Tool – Affinity Clustering (Affinity Mapping)

Primary Goal
To group matching ideas or concepts

When To Use
To quickly make sense of and identify themes of large amounts of information

Time Required
30-60 minutes (depending on the number of items in your list)

Number of Participants
1 facilitator and 2-7+ participants or 1 person

Who Should Participate?
For anyone as a solo activity or the entire project team

Supplies
Large whiteboard or Post-it Tabletop Pad, Post-it notes, Sharpies, whiteboard markers

Affinity Clustering (or Mapping, as it’s also called) is merely a fancy name for grouping or putting like ideas together—an “apples go with oranges and carrots go with cucumbers” kind of exercise.

It can help you to reveal common themes, goals, pain points, patterns, or concepts. This can be particularly helpful when you want to get ideas onto paper or whiteboard quickly with little framework needed.

It typically is used after activities like Rose, Bud, Thorn. The other activities provide more rigorous structure, and Affinity Mapping wraps the information into a manageable package.

Affinity Mapping as Solo Activity

1. Prepare
For this activity, you’ll need only the basics—enough Post-it notes and Sharpie markers for each participant, whiteboard markers, and a large open whiteboard. It’s important to have a large writable surface where you can attach the Post-its because you’ll be writing group names around the clusters.

2. Brainstorm
- Pass out the writing materials
- Make sure everyone understands the topic
- Brainstorm ideas on Post-it notes for 10 minutes.

This is a heads-down activity. Read the room and move on to the next step if people pop up their heads and put down Sharpies before the 10 minutes are up. Conversely, if they are still furiously writing away as the timer is about to buzz, give them an extra minute or two.

- This is about quantity, not quality – get thoughts out of heads and make them visible for all to see
- Participants should write down one idea per Post-it. Any and every idea, question, or concern is valid here. The point of a brainstorm is that all ideas are on the table.
- Affinity Clustering (Affinity Mapping) takes into account any and all ideas.

3. Diagram/Map
Once the 10 minutes are up, have each participant read through each Post-it and stick it to the whiteboard. At this time, everyone can ask questions and clarify ideas.
4. Group

Once all of the Post-its have been tracked, the facilitator will begin to group them together. Engage the group to assist in the process.

- Like ideas should be grouped together.
- Once you’ve created a group, draw a circle around it and give it a name.

As you group, you may find that some groups have become too large. If a group grows beyond 6 Post-its, break it down into smaller groups. For example, if a group’s theme emerges as “Fruit” and contains 15 items, break it into smaller groups like “Citrus,” “Stone Fruit,” and “Tropical.”

Also, keep in mind that the groups you create initially may need to be adjusted later on. Don’t be afraid to constantly break and re-group Post-its. Half the fun of the activity is seeing different themes and groups emerge.

Affinity Mapping as Supplemental Activity

1. Prep & run activity

Affinity Clustering (Affinity Mapping) frequently is used as a tool at the end of another activity like Rose, Bud, Thorn. It’s especially helpful when you’re trying to make sense of user feedback or any other activity that produces a lot of material.

Run your first activity as you always would. It may be that the activity wasn’t completed on Post-its. If that’s the case, it’s helpful to organize the output by placing each idea onto a Post-it as a means of better synthesizing the activity.

2. Group

Now take the Post-its from that activity and group them into like segments, the same as you did in Step 4 above.

3. Wrap-up

Once you have organized each group, synthesize them into a spreadsheet or document that you can share with your client. It could be that you prioritize which groups are most important to tackle first or use them as a way to create a plan of action.

Source: https://spin.atomicobject.com/2018/05/02/affinity-diagram-mapping/