

## **Research Report for the PhD Proofreaders: Where do we go from here – and why?**

Researcher: Alan Taman

### **Objective**

To determine whether and how services and products offered by The PhD Proofreaders may be changed to improve the appeal to existing and potential clients thereby maximising engagement and income.

### **Aims**

1. To explore current and potential client characteristics that are relevant to the PhD Proofreaders' products and services.
2. To explore what current and potential clients want from the organisation and how this relates to current products and services offered.
3. To recommend changes to the organisation's identity, brand and services in line with the findings from the above.

### **Specific questions**

1. What characteristics do people have which would be useful to know for the organisation with a view to develop its services and products in line with the questions listed below?
2. What do people want from the organisation? (for example, how critical are the social and emotional dimensions for services offered?)
3. How can the organisation create the experience people want?
4. What changes can and should be made?
5. How confusing is the current organisation name (the PhD Proofreaders)?
6. What is the likely appetite for changing the name to 'The PhD People'?

These was also the overarching need to try to determine perceptions to shifting the current hierarchy of products available for the services offered via the organisation website and social media.

Currently proofreading services have prominence, with events and services displayed less prominently. An important consideration was therefore also whether events, workshops and masterclasses (which are proving increasingly popular) should be displayed more prominently to reflect these as core brand elements which people buy into initially, and are then engaged to purchase other products such as masterclasses or proofreading as 'add-ons', perhaps similar to the hotel-room model whereby the room purchase serves as the gateway to further products. How popular were these likely to prove?

### **Methodology**

Given the above questions, there was a need to explore and analyse both quantity-based and quality-based questions and answers while avoiding conflation or confusion. A mixed-methods approach was therefore the most suitable methodology to adopt.

## **Methods**

An initial, relatively large-scale quantitative/qualitative online survey was used to recruit to and inform a more in-depth series of qualitative interviews which explored qualitative questions in greater detail.

The current mailing list provided a good population of potential respondents to explore these questions even though many have not committed to buying products.

Recruitment was therefore made online using the mailing-list database with direct mailing. A single follow-up e mail was after the initial response.

Mailing-list members were invited to complete an online survey exploring the above questions. Responses were anonymised and written consent obtained from respondents. A mixture of closed, open and narrative questions were used which were partly quantitative and partly qualitative in nature (mixed methods). Respondents were invited to a follow-up interview (held by phone or Zoom) to explore further aspects in depth, using a semi-structured, qualitative interview method. Participants were sent a briefing sheet (Appendix 1) and agreed to the interview, and to have it recorded, prior to the start of the interview.

Please [click here](#) for individual (anonymised) responses and summary reports. Appendix 2 shows the interview schedule used for the follow-on interviews.

## **Findings**

### *1 Survey responses*

There were 178 total responses. Of these, 84 were classed as complete and 94 incomplete. However, some 'incomplete' survey responses were included in the analysis if respondents had completed their names and at least some of the elective questions, even if they had not completed all the elective questions (n = 121). This did not include a set of questions at the end of the survey asking them for more personal information relating to their individual PhD project (respondents were offered the chance to opt out of these as a set).

Of those respondents regarded as submitting a sufficiently complete survey to include in the analysis, 37 agreed to a follow-up one-to-one interview and 19 interviews were subsequently conducted.

Both the numbers of survey respondents and numbers agreeing to then holding interviews are sufficiently great to draw meaningful findings from.

### How had people heard of us? (Q2, n = 121)

Most people had heard of us through a search engine (61.34%) with e-mail marketing (15.13%) and Eventbrite (9.24%) the next most popular. Less than 1% had heard of us via WhatsApp.

#### Are people currently using our services? (Q3, n = 119)

There was roughly a 2:1 split in respondents between those who are currently NOT using (60.5%) and those who are using (39.5%) our services. This was reflected in the interviews, which were again split between those who are not using our services and those who are.

#### Use of services (Q4, n = 46)

For those who are already using our services and offered a response, use of the PhD writing guides, PhD knowledge base and PhD skills workshops were clearly the most popular, all at around the 45-60% mark. The mock viva was currently the least popular, under 5%.

