



in Lancashire

Vision Qualitative Research

Focus Groups 2005

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1 Executive Summary

Vision is Lancashire County Council's community newspaper for the county, and it is delivered to 500,000 homes across Lancashire. As part of its continuing improvement and before a proposed re-design of the newspaper, the Research and Strategy team conducted focus groups to investigate the public's perceptions of Vision and their opinions on a new design for it.

Three focus groups were conducted with members of the Life in Lancashire panel and were facilitated by Lancashire County Council's Research and Strategy Team. The groups were held at three different locations around the county to gain a cross-section of views and readerships. During the sessions participants were given a recent copy of the current version of Vision, and mock-ups of possible new versions.

The research showed that while the vast majority of focus group members had seen Vision and read at least some of it in the past; it was seen as tired and in need of updating. No member of any of the three panels correctly guessed the monthly frequency of Vision, with most expecting it was delivered quarterly.

The personification of Vision was seen to be male, in his forties or fifties, dull and "plodding along". He would be seen as trustworthy and earnest though.

The new design of Vision is seen as a great success, with every attendee saying they would be more likely to pick up the new version. It is seen as more modern, with greater impact and more professional and open.

The recommendations of this report are to:

- introduce the new design of Vision as soon as possible, with a straight masthead and sans serif headline font, ensuring the Lancashire red rose is prominent in the masthead;
- ensure the first page is attention grabbing, either through the story, picture or headline and covers a high impact story relevant across Lancashire;
- remove any use of council specific words and explain what services do;
- consider adding more information on what the council does, or doing this through another medium;

- consider sectioned content, by theme, such as schools, or by location;
- consider inviting more comments thereby adding more interaction to Vision;
- cover more contentious issues and admit where Lancashire County Council has made mistakes, thereby making people feel the Council is more open and honest;
- add contact names and numbers for articles so interested parties can find out more information;
- investigate the delivery of Vision both in other newspapers and to sheltered accommodation.

2 Introduction

Vision is Lancashire County Council's community newspaper for the county, and it is delivered to 500,000 homes across Lancashire. As part of its continuing improvement and before a proposed re-design of the newspaper, the Research and Strategy team conducted focus groups to investigate the public's perceptions of and priorities for Vision.

Groups were conducted at three locations in Lancashire, at Nelson, Lancaster and Preston, to get a good overview by geography.

3 Research Objectives

This research was commissioned to enable Lancashire County Council to appraise its proposed new design of Vision. The research was widened to research public perception of Vision as a communications product. The objectives were to gain an understanding of:

- participants' opinion of the current design and content;
- preferences for the new designs;
- the public's priorities for Vision.

4 Methodology

Participants at the groups were recruited from the County Council's Life in Lancashire residents' panel. The panel offers a cross-section of residents across Lancashire. Attendees were drawn at random from the panel membership in areas close to the location of the focus group meetings. These attendees were then contacted by telephone to invite them to the group.

Once members had been recruited to the groups they were sent a letter of invitation and a location map of the venue.

Three groups were conducted in total: at Nelson, Lancaster and Preston. These were chosen, in addition to covering a wide area, since Lancaster had the lowest readership from the Life in Lancashire 2003 research by MORI, and Pendle district amongst the highest. They also have district council newspapers and magazines for comparison.

The County Council's Research and Strategy Manager, Mike Walker, supported by Steven Knuckey, Research and Strategy Officer, facilitated the focus groups. Neil Graham, Vision's editor attended the Nelson focus

group and answered questions from the group at the end of the session. To prevent this affecting the group's responses, this was not revealed until the end of the meeting.

Using participants drawn from different geographic locations gave a spread of views from around the county. This would highlight any differences participants may have as a result of where they live and also explore any particular concerns that may be particular to that area. Problems with delivery in some areas had been highlighted by the Life in Lancashire 2003 research for example.

A total of 28 people attended the groups, each attendee was paid a £20 honorarium to cover their time and any travelling expenses. The fieldwork took place between 28 July 2005 and 3 August 2005. A discussion guide was prepared for the groups, the main themes being:

- how participants found out about Lancashire County Council;
- awareness of Vision;
- opinion of the current format and content;
- their personification of Vision;
- opinion of the new design; and
- the priorities they would have for Vision if they were editor.

5 Understanding Qualitative Findings

Qualitative research deals with the why and how people take various actions or hold various perceptions. Two of the key strengths of qualitative research are that it allows topics to be explored in detail and enables us to test the strength of people's opinion. However, it needs to be remembered that qualitative research does not allow conclusions to be drawn about either the extent to which something is happening or percentages of residents who have certain attitudes and opinions.

Qualitative research is designed to be illustrative, rather than providing statistically representative data. Participants may hold views based on incorrect information; these perceptions are reported here. There is also sometimes a tendency for qualitative discussions to elicit critical views. It is important to remember that the views expressed do not always represent the views of the groups as a whole, although normally these are representative of at least a significant minority.

One of the key limitations of this piece of research is that the groups are composed of members of a Lancashire County Council citizen's panel and therefore likely to be more aware of the County Council and its products than the wider population.

