

Mental image of groups is out of focus

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SOMEWHERE ALONG THE LINE some clients have lost—or they never had—a true research perspective when it comes to focus-group technique.

While quantitative research never has been questioned as the methodology from which strategies are formed and executed, focus groups are often thought of as some lesser, therefore weak, animal in the research arena.

This attitude tends to pervade marketing. It has important implications not only to the client-researcher relationship but also to the marketer's ability to understand fully how each aspect of the research process relates and works together to provide strategically sound directions.

Numerous pieces of evidence suggest that marketers have failed to perceive focus groups as a serious research technique:

- The viewing room often overflows with clients, many of whom have been brought along for a variety of inappropriate reasons, the most popular one being, "We thought we'd bring Joe and Tom along since they've never seen a focus group."

- With the room filled with clients, a party atmosphere quickly develops, spurred by plenty of food and drink. Hostesses become "watchdogs" and have to cut off liquor to some clients if the drinking gets out of hand. As the party ensues, two critical problems occur: the client misses important information during the group discussion, and the moderator loses faith in the client and interest in the project.

- The moderator often is asked to cover too much material in a discussion, causing confusion or generating little information on variety of topics.

- Clients often see focus-group recruiting as a telemarketing effort, in which the salesperson is really targeting participants as his next sales call.

- Marketers tend to over-emphasize ideas emerging from focus groups that confirm preconceived notions.

- Marketers tend to over-emphasize ideas that contradict preconceived notions.

- Marketing executives often make decisions, strategic and otherwise, on the basis of focus groups, rather than use the technique as a preliminary research step.

ALTHOUGH FOCUS GROUPS

are not quantitative research, they are an important research tool. Yet, they have a unique place in research. The difference that sets focus groups apart from the other techniques is the human

behavior and psychological element, which is fundamental to understanding the important role focus groups play in connection with qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

Yet it is the social or group dynamic aspect of focus groups that often make them suspect, and as a result misused by marketing managers.

Much has been written about the limitations of focus groups, and, possibly as a result, confusion, distrust, and even irreverence have grown for the technique.

What can or should be done? An obvious answer is to make marketers and in-house research staff more aware of the proper ways to look on focus groups as a technique.

Hopefully, this awareness will lead to better appreciation for and use of group discussions.

MARKETING MANAGERS can begin to overcome "focus group

smart" by incorporating the following suggestions:

1. Avoid the party atmosphere. People who are invited to focus-group sessions simply because they have never attended one are a big expense, in time and money, to the sponsor. For substantially less cost, the groups can be videotaped, in color, limiting attendance to two or three essential people.

Later, the tapes can be presented to other key staff members in a forum conducive to interpretation and open discussion. Videotaping has the added advantage of allowing the client to gain a proper perspective of a group discussion, from the time the group was conducted until viewing the group again on videotape.

2. Do not place too many, very specific quotas on the recruiting process. Doing so strongly implies that focus groups are too often thought



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of in quantitative terms. Filling a group with any number of consumer types is inappropriate, assumes the research is projectable, and by meeting certain quotas will provide a well-rounded basis on which to draw definite conclusions.

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Such an attitude is false and misguided.

Many focus-group sessions have become a waste of time because of too many variables interacting, leaving the moderator and the client no smarter than they were.

3. The moderator should not be asked to cover a multitude of material. When this happens, the moderator and the client are left confused, not having learned anything meaningful on any one subject.

Remember, focus groups are meant to be just that: focused, concentrating on one respondent-type and a limited range of topics. The group dynamic process can work for or against you and is most likely to work in your favor if the group is as homogenous as possible.

4. Do not expect the moderator to provide all the answers immediately upon concluding a couple of group discussions so that you can develop strategies overnight. A good moderator will hesitate to make quick interpretations at a time when emotions and the stimulation resulting from information overload are running high.

THE FINAL, but possibly the most important, suggestion for marketing managers is this: Focus groups are a legitimate form of research that live by the same research ethics employed in quantitative studies, particularly the ethics concerning respondent confidentiality.

As in survey research, successful group recruiting is contingent on gaining the trust and confidence of the interviewees, with the certainty that their responses will not be divulged or that the research is not a sales effort.

It is hoped that if marketers change their thinking about what focus groups are and what they are not, they will realize that the rules of research are not confined to quantitative studies, but cross into all forms of well-designed techniques—including the focus group.