#### How had our services helped them? (Q5, n = 36)

When asked to elaborate on how our products and services have helped them in a narrative response, respondents gave a range of responses. These ranged from simple observations on giving practical support through to replies indicating partial or total lack of support from their university, and for which they then turned to us.

Emotional support was mentioned either explicitly or strongly implied in the type of support offered beyond simple practical help for most respondents, with respondents' own feelings of negativity or inadequacy or lack of confidence also being mentioned as reasons for finding our products and services useful. All the responses were positive.

#### Did our products and services offer a sense of engagement or social belonging (Q6, n = 38)

The strong presence of a feeling of emotional support or belonging to a group that could reflect or offer it was also apparent on being asked explicitly if our products and services offer a sense of engagement or belonging: almost 85% of respondents (n= 38) said yes to this.

This was expanded on with narrative responses in the next question (Q7, n = 31). The weekly e mails received many positive mentions, as did other aspects of feeling supported. Responses included: 'Just good to know I'm not alone in the ups and down'; 'For me, emotional engagement is probably the most important element that PhD Proofreaders offers', and 'Whenever doing courses at PhD Proofreaders, I feel like I am not alone as others have the same struggles I encounter' and sum up the overall sentiment. The overall positive response perhaps explains the relatively few suggestions as to how things might be improved (Q8, only 6), and 2 of those said there was nothing that could be done!

#### Why are people not (yet) using our services? (Q9, n = 51)

The overriding reason for not using the services was monetary: people were waiting to judge if the money they would spend would be well spent, or they simply could not afford it: 'I can't pay'. But there were also some useful pointers on not finding the right information. For example, '... timing - I'm based in Ontario, Canada. (Potential collaboration in expanding PhD proofreaders to the Canadian market...?!)'; and 'The timing between your

service meetings and NZ is not convenient for me. I attended one workshop in which the timeframe suited and found it very useful’.

#### Changing the name (Q10, n = 94)

Changing our name to ‘The PhD People’ gave a clear result: over 70% of those who answered thought this was a good idea (n = 94). (This was also reflected in the interviews in more detail.)

Encouragingly, 64 of those who answered this question took the trouble to explain their answer in the next question (Q11). The overall opinion was that this would reflect the fact that we do more than proofreading, but equally it would demonstrate a more ‘human’ side to the organisation, reflecting the importance of a sense of belonging or emotional engagement: ‘Well, the phd proofreaders has a certain ring to it but I guess you do much more than that. There is a “humanness” to people. And it does suggest a sort of expertness too’; and ‘Proofreaders is very specific. It underrepresents the diversity of your expertise’ are good examples.

Only 8 people explained why they thought it was perhaps not a good idea (Q12): the impression here was that it might not give the right idea about precision or professionalism.

#### Can we offer more? (Q13, n = 61)

Most of the responses on products or services not currently offered that might help simply said they couldn’t think of any! There were a few suggestions on making minor improvements, for example: ‘I think you need to clarify what technical services you are offering. For some science based disciplines it’s not comprehensive’ ; ‘A product of brainstorming, such as a half-hour rate for brainstorming would be great’ ; ‘Critical reading and writing’; ‘I think it is very important to address the mental challenges during the PhD process. I know that you have a course on procrastination. I would include one on imposter syndrome and how to deal with it as well as offer a course on Mindfulness for PhD students’ ; and ‘Specific advice for part- time phd students- there seems to be a lack of this type of support on line.

#### *Demographic data (Q17 – Q23)*

Most of those choosing to disclose (n = 74) were male (74.32%). There was a wide range in PhD projects, covering science, social sciences and humanities. There was a 59:41% split between full and part time respectively. Funded and non-funded were almost exactly 50:50. Most funded were receiving a university stipend for support and tuition (62%).

#### Anything else to add? (Q24, n = 24)

Most of these responses said either there was nothing to add, or thanked us for the services we offered!

## *2 Interviews*

### 2.1 General observations

Nineteen survey respondents were interviewed. These were from a range of locations around the world, including the UK. Most identified as female. The point participants were at in their PhD covered the entire range, from 'just setting out' to approaching viva and, in two cases, recently successfully defending in the viva. The subjects of the PhDs was equally as broad, covering science, social science and humanities in overall definition.

