

QUIRK'S

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Ever the skeptics: tips for dispelling doubt in employee research

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Conducting employee research is in a class all its own. Asking consumers to confess their brand preference is one thing but asking employees to divulge little-known opinions about their jobs - their life source - is a risky business. There is a host of issues to consider when conducting qualitative and quantitative research with employees; the following are just a few areas specific to conducting face-to-face employee focus group research:

Reach out ahead of time. Prior notification - via e-mail, company bulletin board or newsletter - dispels doubts and cynicism while minimizing refusals during recruitment. To instill credence and maximize impact, the notification should come from someone in management who is far up in the chain of command yet carries a name that is easily recognized (and respected) by employees. In some instances this means the president or CEO of the company; in others it may mean the department head. The important thing is to get employees' attention and gain trust in the research.

Get management involved. Make all relevant management aware of the research to create an informed and supportive frame around the research within the company. This gives employees added assurance that the research is legitimate and important to the client company, which adds another brick to the foundation of trust.

Beware: Cooperation among non-management

employees may be low. Management will participate in the research as a sense of duty (as part of their job description); but non-management tends to be more skeptical, questioning the real benefit of participation, and more likely to wonder "What's in it for me?" This can happen even with prior notification. This issue of cooperation is what makes all the other issues on this list - prior notification, recruitment, environment, etc. - so important to a successful employee study.

One highly-sensitive, tactful recruiter is ideal. There should be one experienced moderator who can dedicate his/her time to instilling trust and cooperation with employees. This person should actually be named in the pre-notification so that employees anticipate the contact; are comfortable communicating with the recruiter; and secure in the knowledge that the research and participation request are bona fide.

Give out a client contact name/number during recruitment. This way, employees can independently verify the authenticity of the research study. Even with prior notification and a quality recruiter, there will be employees who remain skeptical. Left on their own, employees may question their immediate boss about the research, who may or may not be able to answer the employee's questions. Proactively giving employees a name and number to call (or e-mail address to write) funnels employees' concerns to the appropriate person within the company while reinforcing the trustworthiness of the research effort.

Find a neutral environment to set the mood. Conducting the research outside the corporate campus helps to create an open (less oppressive) atmosphere. This can be a standard focus group facility, a local hotel conference room or other publicly-available space (e.g., community center). The client company may not want to shoulder the added expense

of an external site, but it is a necessary component to an open, useful discussion with employees.

Don't recruit more than you can accommodate. In employee research, live by the rule that no one is sent home. Refusing to seat everyone who shows for the discussion is a negative stroke to the employee and bad public relations for the client company. After all of the trust and rapport that has been established getting employees to the discussion site, it would be unconscionable to then refuse them admission. A respect for the courage that employees muster to attend a discussion is rewarded by positive feelings toward the client company, as well as a willingness to cooperate in future research efforts.

Don't invite client viewers. The absence of viewers also contributes to a comfortable, open atmosphere. Inviting clients to watch as employees spill out heartfelt concerns about their jobs is insensitive at best and a potential disaster for the future of employees' work life at worst. If working in a standard facility, I typically leave the light on in the back room and invite employees to see for themselves that no one is lurking beyond the four walls of the discussion room. Some employees will actually get up from the table and walk into the back room to make absolutely certain that it is empty. Placing viewers in the back room personalizes the research more than intended and potentially jeopardizes the employer-employee relationship.

Participants may know each other. Although an attempt may be made to recruit from various departments within the company, it is not uncommon for employees to know, or at least recognize, each other. This has the potential of diluting employees' trust and stifling the discussion. I was once sitting with a group of corporate (non-management) employees giving my usual introduction before going around the table to learn about each of them. When I had finished with my remarks a woman asked, "Okay, Margaret, I trust you; I don't have a problem with you. But I know some of the people at this table, and how do I know one of them won't go back into the office tomorrow and tell everyone what I say here tonight?" All eyes were on me and the room was dead silent. In response I looked each person in the eye and said, "If there is any one of you who feels the need to repeat anything that might be said in this room tonight, I will please ask you to leave the group now." I went on to reassure the employees that the success of the research hinged on the ability of everyone at the table to keep the discussion confidential. By giving them the option to leave (no one did, by the way) while emphasizing the confidential nature of the discussion, these employees relaxed and provided valuable input for the client company.

Use an exceedingly empathetic moderator. A mod-

erator who can relate to the respondents will help pace the discussion according to employees' needs and allow negative attitudes to be expressed if necessary. The emphasis is on giving employees a wide berth to explore and articulate the issues, even at the risk of ignoring the prescribed discussion guide. Importantly, however, these discussions are not intended to be (and should not be) gripe sessions. While it is critical to the ultimate productivity of the discussion to permit employees to vent, it is equally important to stay focused on the objectives and turn the venting into constructive ideas that move the company forward.

Taping is optional. Whether in a standard focus group facility or a hotel conference room, the moderator comes prepared to audiotape the discussion. But, unlike a usual consumer group, the taping of an employee discussion should be optional. I typically explain to employees why I would like to tape the discussion (i.e., to help me accurately recall and report on the session) and - as throughout my introduction - assure them that no one will be identified via quoted comments. I then let them vote. There are actually two votes: 1) whether the discussion is taped; and 2) if the discussion is taped, whether the tape is strictly for my use (to use for analysis and report writing) or can also be shared with my client contact (a standard procedure in focus group research). Most often, employees will allow me to tape and defer the second vote until after the discussion (that is, after they have heard the questions and their responses).

Reporting and follow-through require special attention. It is not good enough to submit a written report and hope that someone will act on the research findings. Employees demand serious consideration of their suggestions. They want to know the status of the research results and how their input is impacting corporate policies. For this reason, the corporate communications department is an integral player in all employee research efforts. By communicating the outgrowth of the research the company is saying to employees, "We care about what you think, we are listening, and we are prepared to take action." This is just another vehicle through which the client company builds trust among its employees, makes the workforce feel good about their employer and encourages them to participate in future employee research.

Satisfied and stable

Employee research - conducted within large or small organizations - is critical to maintaining high morale, minimal turnover and top-quality production. A company that understands the significance of employee research is not only rewarded by a satisfied and stable workforce but a profitable bottom line and a growing return on investment. | Q