

Working Paper

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Focus Group Research: A Best Practices Approach

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The role of research in marketing cannot afford a quantitative-qualitative schism with silo affinities to one approach over another. Indeed, marketing research is an integrative process that benefits from both quantitative and qualitative methods although these two umbrella research categories differ greatly in purpose, scope, technique, analyses, and reporting. While the research principles followed by survey researchers are often discussed and at times hotly debated, there is relatively little corresponding public discussion in the qualitative arena, particularly with respect to the use of focus groups devoted to uncovering individual product/service attitudes and behavior. The purpose of this paper is to discuss how research rules apply to both quantitative and focus group research designs and how greater attention to best practices adds much needed deliberation to the study of focus group designs.

Basic Premises Underlying All Research

Let's begin with the basic premise that all research designs work within certain paradigms. Although less elaborate or concrete as in the quantitative realm, qualitative research designs are grounded in a basic model of "good" research.

Adhering to these principles not only raises the quality of the research design but builds in necessary transparency breeding confidence in the research findings. A research design that is transparent is one in which the researcher can explicitly communicate the underlying assumptions as well as the various control measures integral in the design, enabling end-users to clearly follow the process and understand how outcomes were reached. This transparency provides end-users with some measure of quality and confidence in the results.



Quantitative and focus group research schemes are also equally interested in individual attitudes and behavior – quantitative methods in a highly-structured, wide-spread sort of way (breadth); and focus groups via a highly-interpersonal approach (depth). In many instances, focus group research individualizes quantitative further by deriving meaning and context to survey data that is often masked by necessary standardization and coding. Like quantitative, focus group research methods respect individuality, knowing that the ability to maximize the quality of individual response contributes greatly to the accuracy and usability of the outcome. Focus group efforts show regard for the individual participant in the carefully crafted recruitment (screening) process, the use of probes, and by enabling a meaningful contribution from each participant in a safe research environment.

Controlling Error

To get at individual attitudes and behavior, both quantitative and focus group research carefully shape research designs to ensure that responses to research questions are heard correctly and to improve the accuracy of analyses. The potential for achieving both these aims – accuracy in response interpretation and analysis – is realized to the extent that certain parameters are utilized in the conduct of the research.

Quantitative studies, because of the structured design, can control for or logically theorize about sampling and non-sampling errors. Focus group research, on the other hand, cannot as easily view these errors although they exist to a high degree and are often willingly introduced by the qualitative researcher. Knowing that error exists in focus group research is problematic because all researchers aim for confidence in their findings. Being highly aware of error introduced by convenience samples, as well as non-sampling errors (such as interviewer and selection bias in recruiting, moderator and response bias in the discussions themselves), qualitative researchers build in control measures in the selection and interviewing procedures similar to their quantitative colleagues.



The notion of error in qualitative marketing research (focus groups or otherwise) is rarely discussed but a concept worth exploring. Without it, qualitative research is weakened under scrutiny and simply becomes an exercise where all ideas are “good ideas,” where individual differences don’t matter, and where all responses to qualitative questions are legitimate. Some might go further and say that focus group research devolves into a haphazard process of ransacking the moderator’s projective toolbox. If this was true (which it is not), researchers wouldn’t incorporate any controls into their qualitative research designs or care too deeply about analysis. But as researchers we *do* care about the design and analytical elements of focus group research because we care about the transparency of the processes and the degree of confidence by which we can report study findings.

Reliability, Validity, & Cognitive Processes

To take this one step further: If measurement error is an appropriate concept in focus group research then you have to consider quantitative constructs such as reliability, validity, as well as cognitive processes such as optimization and satisficing. Reliability and validity are not typically uttered in the same breadth with qualitative research but the ideology that lies within these concepts is relevant to all research. Further discussion of reliability and validity in qualitative research is left for another time. The purpose here is to emphasize that the essential underpinning of reliability and validity – trustworthiness, quality, dependability – are germane to focus group designs. For example, the moderator has control of question administration in a focus group (by typically probing and clarifying questions on the spot to unearth any possible misinterpretations or alternative meanings) which assures that the intended question (or necessarily re-worded question) is indeed the question being answered. Question-answer validation is a key strength of focus group research as mentioned on page 2, i.e., “the ability to maximize the quality of individual response,” and raises an interesting issue concerning the group activities frequently used in focus group sessions. Further commentary on this issue is left for a subsequent paper.



