

FOCUS GROUPS: THOUGHTS FROM BEHIND THE ONE-WAY MIRROR

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Abstract

Focus groups are a useful tool to generate ideas and hypotheses, for further research and ultimately action for a product or service. Often, however, they are misused to make a final decision, which is dangerous to product marketing. Focus groups are a valuable qualitative tool, but as a starting point – and should not be used to draw final conclusions.

KEY WORDS

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For many years, a popular form of qualitative research for consumer products and services has been the use of focus groups. Potential customers with common characteristics (such as heavy soda drinkers, moms with children aged 13-17, or instant coffee drinkers) are brought together in a controlled environment, and led through a deliberate and controlled discussion by a professional focus group moderator. After an in depth discussion, the moderator tabulates and interprets the results for the client – often with in depth verbal and written reports. In recent years, focus groups have entered the mainstream culture, particularly for political races, most notably the recent U.S. Presidential election. Regularly, for example, Fox News broadcasts live remote focus groups, as people react to an event, such as a debate.

Focus groups can be very useful tools, whether used for political races or more likely consumer products. However, like any other tool, they need to be used and interpreted properly.

The key point is that they are qualitative – they can generate thoughts, ideas, and hypotheses, which can be the basis for further more concrete research.

You might use focus groups to understand your brand image; to explore potential new product ideas; understanding purchasing decisions; evaluating new advertising campaign ideas; or trying to differentiate you vs. competitors (Market Street Research, 2004).

The danger arises when focus groups are interpreted as complete research, which they are not. They are a step in the right direction, but only a step.

The methodology may vary, but here is how a group might be formed and executed.

A moderator is hired for a mission as noted earlier – let us say for consumer reaction to a potential change in a specific airline frequent flyer program. The moderator typically directs the recruiting, in consultation with his/her client. Screeners contact potential focus group members by phone, and for those who are willing, ask qualifying questions to make sure that FOCUS GROUPS 4 the people who show up are of the exact “head set” for the learning that needs to take place.

If someone is qualified, they are asked if they are willing to show up at a specific location at a specific time and date, and are typically promised cash compensation paid upon completion of the group. They are also advised of the time for the session, such as an hour and a half.

Occasionally a few “extra” people are recruited, to cover “no shows”, or people who were screened but found not to be usable upon arrival (people not used are still compensated for showing up).

Often groups take place at a facility with rooms built and set up specifically for focus groups. Focus groups will vary in size, but the 8 – 12 people range is typical. More than that has diminishing returns, as the moderator will want to be sure to hear from all participants during the controlled conversation.

People are brought into a room, often with an oblong table, and with cards set up, showing their first name. Typically drinks and light food are available, and chairs are comfortable. It is usually desired to create a relaxed but professionally maintained atmosphere. The head of the table is where the moderator sits, and behind him/her is a mirror – at least that's what the participants see. In actuality, it is a one-way mirror, and on the other side is a small room where interested parties (such as the client who the group is for) can sit, observe, and speak, without disturbing people in the main room.

The room also has microphones on the ceiling, and/or video facilities. The moderator generally will not take notes – the moderator is there to ask questions, really listen to the answers, and focus on follow-up questions. After the event is over, the moderator will listen or watch the group, and take notes then.

One thing that has changed from focus groups of the 1970's – the moderator will fully disclose FOCUS GROUPS 5 the one-way glass and that people are watching – in other words being completely forthcoming (this was not always the case in the past). However, the moderator will then ask the group to ignore the hidden observers from that point on.

When participants show up, they have a vague idea of the topic – such as “travel” for our airline example. They do not know specifics until the moderator chooses to reveal them as the discussion flows.

Initially, the moderator will go around the table and have people introduce themselves; where they are from; what do they do if they work, or what they do if they stay home. He/she will then begin a broad discussion of what the group has been assembled for, in this case under the topic of “travel”. Initial questions will be general in nature...maybe about their feelings regarding air travel in particular, airlines, and ultimately air line reward programs. A good moderator needs to shut down two avenues of unneeded conversation: (1.) when a group member goes off on a tangent with an interesting story but not relevant to the mission; or (2.) when someone tries to dominate the discussion or even change it.

The moderator will then ask questions, in this case, about specific airline programs, and get a reaction. Ultimately, the actual client might be revealed, and specific questions, looking for reactions, to existing services.

After all of the preceding, the “meat” of the discussion takes place – what the group is really here for. It could be a discussion of new potential program adjustments; seeking reactions to potential advertising campaigns; or suggestions on how to make the program experience more appealing to them.

When the moderator feels that the mission is accomplished, he/she will excuse himself/herself, and see if the observers have any follow up questions they would like asked.

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When the group is completed, they leave the room, are given payment for their participation, and sign that they have received their promised compensation.

If the moderator is professional, it is a very smooth process, and valuable information is obtained.

However, we now return to the topic of how the results are used. Even if results are seen as revealing, exciting, and generate new ideas, the caution light must go on. I have been on both sides of the “one way glass”. I have observed many consumer products focus groups while working for General Foods and Nabisco Brands (now folded under one umbrella called Kraft); and after I left those companies, I befriended a focus group recruiter who put me in very interesting and appropriate groups where I was actually a participant.

From both sides of that glass, it all boils down to this:

1. These are ideas – no more, no less.
2. Even if you do 4 or 5 focus groups, garnering reactions from 40-50 people plus or minus, you cannot make a final marketing decision from this. It would make little sense, for example, to launch a new \$20 million advertising campaign, based on a relative handful of people.
3. Do not make new product launch decisions based on focus groups. These are small, not representative samples (Relevant Insights, 2011).

What you can do is take the information, and possibly the most judgmentally appealing ideas, and do more formal market research – such as a statistically valid phone survey or series of shopping center intercepts across the country, also hitting a much larger number of people.

In the past, I have winced at hearing people say “focus groups of our consumers have proven FOCUS GROUPS 7

XYZ....”. They don’t prove anything: they are a good starting point for thinking in a bigger way, and an initial point to bring in some customer reaction. If a moderator ever suggests otherwise -- that all you need are some focus groups -- do not hire that person to work on your product (Decision Analyst, 2012).

Focus groups are thus a beginning – not the basis for an ultimate conclusion.

References:

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