6 Findings

6.1 Finding out about Lancashire County Council

The discussion began with participants talking generally about the services that the county council provides. Despite being panel members and possibly being more informed about what the council does, some people found it difficult to name the key services with confidence. This led to the members of the groups being asked how they find out information about Lancashire County Council.

Vision was mentioned unprompted by all three groups, showing a good awareness of it as an information source. The Council's website, leaflets, posters and libraries were all frequent given mentions. Local newspapers, the phone book, Radio Lancashire, TV news and information one-stop-shops were all given one mention each. The Preston focus group suggested the district council's civic magazine, 'The Prestonian' as a possible source of information. The Lancaster focus group suggested Lancaster City Council's phone book of services.

6.2 Awareness of Vision

There were some differences in awareness of Vision by location; in Pendle all focus group members said they received it and it either came on its own or with a free newspaper. In Lancaster, the majority received Vision, though one attendee who lives in sheltered accommodation said he had never seen Vision before. Delivery to these areas needs to be investigated in the future. The entire Lancaster group said it came inside another newspaper, either the Lancaster Guardian or Citizen. Preston panel members said that Vision came with a lot of adverts and some said it was binned for this reason. Several Preston attendees and one from Pendle said they read it from cover to cover. The general consensus amongst attendees was that they would flick through Vision. The vast majority of attendees thought that Vision was produced quarterly. Vision is usually in fact monthly, but there was no edition in either April or May, which would have reduced the perceived frequency.

Initial impressions varied from the very positive:

"That is really good, Vision is really good." Female Pendle resident

To the more negative:

"Its only ever good news" Preston resident

“There’s not much about Lancaster in it” Lancaster resident

To compare, awareness of the local district council paper was tested. This was high in Preston, with many knowing of “The Prestonian” spontaneously. Lancaster group members showed awareness of “Your District Council Matters” when prompted, but there was no awareness of Pendle Today even when prompted. Preston’s civic paper is produced monthly, while both Lancaster and Pendle’s are biannual.

6.3 The current version of Vision



Vision July 2005

Copies of the July edition of Vision were handed out to each group. Asked which section they read first, several attendees said they read the vacancies section. Several attendees mentioned that it was difficult to know the paper was a Lancashire County Council product since the word ‘Vision’ was so much larger than the council logo. They suggested either a larger logo or a larger rose. There was some awareness of why the council logo should not be too large:

“If it looks too ‘officially council’ people might not read it” Pendle resident

Some also spontaneously said they disliked the Vision logo, one person describing it as “1980’s”. Some felt the front page was too busy, with too many fonts.

In addition to describing the style, many had more general suggestions. Attendees from Lancaster said they would prefer it in a magazine format to

distinguish it from local free papers. Aware of the large size of Lancashire, people in every group suggested different versions for different regions, (eg north, south, east, and west) or alternatively a larger county-wide version able to devote pages to each area.

“A school in Accrington could be in Kenya (to me)” Lancaster resident

The first page of the July edition dealt with a lottery funding boost for Helmshore museum in Rossendale. There was some negativity towards the relevance of this story, particularly among the Preston group who thought a Lancashire-wide story would be better. There were also comments that the first page story needs to be harder-hitting on an area that is of more importance to more people and more attention grabbing to encourage people to pick it up.

The July edition contained a page from Lancashire Children’s Fund. There was some disagreement on whether feature pages should be allowed, some people thinking it should not be in since it is not County Council, while others thought adverts were a sensible way of funding the publication.

Group members pointed out sections where language was unclear, citing “Gershon” and “overview and scrutiny” as examples of jargon. These obviously need to be avoided or explained more fully in the copy.

Attendees asked for more information both generally, suggesting a special edition making clear the services Lancashire County Council is responsible for, answers to frequently asked questions or a regular page of phone numbers for services. In individual stories, group members wanted more information, (eg where Beacon Fell park is), and contact numbers for the relevant officer at the end of the article.

Balance was another area of contention, with accusations of the stories only presenting one viewpoint:

“It’s just bragging about what you’re doing” Pendle resident

“It’s all ‘Stalin says this’...” Lancaster resident

Some felt that the stories were too upbeat and presented the County Council’s work in a solely positive way. Comments were made that the Council should own up to mistakes and say how they would be put right, or include subjects that were contentious to get a response and open a discussion.

Group members from Lancaster and Preston took issue with the order of the articles, suggesting instead that pages should be themed, with a page of schools stories for example.

The letters page was popular with all three groups;

“They seem like genuine people (writing in)” Pendle resident

This was also true of the vacancies page, though one or two people thought there should be more jobs on the page and one person thought there was no need to advertise jobs that were available elsewhere, such as on the Council's website.

6.4 Personification of Vision

Having discussed the current version of Vision, focus group members were next asked to describe Vision as if it were a real person. This projective technique is useful to gain users' emotional response towards a product and operates at a deeper level.

