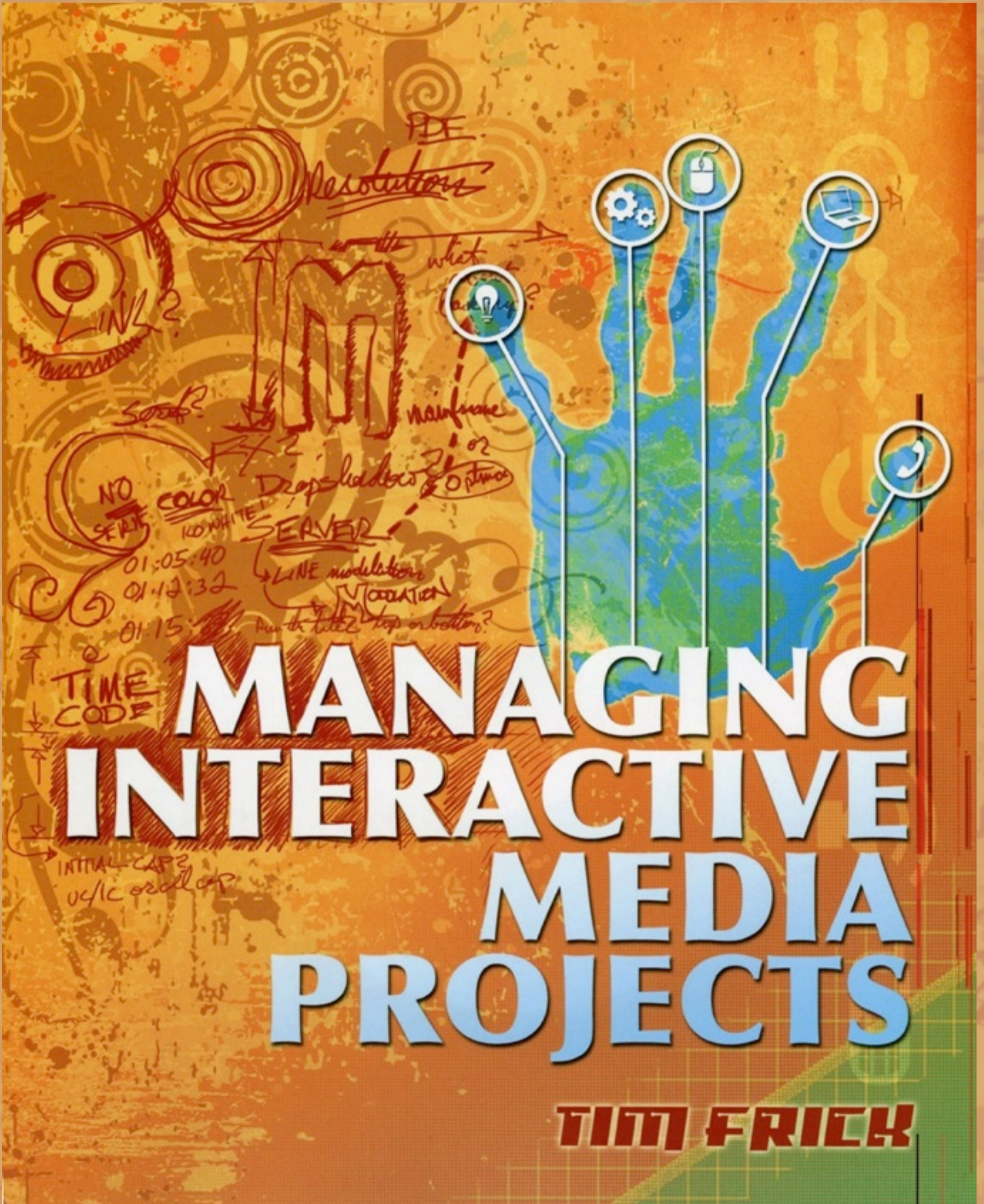


PROfile:

Judi Lapinsohn - *The Importance of Strategic Focus Groups when Assessing Content*