It was apparent that the quality and amount of support participants were getting from their university teams varied widely, from obviously good to almost absent. Participants' feelings of confidence also varied widely, with no clear link between this and the quality and level of support they were getting from their universities: some participants exuded confidence and seemed headed to a doctorate and a career in academia; others were clearly struggling on an emotional level and had had thoughts of giving up. What is clear is that the participants were at the least interested enough in our organisation either to consider using the services or were already doing so, and the overall impression was strongly positive. Perhaps this is to be expected, given the self-selecting nature of the sample, but there was enough elaboration on why participants felt that way to indicate this was a considered and not trivial or coincidental view.

## 2.2 Specific themes

### *1 Participants know us well already or would like to – a sense of **identity and loyalty***

Even for those participants who said they did not use many of our services currently or used only the weekly e mails, it was apparent that they either understood what was on offer, or had a good idea. Many of those who already used our services also expressed feelings of loyalty to the services used or organisation.

For example, several participants (initials are pseudonymised) said they had feelings of loyalty, or had recommended us to others:

'I've already encouraged other people to use you.' (BD);

I've forwarded the e mails to people... I think they do a lot of good work for your company.' (WJ);

'I've recommended it to lots of friends....I think their [*ie our*] service is good.' (EM);

'I've become a very avid follower.' (MI);

But others went beyond simply describing the transactional nature of whatever service they had signed up to – most would add remarks along the lines of the quality of service offered (almost universally good) and on further questioning would expand on that to reveal a sense of 'getting more out of it'. They identified with us:

'It gives me such peace of mind, there are other groups who have approached me but I said no, I would stick with PhD proofreaders' (WD);

'Making those connections with people – there was something very powerful about it not just being people in the UK ; I felt I was connecting with people in a different way; it was useful to recognise that things had moved on for me [*in hearing from other people who were where this participant was a year ago*]; I felt like the

organisation had really given a lot to me for nothing and I wanted to offer that back [on reasons for completing the survey].’(HJ)

‘I just thought "that's me"! [on reading the weekly e mail]; on reading some of that material, as you move along the PhD process, you identify different aspects that are being discussed by the Proofreaders.’ (NL)

‘I felt interacting with some of the other students was useful, knowing what the other students were going through - a sense of belonging from hearing other people's stories'; it's really accessible at all kinds of levels.’ (NN)

So this sense of identity and loyalty meant many were intending to use more of our services as their PhDs progressed, or would recommend us to their colleagues – a reflection of brand loyalty which is highly valuable and should continue to be cultivated.

The reasons for this sense of identity were not uniform or singular but spoke to a larger need for people taking a PhD, ie to be supported or belong to something which offered them support on a broader basis. People very much wanted this from an organisation such as ours – far more than transactional services for time or events rendered. Which also reflects in the next theme.

## 2 *We're here for you: a sense of emotional engagement and support*

Participants referred repeatedly to gaining a sense of support from the services offered that was fundamentally different from, say, getting good service for a retail purchase or service. This is because it reflected an apparent, usually admitted, and common need to feel they were supported by not feeling alone in what they were doing:

‘To me it's so wonderful to know I'm not completely isolated ... meeting other people who are like minded.’ (FW);

‘With the support of the PhD proofreaders I felt quite good [having felt stupid].’ (NL);

‘It gave me the reassurance I was on the right track [on the writing guides].’ (ME)

‘It helped me focus - the PhD journey is a mountain.’ (IM)

The sense of support was sometimes referred to on its own, as above, but also in combination with positive remarks on the practical use of services offered:

‘It gave me the reassurance I was on the right track [on the writing guides].’ (ME)

‘The newsletter is definitely something I related to very well - the anxiety, things like that.’ (SJ);

‘[my confidence improving] is possibly the most important element; [emotional support] is a lot of the focus; even the workshop I attended gave morale - having that level of expertise that Phd proofreaders offers is so much more valuable.’ (SV)

‘The course materials had a positive spin; it felt really positive and supportive, with the follow-up as well.’ (DB)

‘I'd found myself in a very bad place ... I don't think it's an exaggeration to say those e-mails were a bit of a lifeline for me ... just that sense that there was somebody out there who understood and had some words of encouragement or support ; it was

interesting to meet up with people from all over the world who were challenged but to know there were strategies [*to cope*]; (JH)

Some participants who said their supervisory team were doing a good job added that this sense of support or engagement was an important element to their signing up for our services; for participants who said they were struggling this was nearly always referred to as a critical reason for doing so.

