Long after the research question is formulated, the evidence is gathered, the numbers are crunched, and the report is written, the hard part begins: how to get research into the hands of those who can use it and convince them to take action on the findings. This article by Jacobson, Butterill, and Goering shows researchers how to understand and influence managers and policy makers with their evidence, but its insights are just as pertinent for other knowledge brokers.

The authors devised a five-part framework or strategy for getting research used. This framework focuses on ensuring researchers and knowledge brokers become more familiar with the managers and decision makers they hope to influence. It contains a series of questions designed to help researchers and knowledge brokers gather information about these critical target groups. Key to the exercise is understanding how to build strategic and effective alliances between the scientific experts and the “user group” or target audience.

The questions are organized under five subheadings to help researchers and knowledge brokers identify the perceptions, characteristics, and needs of their user group.

Where and how the user group functions

In this section, researchers and knowledge brokers are asked to consider questions which explore how the user group’s context, structure, decision-making patterns, information use, and history affect openness to research. Some of these questions are:

**Context:** In what formal or informal structures is the user group embedded?

**Structure:** What are the politics within the policy or service organization?

**Decision-making:** What is the user group’s process for decision-making?

**Information use:** How sophisticated is the user’s knowledge of research methods and terminology?

**History:** What resources does the user group devote to knowledge translation?

According to the authors, certain characteristics lend themselves to openness. For example, if the implications of the research are in line with the target audience’s dominant
ideology, the findings are more likely to be adopted. If a user group is accountable for making evidence-based decisions, it is more likely to engage in the knowledge translation process. And groups that see their decisions as technical rather than value-based are more likely to use research to guide their actions.

The target audience’s relationship to the issue
Knowing the target audience’s relationship to the issue that’s at the centre of a knowledge transfer initiative is also important. That issue can be micro or macro, new or recurrent, conflict-ridden or consensual, certain or uncertain. Each of these characteristics affects how willing the user group will be to listen to and accept the research. Two useful questions in this context are “How does the manager or decision maker currently deal with this issue?” and “For what other groups is the issue salient?”

The target audience’s orientation to research
These questions explore the quality of the research and the audience’s orientation to it. Jacobson et al. argue a knowledge translation effort should begin with a thorough assessment of the research and an equally thorough assessment of the user group’s preferences regarding the research. The evidence shows user groups prefer research that compiles the results of many studies, that supports their orientation to the issue, and offers answers leading to action. Two questions that further clarify this understanding are “What is the quality of the research?” and “Would the implications of the research disrupt the user group’s status quo?”

The researcher-user relationship
Early, personal engagement between the researcher and user group – preferably when the research idea is being developed – has been shown to help improve the chances of getting research used. As such, questions about the quality of the researcher-user relationship, or the potential for such a relationship, are critical. Questions like how much trust and rapport exist between the two parties and whether they agree on desired outcomes for the knowledge translation can help researchers and knowledge brokers assess the potential that exists for influencing their target audience.

Preferred dissemination strategies
Knowledge translation involves awareness, communication, and interaction. The authors suggest each of these be considered at every step in the research process, from planning to conducting, interpreting, and disseminating the findings. Clarifying questions under this category include “What level of detail will the users of research want to see?” and “How can the research be made vivid to the user group?”

Question-answering strategies
Finally, the authors offer several strategies to help researchers and knowledge brokers answer the framework questions. First, build experience communicating with a user group. Second, hire a knowledge broker to help find and develop these relationships. Third, apply research methodologies to understanding the target audience. And fourth, reflect on what is known about the users of this information through day-to-day conversations.

Most researchers move out of their comfort zone when they start talking to people who may use their research. This framework can help them understand the user group’s context and become part of it. Other knowledge brokers, too, will find the framework helpful in identifying the most approachable audiences and packaging research results for that particular target audience.

Bibliographic Reference

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