



Using Data To Study and Market A/E/C Innovation

By Mallory Horshaw

The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic is set to change the way we engage with the built and living environments forever. Already, for example, while walking in public spaces, such as parks, grocery stores, and transit stations, you'll notice conspicuous red tape or signs on the ground. These markings, intended to direct movement and guide people into social distancing, are changing the way users interact with the spaces they inhabit.

In order to observe and demonstrate how people use their environments, occupant studies have always been the holy grail of A/E/C marketing. For those in the industries, nothing can be more work-affirming than a study demonstrating the success of a project's original design intention—with the numbers to prove it. These hard facts and figures are also invaluable for new business, where efficiency and results-based communications are key to closing a deal. Now that the way in which people move, use, and socialize in architectural spaces is bound to change forever, occupant studies will be essential to proving the efficacy of post-pandemic innovations.

Red tape markings won't last forever—they will be replaced by new, better design solutions. As we prepare for this wave of inventiveness, A/E/C marketers must stand ready to measure and market the result of new products and designs.

Obtaining robust and fact-based occupant studies can prove timely and costly, especially when outsourced to a consultant. But marketers are specially poised to leverage their skills and knowledge of projects to undertake fact-based consumer studies that offer similar value to those costly and time-consuming studies. Here are some tips to help you do just that.

1. Design an original study that tells your story. Marketing's approach to a consumer study will differ from a large-scale and scientific study in a few ways, as the marketer's job is to discover and promote the company's value. To design a study that is both honest and supports the strengths of the company, you must first define the objective of the study from a marketing standpoint.

Meeting with company leaders and subject matter experts can serve as a good start to discovering which

company strengths to test and magnify. Use these meetings to achieve a thorough understanding of how your company will pivot their approach to building environments for working and living after the pandemic. How will they innovate and come up with original solutions? How will they adhere to emerging protocols?

Once you've defined possible emerging value propositions based on this research, it's time to hone in on an envisioned headline. As an example: If a design aims to improve social distancing measures while keeping workers from becoming isolated, you'll want to create a survey capable of testing for and proving this proposition. If successful, you can then use the data to back up your design and tell your story externally.

2. Identify your own proprietary data collection methods. Now that you have an idea of your objective for the consumer study, determine your budget and the resources at your disposal. Consider looking for outside vendors who conduct data collection or utilize self-serve platforms like SurveyMonkey or Google Forms. Luckily, we live in a time when inexpensive (or even

free) online tools can streamline the collection and design of surveys, making a once prohibitively expensive endeavor available to any marketer.

By following basic principles of impartial data gathering and interpretation, you can discover the most valuable data points necessary to drive conclusions. Define the insights you're seeking and how you will evaluate the success of various criteria. Ask the questions that will determine the nature of your inquiry. Will your dataset be composed of qualitative or quantitative data? This could largely depend on whether you're looking for concrete numbers and statistics, or a general overview of consumer opinion. What statistical fallacies need to be accounted for? Make sure your consumer study avoids correlating data by responsibly accounting for variables and alternate explanations of results.

Most important, make sure to define your survey sample. Your sample could be broad, focusing on consumers ages 18–45, or it could be targeted, focusing on consumers working in offices with 200 or more employees. It's important to remember that responses can vary between different user groups in a building, and it can be valuable to compare these groups or to focus in on a particular experience. For example, the experience of workers in an office building—gathering in large meetings and spending most of their time at their desks—could be very different from that of maintenance staff who circulate through stairwells, storage rooms, and mechanical floors. Find the vertical or verticals you think could provide the most insightful information, then see if there's a story that emerges from the experiences of inhabitants.

Finally, be specific. If you want to measure the "well-being of inhabitants," make sure to define well-being, and remember that data can be useless if it isn't woven into a larger project narrative. Ensure you're collecting the right data and avoiding common statistical fallacies.

3. Return your focus to the occupier and the human experience. Deriving meaningful, actionable data and information can establish your firm as a leader in post-pandemic design, but the human element in consumer studies



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makes them invaluable as a tool for professional services marketers and companies.

The greatest part of these studies is that they return the focus of A/E/C work to the users of buildings—including their health and comfort. A company that carries out consumer studies clearly shows the world they care for their work far beyond their involvement in projects. This commitment to value and to the human occupants of buildings shows past, present, and future clients that a company authentically believes in the quality of their work.

There's a common tendency to think of buildings as fixed in time, but their life cycles extend long after construction work is complete. Consumer studies can improve the work a company does and, for marketing purposes, uncover positive and insightful results that may not otherwise come to light.

These tips should serve not only to make a case for consumer studies as a marketing tool after the pandemic, but also to demonstrate their long-lasting value in providing insights that could potentially change the work of A/E/C companies forever. ■