Cognitive process theories are also relevant and important to focus group research. Let's look at optimization¹ and satisficing¹ as it relates to the presentation of stimuli in a group context. Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski (2000) and others have espoused a basic four-step cognitive process model to discuss how research participants respond to questions optimally: 1) interpreting the question to deduce its intent; 2) searching the memory for relevant information; 3) integrating that information into a judgment; and, 4) translating that judgment into a response. The fact that focus group studies typically involve a limited number of stimuli and moderator's guides are designed to take participants through this cognitive process by motivating thoughtful responses strongly argues for the idea that optimization, not satisficing, is at play in these research settings. Similarly, the likelihood of research participants opting for a response that is "good enough," or satisficing, is greatly reduced. Applied to the use of concept boards and other stimuli in focus groups, one could argue that the concept of primacy and recency effects are irrelevant in focus group research and, while randomizing the presentation order of stimuli is de rigueur in quantitative, not so in qualitative. To the contrary, this argument suggests that *not* randomizing across group sessions adds a necessary component of control. This last issue will be more fully discussed in a subsequent paper.

Best Practices

The research industry is urged to move towards a model of best practices by systematically examining the issues that revolve around the multitude of variables that are part and parcel of focus group designs. For example: What are the effects

¹ Optimization and satisficing refer to the extent respondents "perform the necessary cognitive tasks" to answer research questions. In the former, respondents exert the effort to thoroughly comprehend and weigh response choices in order to select the optimal answer; in contrast, respondents who satisfice "may compromise their standards and expend less energy...Instead of generating the most accurate answers...[they] settle for merely satisfactory ones." [quoted statements taken from Krosnick, J.A. 1999. Survey research. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 50, 537-567]



associated with research observers and what is the optimal way of dealing with this? What effect is associated with audio and/or videotaping? What are the specific problems related to the inclusion of “professional participants”? What are the moderator effects that have the greatest impact on the discussion outcome? How does the cultural, social, economic, and geographic diversity of participants affect input and what are effective strategies for tackling these issues in analysis? What are the cognitive processes at work in the research setting and what are the best techniques to maximize participant input?

A best practices approach towards focus groups would be remiss without scrutiny of projective techniques – a unique and important facet of qualitative marketing research. Discussions abound on the numerous techniques in the projective toolbox – collage, picture sorts, sand play, storytelling, guided imagery, mapping, etc. – but there could be much more dialog towards a better understanding of these techniques and whether any one of them should even *be* in the toolbox for any particular study. Such a dialog might ask: Do projective techniques introduce confounding factors into a research discussion and, if so, how should that be addressed in the analysis? How do multiple or certain combinations of projective techniques impact the research environment? What is the effect of individual vs. group think exercises and what is the appropriate method for unbundling individual from group think responses? What legitimacy or caveats should be given to reported verbatim comments that stem from one or more projective activities? What have proven to be effective analytical schemes for specific types of projectives? And, the more overriding consideration might be, what *is* the role of creativity in qualitative marketing research?

Conclusion

Focus group research shares many of the concerns and issues associated with quantitative. Both adhere to research principles that serve to maximize users’ confidence in the research findings. But, while quantitative design and analysis issues are openly examined among various marketing research publications (such as *Marketing Research*) and associations (such as AAPOR), corresponding public methodological discussions concerning focus group research are relatively few.



Guidelines and white papers (proprietary or otherwise) on core competencies and procedures exist, yet there is a void of meaningful discourse that would bring methodological priorities into focus for the discipline. No less than quantitative, focus group marketing research merits discussions pertaining to a variety of design components, such as: screener development (questionnaire design), the moderator's guide (question wording and context effects), the use of specific techniques (control for bias and analyzability of the results), and the analytic process (accuracy of conclusions and recommendations).

A systematic, thorough investigation – or at the least, a robust ongoing industry-wide conversation – concerning these and other issues will provide an important look into focus group marketing research. The outgrowth of these analyses will be to remove any black-box perceptions of focus group research, add transparency to the process, and ultimately offer research users greater justification and substantiation for the findings. Like quantitative, qualitative methods of all types deserve ongoing questioning and inspection that contribute to an increasing level of confidence among researchers and their clients.

Reference

Tourangeau, R., Rips, L., & Rasinski, K. 2000. *The Psychology of Survey Response*. Cambridge University Press.