Using this technique Vision is seen as a person who is:

- Male, (asexual for Preston group);
- Middle aged;
- Not stylish, dull, “John Major”;
- Poor sense of humour, not Lancastrian;
- Excited about Lancashire County Council;
- Would be truthful, earnest;
- Understandable for some, using confusing language for others;
- “Plodding along”;

And, most damningly:

- “Lives in Cheshire!”

Our attendees considered that Vision is tired and in need of an update. One attendee even objected to the name:

‘It’s no Vision, its all past. It needs to be more forward looking’
Preston resident

6.5 The new design of Vision

Attendees were now given the new designs of Vision, which are new versions of February's edition, with a new masthead, in straight and italic font, and headline text in serif and sans serif type.



Italic masthead with bold sans serif headline



Straight masthead with capitalized serif headline

All attendees greatly preferred the new designs to the current one, considering them much more modern, having more impact and “crisper”;

“It just looks so much better” Pendle resident
“I am perfectly happy with this front page” Preston resident

The Pendle and Lancaster groups preferred the straight masthead and the majority in Preston preferred the italic. Two groups said that they would prefer a clearer rose and that it was important it wasn't lost, perhaps incorporating it into the large letter V. One attendee in Lancaster suggested that the new style was similar to the Morecambe Visitor and it was important people were not confused by it. All groups preferred the bold sans serif font.

Two groups spontaneously mentioned they liked the 'news in brief' section and would find it useful. The telephone number highlighted at the bottom was appreciated as a contact point for the council, showing a “call us”, open attitude.

The new design proved very popular with the focus group attendees, who considered it looked more professional and would be much more likely to pick it up on the doorstep than the old version.

6.6 Editor priorities

Focus group members were finally asked what their priorities would be for Vision if they were editor. A wide variety of comments were returned and displayed below.

Encouraging readers

- Encourage readers' comments;
- Focus on the readers.

Information

- Add more information on what Lancashire County Council do;
- Need more information;
- We need to know more about Lancashire County Council;
- Do a one-off information special;
- Need more information eg school holiday times;
- Add an events page;
- More contact telephone numbers for stories;
- Add more of what's coming.

Style

- Improve the order of stories;
- Improve balance to articles;
- Add some controversy, eg between politicians;
- Make sure the first story on page one grabs the audience and has a good photo;
- Have a larger edition for Lancashire or different editions for smaller areas.

Content

- Send a team into schools;
- Do less on schools, as these are in the newspaper;
- Add a section for children, such as cartoons or a competition.

Other

- Have it every month.

The group members were most likely to say they preferred more information rather than news and this ties in with findings from MORI that residents would most like an A-Z of services. However, whether they would be more likely to read it in reality is another question. What is most encouraging is that all the suggestions were positive, (even if they would not realistic in terms of time or finance). There were no suggestions to close it down for example.

7 Conclusions

The focus groups have given an invaluable insight into how Vision is perceived by residents, and has shown how the redesign of Vision is likely to be a success in the future, but these must be supported by work on the content.

The vast majority of focus group members had seen Vision and read at least some of it in the past*. The tendency was to skim through it, though some people read it cover to cover while others tended to put it in the bin. None of the focus group members correctly thought the newspaper was produced monthly, but this is likely to have been influenced by two editions being cancelled due to the local elections.

The current edition of Vision was seen as tired and out of date, with a “1980’s” masthead. Attendees also considered that it included jargon and needed to be written more clearly. There was also a strong desire for more straight information about what the council does, rather than news, (though whether Vision is the right medium for this is a matter for debate, it may well be that these needs could be satisfied with a County Council A-Z guide for example). The fact that it is a Lancashire-wide and a county-council-wide publication also creates issues. Positively it gives a broad interest base for reader, but conversely it can also be seen as lacking relevance by either talking about services some people do not use, or geographic areas that are too far from the reader.

The personification of Vision was seen to be male, in his forties or fifties, dull and “plodding along”. He would be seen as trustworthy and earnest though. These views are not just design-driven, but are based on the overall product experience.

The new design of Vision is seen as a great success, with every attendee saying they would be more likely to pick up the new version. It is seen as more modern, with greater impact and more professional and open. The majority preferences were for the straight masthead and the bold sans serif headline text. There was a demand for a clearer County Council logo and rose if possible.

Future research should be conducted to look in more detail into the delivery of Vision, particularly within sheltered accommodation. The delivery within other publications would also need to be looked at, since this would either hide Vision or possibly even imply a County Council link with the other newspaper.

* See Section 5 for limitations

8 Recommendations

The recommendations of this report are therefore to:

- introduce the new design of Vision as soon as possible, with a straight masthead and sans serif headline font, ensuring the Lancashire red rose is prominent in the masthead;
- ensure the first page is attention grabbing, either through the story, picture or headline and covers a high impact story relevant across Lancashire;
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- add contact names and numbers for articles so interested parties can find out more information;
- investigate the delivery of Vision both in other newspapers and to sheltered accommodation.

9 Designs

9.1 Vision July 2005



9.2 Mock ups of new Vision designs



Italic masthead with bold sans serif headline



Straight masthead with capitalized serif headline