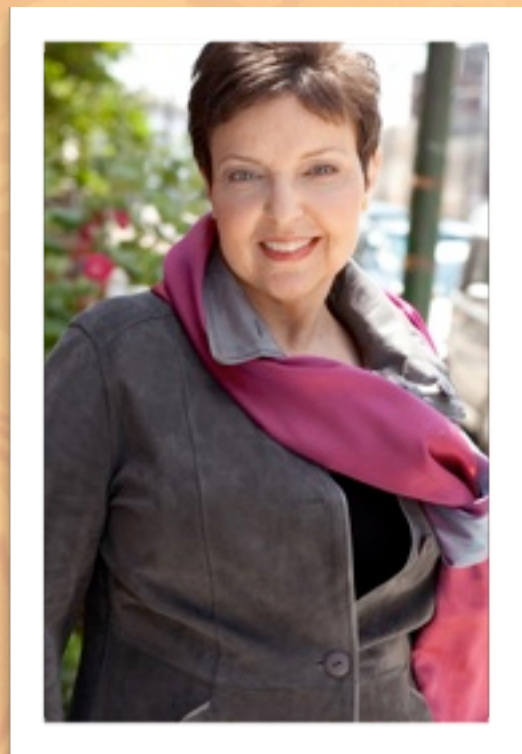
MANAGING INTERACTIVE MEDIA PROJECTS

TIM FRICK

PROfile:

Judi Lapinsohn

*The Importance of
Strategic Focus Groups
when Assessing Content*



Judi Lapinsohn, president of Judi Lapinsohn and Associates, an Evanston, Illinois-based qualitative research firm, says never underestimate the power of the data you can glean from a good focus group.

“A series of strategic focus groups can be the best way to identify key information about user preferences,” she said. “Armed with that knowledge, developers can create the most user targeted Web and interactive content.”

Lapinsohn continually stresses the importance of getting to know specifically what customers want from a Web site or interactive project.

“User needs and desires should drive content creation,” she said. “So it is crucial to undergo focused research at the front end of a project and ask the right questions of different involved user groups. What do users want or need from your content? What are the processes by which they acquire information? Where else do they go to get the same type of information? What other types of information might they want? How do they want it to be organized? Answers to all the questions are important because different customer segments will want different things. For example, existing customers may want to know their order history while prospective customers probably want to easily find product applications and pricing.”

Lapinsohn also points out that the focus groups she moderates typically do not define a target audience.

“We usually have a pretty clear idea who the audience is going into a focus group,” she said. “While that audience information may be refined, this research is meant to define content for the target audience rather than the target audience itself.”

Lapinsohn’s specialty is qualitative rather than quantitative research.

“Quantitative research answers the *what* question providing statistics, such as *x percent* say one thing is important whereas *y percent* say another thing is important,” she said. “Qualitative research answers not only the *what* questions, but the *why* questions as well,

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so it is appropriate to use when trying to refine content ideas. And, those answers are incredibly relevant to developers as they create interactive content, because it gives them valuable insight into specific user behaviors and perceptions.”

Most of Lapinsohn’s Web site groups typically consist of six to eight people. Generally, target subjects are those who fit a site’s general demographic and tend to feel and think the same way about the relevant topic. The number of focus groups or interviews conducted largely depends on the number of customer segments, but she advises running no fewer than two groups and plan on doing more. The research plan includes a screening questionnaire and discussion guide, and the results of the groups are presented in a detailed report for the client.

In the case of a Web or interactive project, information gleaned from Lapinsohn’s report helps her clients move forward with development. She says that although she does not typically interact with the developer directly, smart clients will involve developers in the entire research process. Developers might observe the focus groups in the backroom, watch tapes, read the report, etc., in order to identify how best to advance their project, be it continuing the research process, starting over, or creating a prototype and testing that with users.

“The most important part of a focus group is not so much what people want but *why* they want it,” Lapinsohn said. “A good developer can use these answers as an opportunity to address any number of site functionality issues.”

She may also recommend other qualitative research practices depending on the project needs: one-on-one interviews offer more personal experience feedback for the client, something that can be particularly worthwhile when dealing with sensitive subject matter. Phone interviews can help gather a wide range of opinions from participants all over the country, and phone focus groups, similar to conference calls, allow a group to work on the same part of a program or site in unison. Ethnographies, wherein subjects are observed in their own homes or in the workplace, can be helpful. Additionally, she says, online research tracking services like keynote.com - <http://www.keynote.com> - can be helpful to diagnose Web site performance problems at multiple levels.

No matter how you approach developing interactive and Web content, conducting focused research on how your content will be received by your target users can be an extremely helpful development asset.

“It’s much easier and less expensive to find out what your users want and need before you begin development, so you can create a well-informed, targeted Web site or interactive project the first time,” Lapinsohn said.

Judi Lapinsohn is the owner of Judi Lapinsohn and Associates.

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