In offering a sense of support and engagement, even when restricted to the weekly e mail, we are giving people a critically important reason to engage with us. Several participants gave pointers as to how services could be changed to reflect that, eg offering workshops over several time zones, but this theme was strongly reflected by almost all.

These two themes were very much linked in many of the remarks: people feel a sense of loyalty and identity often because of the sense of emotional support and engagement they get from using our services. This is far more than customer satisfaction with the quality of goods offered in a simple transaction.

### *3 The naming of cats is a serious business...*

There was overwhelming approval for changing our name to 'The PhD People':

'I think if you can think of something that really encompasses other services that would be fine.' (WD);

'I liked it - I thought it was a good idea.' (BD);

'It is about the PhD people, it's more inclusive.' (SH);

" "PhD people" sounds a lot more inclusive... sounds a lot wider to who it speaks to.' (MI);

'What the organisation offers is way more than proofreading.' (JH)

'It's a good idea because the [*current*] name suggests you're doing the one thing... and it's not ... it doesn't tell the whole story'. (JB);

'Some of my colleagues think I'm referring a proofreading service to them and I'm not! I definitely think a name change would serve you well.' (JW)

'I was looking for a different service when I found the service - so "PhD proofreaders" doesn't really describe what they do.' (SV)

Several participants mentioned this had been attempted before. Bearing in mind the importance of identity and a sense of support, and the range of services offered, this is perhaps not surprising: PhD candidates appreciate accuracy in meaning, and as things stand 'The PhD Proofreaders' doesn't stack up, in their view. Some pointed out that the current name does convey a sense of professionalism which the proposed change may not quite convey: eg '[*the current name*] is quite catchy... "PhD people" sounds a bit journalistic' (JS). This can be countered, I believe (see recommendations).

## Discussion

People responding to this survey, and in the interviews, were almost wholly satisfied with what we have to offer. This should not be surprising: people are unlikely to use this as an opportunity to complain, but even so there was ample scope within the survey and interviews to make any negative points known: there were hardly any. About the most prominent 'negative' comment was that some people could not afford to pay us more when they clearly would use our services more if they could!

It is apparent they get far more out of using a particular service than a strict interpretation of what is offered as a simple business transaction: people using our services identify with us (loyalty) and gain a great deal of emotional as well as practical support largely from knowing others are 'in the same boat' (or were now in the boat they were in earlier on in their PhD journey): a continuum of perceiving and wanting to be a part of something greater and more rewarding, not a simple point of sale. Value transcending and in many cases exceeding cost. This glimpsing of 'something more' was apparent even in some participants who had not made use of our services yet: several said they intended to, unprompted - because they thought when they reached that point in their PhD (or could afford to pay us!) they would be willing to do more. Central to this was the importance of feeling our services were speaking 'to them', addressing their broader needs via a particular service (be it the weekly e mail or a specific guide or workshop). There were some suggestions for making specific changes such as holding workshops in different time zones and offering more for qualitative-based researchers, but overall the participants already got a great deal out of the services offered.

On the name change, there is a strong indication that this was approved and understood. However, a few participants did mention that 'PhD People' had a 'fuzzier' feeling to it than 'Phd Proofreaders' so might make some feel the services on offer were somehow less precise. One way of countering this could be to add a short phrase after 'The PhD People' which gave an indication of the range of services and level of quality offered: 'Professional, precise, and caring', or similar.

## Recommendations

1. 'You can keep calm and carry on (doing what you're doing, only better)! Continue to offer and develop our range of services with the important principles of a sense of belonging and support in mind, so as to continue to foster a strong sense of identity and foster loyalty.
2. Further services can be developed profitably which cater to these principles – eg more workshops which would allow people in different time zones to take part more easily, some group discussions around critical points for the PhD, continuing emphasis on one-to-one support. Less emphasis (ie prominence) on proofreading services on the website should be considered.
3. Changing the name to 'The PhD People' or a similar company name to reflect the broader range of services offered or being considered for roll-out has strong support, but adding a short phrase to counter the risk that this is taken to be 'imprecise' should be considered.

