

INSIGHT



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UX in Libraries

# Affinity mapping: bringing your research alive



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**T** HIS month I'm going to take a break from detailing UX research methods to focus instead on a core technique for processing the research data you gather, because as I never tire of saying: there's no point in gathering data if you are not going to do anything with it. Known as affinity mapping, or affinity diagramming, this highly tactile and visual method involves the theming of sticky notes on a wall or other flat surface in order to identify data concentrations, groupings and relationships. I know of no better method to bring your research alive. Affinity mapping instantly makes the abstract more tangible and your next steps more obvious.

### Take the manual approach

It's natural enough that our first instinct when recording data is simply to open up Excel or Google Sheets, or to input the research into a database product. However, I would counsel against such approaches and not only because your UX research data will likely be more qualitative than quantitative (some databases such as NVIVO are intended for processing qualitative data), but also because your project will benefit from a more direct and "in the world" manual approach to processing data.

### Flexible, colourful, real

The humble sticky note possesses a range of properties that might be underestimated if you are not regularly engaged in UX research and design. In addition to their function as written notes, their different colours (working with four to five distinct colours is best) allow for the visual theming of data – provided, that is, you think about those categories in advance, with different coloured notes representing, for example: behaviours; problems; ideas; comments; and emotions or,

alternatively, different user groups. Their sticky strip which allows for repositioning also supports the flexibility required when theming: most notes are moved several times before a best fit is found among the other notes.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, sticky notes are physical objects in the real world. We can see and touch them, as well as move them, and in this way they are an important departure from a digital process. I firmly believe we need to spend more time away from screens, individually and as teams. An hour spent theming sticky notes on a wall with colleagues, during which you debate data content and relationships as meaningful coloured patterns emerge before your eyes, is far more valuable than logging into a shared spreadsheet through which the data is rarely as accessible or manipulable.

### Let your data breathe

A more physical, visual process also aids analysis through quicker familiarity with the content. Just as a picture is worth a thousand words, so are your themed sticky notes. This is, unsurprisingly, the favoured technique of the design industry, of people whose primary function is to imagine and develop better services and products. They know that rather than huddling around spreadsheets or databases, they need to affinity map the data they have gathered in a group, so that it will breathe, and ideas and possibilities will freely flow.

### The bigger picture

Critics imagine this analogue approach takes longer but this is not my experience. Even if you go digital, you will still have to analyse what the coded data means; besides, the numerous side benefits will support any longer investment of time: deeper understanding; creativity through collaboration; and most important of all, a big picture appreciation of your research and its emergent themes. Another criticism is that affinity mapping will not work for



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lots of data, to which my response would be that too much has been gathered. UX research is about gathering actionable insights quickly, not proving scientifically with masses of data that you have identified an unconquerable truth. Instead of pursuing statistical significance, you should be theming and analysing a batch of manageable data that can lead to the testing and piloting of new service ideas.

I have no doubt that sticky notes are easily the most important item in a UX researcher's toolkit, and affinity mapping the best way to arrange, live with, and learn from your data. Go on, crack some open today! **IP**