: Recognize that people experiencing homelessness have a right to privacy and do not have to share any information.

- **Do Not Disturb**: Do not wake people up or interrupt them if they are engaged in an activity you would not want to be interrupted doing.

- **Introduce Yourself**: Always introduce yourself by stating your name, organization, and purpose. Ask if they have a minute to talk.

- **Body Language**: Avoid appearing guarded or like an authority figure.

- **Be Honest**: If you do not know the answer to something, admit it. Saying, "I don't know," is not a weakness. Do not make up answers.

- **Stay Focused**: Remember that you are representing your organization, not just yourself. Do not judge people, and do not let personal beliefs interfere with your work.

- **Know Your Limits**: Do not make promises you cannot keep. Be realistic about what you can offer.

- **Set Boundaries**: Let people know if something makes you feel uncomfortable.

- **Follow Up**: Get contact information when possible, and always follow through. Inconsistent follow-up will make people reluctant to talk to you again.

Relevance

Outreach is the first step to understanding a community's opinions, experiences, and attitudes. By following these guidelines, we can paint a better picture of homelessness, and lay the foundation for inclusive design.

Community Engagement Plan

Objective

To recruit participants for usability testing.

Problem

Unhoused individuals often lack trust in authority due to systemic injustices and repeated negative interactions with institutions. This distrust stems from experiences of marginalization, criminalization, and inadequate access to resources or support systems. Consequently, building meaningful relationships with this community requires approaches that prioritize empathy, respect, and equity. Addressing these barriers is critical for effectively engaging unhoused individuals and ensuring their voices are heard in the development of tools aimed at improving their circumstances.

Solution

Increase research participation through community engagement in Whidbey Island. This involves meeting up with the community, learning about their lived experiences, and building trust over time.

Methodology

Approach

Focus on minimizing power differentials between researcher and participant as well as breaking down any barriers that stand in the way of honest and trustworthy interactions.

Sampling Method

Start with a sample size of 1-2 individuals. Then, focus on building deep, meaningful connections with these participants. Once rapport is established, create a snowball effect through referrals and expand the scope of the project. By recruiting one person at a time, we can slowly build a list of research participants and lay the foundation of trust in the unhoused community.

Data Collection

COME PREPARED

We want to create a space where participants feel comfortable enough to talk about their experiences. To achieve this, the tone of conversations must be both casual and friendly, rather than transactional.

- Treat the interaction as an open dialogue, where the goal is to learn rather than extract information. Think of it as two individuals learning from one another, rather than a researcher studying a subject.

- Avoid using clinical, corporate, or authoritative language, like "initiative," "interview," or "usability testing." We want to learn about participants and discover how to better support them in their employment journeys. Opt for simpler descriptions like, "we'd love to hear your thoughts, feelings, and perspective," or "we want to understand your point of view."

- Get to know participants FIRST and then gradually introduce the topic of usability testing. Start with general, open-ended questions and narrow your focus as you go.

- The conversation goes both ways – talk about yourself. Make sure to share relevant stories about your life and experiences.

- Give participants the option to decline or postpone participation. For example, statements like "We can revisit this later if you'd prefer" can let participants know that they can engage at a later time. This same is encouraged for refusing participation altogether.

- Do not rush. If you can't get through the usability test in time, pause the session and reschedule.

LEARN THE ENVIRONMENT

Before attempting to recruit participants, it's crucial for researchers to first immerse themselves in the community they are targeting. This stage involves understanding the culture, values, and dynamics that shape the group. Researchers should observe the environment, listen to local concerns, and familiarize themselves with the issues that are important to the community. This phase allows researchers to build empathy and cultural awareness, ensuring that the data collection process is respectful and aligned with the community's values.

TALK CASUALLY

Once the researcher understands the environment, the next step is to initiate informal conversations with potential participants. This stage is about breaking down barriers and making connections without immediately discussing the research itself. Researchers should aim to engage in friendly, casual conversations to establish rapport and trust. This allows community members to feel comfortable with the researcher and helps them see the researcher as a genuine, trustworthy individual rather than just someone collecting data. Casual conversation also offers valuable insights into the community's attitudes, fears, and interests, which can inform the research process.

KEEP IN TOUCH

The final stage is about maintaining ongoing communication. Even after initial contact, researchers should continue to engage with the community, offering updates about the research progress and ensuring that participants feel involved and valued. This helps to sustain trust and fosters a collaborative environment. By keeping in touch, researchers can demonstrate their commitment to the community, address any concerns, and ensure that participants are not left feeling isolated or exploited after their involvement. Continuous engagement helps to create long-term partnerships, ensuring a higher level of participation in future studies.

Sample Script

Contacting Staff (Phone)

Introduction: Hi, my name is [Your Name], and I'm calling on behalf of [Your Organization]. We are currently developing a platform to help homeless people find jobs and would love to work closely with someone in the community. I heard that [Organization's Mission or Goal] and I'm wondering if I could have a conversation with one or two people in person.

Purpose: I would love to know more about their experiences and learn how to better assist them through this project. I also want to hear their thoughts and opinions on our research efforts and goals.

Call to Action: Would someone be open to have a brief conversation with me about this?