

User Needs 101

What Are User Needs?

A user need is a well-defined statement of what your service or program empowers people to do.

User needs are a framework for understanding both the big picture needs (the reason your service exists!) and the implementation details of how people can successfully use your service. They form the boundaries of what your service or program does and doesn't do.

Explicit user needs will help your team develop a shared understanding of the context people carry as they try to use your service. These details help policymakers and service delivery teams make good decisions and wise tradeoffs. Without a good understanding of user needs, each decision has a much higher risk that it could result in wasted time, money, or good will.

us·er *yō* ōzər/

A resident, constituent or citizen—but more specifically, someone who interacts with the public service your government delivers.

need *nēd*/

An articulation of what your users are trying to accomplish—which can be fundamental (“get the medicine I need”), general to your service (“enroll in health insurance”), or specific to a task (“intuitively describe my income”).

Articulating User Needs

We can't assume to know what our users need. After all, people are complicated! Technology is complicated. And how people use technology changes all the time.

While users might be complicated, discovering their needs is not. Every user need begins as a hypothesis—an attempt to describe the context our users carry with them. Through user research and a close look at user behavior we can determine if our hypothesis holds, or if we need to revise it.

But before you can test a hypothesis, you need to state it clearly. User needs are typically articulated through user stories. These user stories are vignettes that describe a situation, motivation, and expected outcome as seen from the perspective of your constituent. General user stories often encompass many specific stories, each reflecting a user need.

User needs are the foundation for your team's activities. If a proposed feature or service doesn't address specific user needs, it probably shouldn't be your priority.

Service Level

When I rent a new apartment,
I want to apply for a parking pass,
so I can keep my car on the street legally.

Feature Level

When I apply for a parking pass,
I want to upload images,
so I can easily provide my Vehicle Identification Number (VIN).

Interaction Level

When uploading a photo,
I want to see a preview,
so I can confirm the VIN number is legible.

Advancing User Needs

When our understanding of user needs keeps improving, our service keeps improving too.

Once you have articulated user stories, you can begin to gather data that will support your hypotheses, or lead you to revise them. Data helps us evaluate both how well we understand and how well we address user needs. To gather the data we need, we constantly conduct user research.

User research basically boils down to asking users questions and watching what they do. We can ask questions during in-person interviews, in phone conversations, or through surveys. We can watch user behavior during live usability studies, or looking at the data generated by website analytics—seeing what kind of device they use, how long they spend on your site, or where they fail to take the next step.

Tried & True User Research Methods

Document How it Works Today

In government, we are almost always working with existing public services or programs. So the first question is, how does it work currently? Go through the service yourself, and document it thoroughly. Give people at the top of your organization the ability to see your service from the ground-floor.

Recruit Users for Interviews

Interviews are a great way to discover user needs. They offer a chance to explore why people behave or think in a specific way. Key questions drafted and tested in advance serve as the foundation for rich conversations that can uncover surprising information and useful details.

Distribute Surveys Online

It's never been easier to create and distribute surveys. Surveys are a great way to learn about the needs of potential users, and to get a mix of qualitative and quantitative user feedback. Surveys can be especially helpful for reaching specific groups of people, whether they be citizen groups or staff in other departments.

Organize a Usability Study

Usability studies are a key way to evaluate how well you are meeting user needs in your website or mobile application. Organize a usability study so you can watch people navigate your service first hand. Notice what comes intuitively and what causes users confusion or delay.

Go Observe Real Users

Go observe people filling out forms, submitting paperwork, and trying to navigate the service online or in the office. You'll learn a whole new level of detail—including the emotional states of your users, the tools they rely on, and the time constraints they operate within.

Get Users on the Phone

You don't need to leave the office to interview users. After someone uses your service or program, recruit them to talk about their experience while it's fresh. Routinely taking 10 minutes to talk to users can help you uncover less common user needs much faster.

Survey Users via Text Message

Text messages are a comfortable way for users to answer questions without interrupting their daily business. Moreover, surveys sent over SMS enjoy high response rates. Keep it brief though—your questions should be easy to answer and require little typing (think “YES” or “NO”).

Ask for Feedback

Short feedback forms answered right after a transaction can be an effective way to evaluate how well your product or service meets core user needs. Frameworks for feedback like the “Net Promoter Score” can help you measure overall user satisfaction.

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Use Good Tools

- › **Documentation:** UserOnboard.com has great examples of how to document existing services. CitizenOnboard.com includes examples of government services.
- › **Recruiting:** Ethn.io and similar tools help you recruit users for interviews on the phone and in-person.
- › **Interviews:** The Nielsen Norman Group has articles on user interviews for best practices.
- › **Web Surveys:** Free tools like Google Forms and SurveyMonkey make survey data collection and analysis easy.
- › **SMS Surveys:** Use tools like Textit.in to create short, plain language SMS surveys that have high response rates.

Tips to Remember

- › **Don't overthink it.** The more you talk to users, the faster you'll learn how to get the most out of each interaction.
- › **Reward participation.** The time your users give is worth it. Be sure to compensate participants for their time.
- › **Don't ask leading questions.** When interviewing someone, try not to bias their responses with affirmation or strong responses to their answers. When in doubt, just keep them talking.
- › **Encourage stories and description.** When people tell stories, they'll include details that were important to them that you might never have thought to ask about.
- › **Document your work.** The impact of your research is a function of how well you can share the insights you gain. Analyze your data, write a summary, and help people drill deeper into your work.

You Can Always Talk to Users

User research is a critical part of developing a successful service or program. Understanding your users deserves your team's time and investment. Ideally, you'll have team members dedicated to understanding and advocating for your users.

If you are short on time or resources, you can still do user research. Whether you are a manager, an engineer, or analyst—you can talk to users. In fact, you can always be talking to users. Talking to even five or six users will gain you insights that will help you serve all of them.

When in doubt about how to start, there is one thing you can always do: customer service. Handle paper applications at the counter. Do a ride-along. Take phone calls. Manually help people succeed in using your service.

When you do customer service, something magic happens. You get to know people. Suddenly, your users' problems become your problems. The more time you spend with your users, the more intuition you'll build about how to address their needs.



ALWAYS BE TALKING TO USERS