## Appendix 1: Participant information sheet for one-to-one interviews

### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION**

*The PhD Proofreaders: What do you think of us and how can we improve?*

#### **INTERVIEW BACKGROUND AND PROCESS**

You are being invited to take part in an online one-to-one interview in real time with the researcher for **The PhD Proofreaders**, Alan Taman ( [alan@thephdproofreaders.com](mailto:alan@thephdproofreaders.com) ). Please read the list of points given at the end of this document and reply either by e mail or verbally at the start of the interview that you have read, understood and agreed to them.

During the interview, you will be asked to talk about your understanding of **The PhD Proofreaders**, your views on several aspects of our products and services, and on how you think these may or may not be improved and why you believe this to be the case. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers: we want to explore your perspectives. The interview will be recorded using MS Teams or Zoom. A link for the meeting will be sent with details of the time of the interview. Please ensure the 'virtual background' facility is switched on for your machine if you would prefer this.

The interview will be recorded. The recording will be kept only for as long as required for transcription and analysis then deleted.

#### **DURATION**

30 minutes or less.

#### **YOUR RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AND WITHHOLD INFORMATION**

You can stop the interview at any time without explanation. You can also have your data withdrawn from the time of the interview until 5 days after being interviewed by contacting the researcher.

The transcribed study data will be anonymised and stored under a unique pseudonym known only to the researcher. No participant-identifiable data will be kept in the transcription.

#### **YOUR RIGHT TO CONFIDENTIALITY/ANONYMITY**

Any personal information given in the interview will be rendered unidentifiable to an external party. Your original online survey response will be kept separately from the interview data, which will be stored confidentially, using a pseudonym.

The transcribed, anonymised data may then be used as part of the research report and published as such.

## **WHO IS ORGANISING THE RESEARCH?**

You should try to contact Alan Taman in the first instance if you require further information or wish to withdraw: [alan@thephdproofreaders.com](mailto:alan@thephdproofreaders.com)

If you are unhappy at any point in the study, or if there is a problem, please contact Dr Max Lempriere, The PhD Proofreaders: [max@thephdproofreaders.com](mailto:max@thephdproofreaders.com)

## **CONSENT**

Please confirm either by e mail or verbally at the start of the interview that you have read and understood the following and that you are happy for the interview to proceed:

- You have read this information sheet for this study. You have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily.
- You understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.
- You understand that your data will be anonymous, will be used by the researcher only for research purposes, and may be published in the research report.
- You understand that the audio and video from this interview will be recorded via MS Teams or Zoom.

(The researcher will ask you to confirm that you agree to this at the start of the interview if you do not confirm by e mail, and the interview will not proceed unless you agree.)

## Appendix 2 Interview schedule for one-to-one interviews

### Qual interview schedule PhD Proofreaders May 2023

TOPIC	QUESTION	PROMPTS	PROBE
Introduction – 2-3 mins	Please tell me a bit about yourself		
Products and services	How familiar are you with PhD Proofreaders' range of services?	Refer to specific responses made in individual survey and explore.	Should not need any, apart from attentive follow-up of remarks made.
Help from products and services	1 How have these products helped you in your PhD? 2 How might they be made better, in your opinion? Would you like to see more of/less of something, or something new?	Ask about Masterclass development if seems possible.	How well does the current website work for you?
Emotional engagement and social support	1 How do PhD Proofreaders' products and services lend themselves to offering a sense of engagement emotionally, or being socially supportive? 2 How could this be improved, in your opinion?		What else do you think would help make those feelings stronger, for you?
Name change	Repeat any remarks made and ask to expand.	How confusing do you think this currently is? What do you think the likely appetite would be for the new name?	
Draw to conclusion – 2-3 mins	Is there anything else you would like to add about what we've covered today? Or go back over?		<b>CHECK:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Thank for meeting online</li> <li>• Further questions?</li> <li>• Further contact – my e mail address kept?</li> <li>• Ok to get back in connection with this?</li> </ul>

AT  
29/06/23