

Diary Method

NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS	FACILITATORS	CATEGORY	DURATION	LEVEL OF DIFFICULTY
Min. 10 Up To Larger Scales With 100 People	1	Test Phase	Longitudinal — Can go up to months	Simple

Description

A diary method is used to collect qualitative data particularly for research. It mostly includes the study of user's activities, behaviors, motivations and experiences over the time. In a typical diary method, data is reported by the participants digitally or physically on actual diaries and the time span of reporting data can vary from 10 days to even months. During the defined reporting time, participants are asked to log the information about the specific activities that are being focused. To motivate the participants to fill their diary, they are given soft reminders or notifications and even sometimes small incentives. Diary can be a paper diary or digital diary. Website, mobile application or any form of digital medium where user's feedback can be recorded will be referred as digital diary.

The conditions and time period in which data is collected for a diary study make it different from other conventional user-research methods e.g. surveys (which are designed to collect information by the user itself), or usability tests. These methodologies don't really give you that detailed information as compared to the diary method.

It can be very difficult to create an environment or scenarios in a lab to understand a user's behavior or experience over a period of time, for this very reason diary methods come into play to gather insights on a daily basis or after a defined time interval. This method can be used to observe long-term behaviors, for example.

- ▶ Usage routine — how and when users engage with the product.
- ▶ Usage scenarios — how does the user complete his tasks? What is his approach to complete long and short term tasks?
- ▶ Attitudes and Motivations — what motivates people to use the product and what is their attitude toward a product?
- ▶ Product Improvement — How to improve the hardware or software by getting the user feedback over the period of time?
- ▶ Behaviors and perceptions — How users interact and how their behavior evolves over time.

Diary Method can be used to study from very targeted topics to very broad topics. Diary studies are often formatted to focus on one of the following topics:

Product or Website — Understanding all the interactions with a website or mobile app over the period of time.

- ▶ Behavior — Collecting general information about user behavior (e.g., smartphone usage, college-student, web-visitation patterns)
- ▶ General activity — Understanding how people complete general activities.
- ▶ A specific activity — Understanding how people complete the specific activities (e.g., buying a new mobile, car or to plan summer vacation)

Materials

If you are going to execute a diary studies using a traditional method then you have to prepare paper diaries with specific format for each participant for logging purposes.

Preparation

You will have to define a timeline and topic of studies on which you are going to focus. Recruit participants, select the appropriate tools for the participants for data reporting. Select a digital diary or paper diary whatever suits you. There are two types of logging techniques which are as follows.

1. Simple Logging: This is one of the easiest and straightforward techniques for data collection. Participants have to log information about the related activities. For example whenever they engage in activities which are the focus of the studies they have to report all the important information right away. As this technique takes a lot of time and it should be used only when you require very less number of log entries. You can use email, web forms and other digital diaries for example FocusVision, 7daysinmylife and UX360.
2. Snippet Technique: This technique is quite less time taking and hectic. In this technique participants have to record short snippets of information about the activities as they occur. Afterwards they have to explain each snippet by giving details at the end of the day.

Select the appropriate technique according to your study topic and prepare an instruction manual for them.

Step-by-Step Instructions

1. Recruit Participants

1. Schedule face to face meetings to discuss the details of the study. Explain the schedule for reporting. Also discuss the tools which they will be using for reporting data and also make sure that each participant knows how to use it.

2. Reporting

1. Provide a simple template for the specific activities that you want to be reported. Show users a demo for reporting activities just to make them familiarize with everything.

3. Post-Reporting period

1. After the reporting period is over, you have to call every participant and ask them questions to reveal the underlying details, and also discuss the logs in detail. Take feedback and ask about their experience.

4. Data Analysis:

1. Diary studies generate a large amount of data. Gather and sort the data and then critically analyse it according to your research study. Evaluate the participants behaviours, pinpoint the important things. Make a participants journey timeline so you can understand how the participant experience evolved over the time.

Strengths: Evaluate user experiences organically and use the information to create better design scenarios.

Weaknesses: Requires a lot of time. The "recall bias" where people may forget important aspects occurs. The Quality depends on the time and effort participants spend on the diary.

Remarks, Tips, Limitations

Limitations

- ▶ People may forget important things.
- ▶ Not Possible for the researchers to see or visualise the actual experience.
- ▶ Less likely to reveal sensitive information.
- ▶ The most obvious one relates to time that participant have to spend writing in your diary regularly. Usually participants will need anything between 5 and 30 minutes to complete an entry per day.
- ▶ Participant's diaries could be read by people that shouldn't be able to.

Tips

- ▶ Carefully plan your logging period so that it should not become too long or too small, it should be just the right time span to gather sufficient data.
- ▶ Try to design interviews in such a way that you can screen participants according to their interest level in taking part in your studies, as sometimes diary studies require high involvement.
- ▶ Also try to analyse the data as it gets logged. This will allow you to ask follow up questions immediately and will help to gather underlying information.

Remarks: This method requires a lot of time and effort as compared to other user research methods. With this method you can evaluate user experiences, behaviours organically as it gets really difficult to design scenarios that yield such information.

References

Salazar, Kim (June 5th 2016): "Diary Studies: Understanding Long-Term User Behavior and Experiences". URL: <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/diary-studies/>. Accessed on July 25th 2021.



fablab-siegen.de

usability-siegen.de