Focus Groups:
A Basic Introduction

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Research Reports in Consumer Behavior

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Focus Groups: A Basic Introduction

**Research Reports in Consumer Behavior**

**Editorial Director: Dr. Brian Blake**

Dr. Brian Blake has a wide variety of academic and professional experiences.

His early career... **academically**, rising from Assistant Professor to tenured Professor at Purdue University, his extensive published research spanned the realms of psychology (especially consumer, social, and cross-cultural), marketing, regional science, sociology, community development, applied economics, and even forestry. **Professionally**, he was a consultant to the U.S. State Department and to the USDA, as well as to private firms.

Later on...on the **professional** front, he co-founded a marketing research firm, Tactical Decisions Group, and turned it into a million dollar organization. After merging it with another firm to form Triad Research Group, it was one of the largest market research organizations based in Ohio. His clients ranged from large national firms (e.g., Merck and Co., Dupont, Land o’ Lakes) to locally based organizations (e.g., MetroHealth System, American Greetings, Progressive Insurance, Liggett Stachower Advertising). On the **academic** side, he moved to Cleveland State University and co-founded the Consumer-Industrial Research Program (CIRP). Some of Cleveland’s best and brightest young marketing research professionals are CIRP graduates.

In the last few years... **academically**, he is actively focusing upon establishing CIRP as a center for cutting edge consumer research. **Professionally**, he is market research consultant for a variety of clients.

**Co Editor (2004): Nick Cambria**

Currently enrolled in the Consumer-Industrial Research Program at Cleveland State University, Nick graduated with honors from Virginia Wesleyan College with degrees in Psychology and Business. While an undergraduate, he received “Outstanding Senior in Psychology” honors and was an officer in Virginia Wesleyan’s Phi Chi chapter. Prior to graduation, Nick completed independent research on memory of commercials and the mitigating factors involved in recognition of commercial brand names, which resulted in his study on Advertisement Recognition Based on Commercial Sequence and Program Content. His interests include, but are not limited to, the role of advertising in decision making and consumer behavior, product positioning, and research techniques to acquire this information.

**Co Editor (2004): Kelly Pavelek**

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Foreword

In this report we depart from the traditional approach of citing references for each statement or idea. To facilitate reading of this report, only a few specialized citations are made. For the remainder of the material, references for further reading are listed at the end of the paper.
Focus Groups: A Basic Introduction

The focus group is one of the key players in qualitative research. It serves as an interface between businesses and customers through the unveiling of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, reactions, and perceptions brought about through group interactions and personal experiences. It is based on a company’s needs for information regarding how customers view a certain product or service.

The focus group consists of a small number of carefully selected individuals with at least one trained Moderator. Focus groups can be performed in a variety of ways, on a wide range of topics, and can be paired with other methods of research (quantitative or qualitative) depending on the objectives of the research and the implications that will be drawn.

Focus Group History

Focus groups originated in the 1920’s when social scientists such as Emory Bogardus and Walter Thurstone used basic forms of group interviews to gain information on survey development and various other issues. Bogardus and Thurstone’s work was expanded on by Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld just before World War II when they began conducting more in-depth group interviews. Merton and Lazarsfeld, as social scientists, contributed greatly to the war effort by using focus groups to develop propaganda materials, training manuals for the troops, and knowledge of racial segregation in the armed forces. Merton and Lazarsfeld’s findings were useful after the war as well, when businesses were reestablishing themselves and interested in how data gathered from focus groups could effectively make products stand out and appeal to potential customers. In the 1980’s, focus groups were rediscovered in marketing and
communication settings. The focus group has also widened its appeal beyond marketing research to include academic/scientific research and research for nonprofits. Whatever the use, the reemergence of the focus group has led to several new approaches in the way that they are conducted, in the materials used, and in the applications and implications drawn.

**Players in the Focus Group**

Key players that make up a focus group include the Client, the Researcher, the Moderator, and the Respondents. The roles of these players are interrelated; through their collaboration an insightful and successful focus group can be produced. The Client is the person(s) for whom the project exists. Usually working in conjunction with the Researcher, he/she decides the purpose of the focus group and the nature of the information that will be obtained. The Researcher manages all aspects of the focus group. By working closely with the Client, the Researcher develops the recruitment criteria, writes the Moderator’s guide, selects the Moderator (or, in fact, may be the Moderator), and chooses the focus group facility. A professional Moderator leads the conversation in the focus group, making sure that all Respondents voice their opinions. The Respondent is a participant in the focus group. Respondents can be recruited in a variety of ways, most popularly by telephone; however, the Client may be able to produce an accurate list from which Respondents can be selected. Care should be taken to avoid “professional” Respondents, individuals that participate in numerous focus groups, often for the money received for their participation.
Ways of Conducting Focus Groups

There is no golden rule on how to conduct a focus group. The key is to recruit the right people in the right place and ask the right questions. A physical stimulus can be an excellent way to get a group to discuss an idea. Stimuli may be visual (storyboards, pictures, websites, etc.), auditory (tapes or video), or product trials and demonstrations (actual product samples). The Researcher and the Client must work together to determine and prepare appropriate stimuli for the focus group.

Research objectives must be clearly defined to determine the goal of the focus group discussion. The Researcher and Client together construct the research objectives to be used in the focus group. From the research objectives, the Moderator’s guide, which is an outline of what to cover in the discussion, can be created. A successful Moderator is able to use the guide and lead the conversation in a manner that is unobtrusive to the group conversation.

Techniques and Methods of Focus Groups

Focus groups can be conducted in many settings including traditional, online, and active/creative.

Traditional Groups

Focus groups are traditionally conducted in a room containing a small number of participants and a trained Moderator. Often present is a one way mirror through which the Client observes the session. Notes are taken on Respondents’ group interaction and also on individual reactions that Respondents have toward the discussion. In these sessions the discussion is based around the Client’s needs and wants regarding a
particular product or service. A physical stimulus, such as a picture or package, may be used to give the participants a feel for what is being discussed.

**Online**

Another way to conduct a focus group is online, which is faster and can be less costly than traditional focus groups. One advantage is that participants from many geographical areas can participate. A disadvantage is that these focus groups are very difficult to moderate. When conducting a discussion online, Moderators cannot control the discussion, nor can they assess nonverbal communication from the group, which is an extremely important aspect of the focus group. Also, the online method does not allow for first hand viewing/touching/smelling of stimulus material; this can limit the data collected. Security is another major concern since there is no way to know who is participating in the discussion. At the present time, the online method is not a viable substitute for a traditional focus group, but it can, however, be useful in particular situations, e.g., it might benefit large corporations that have many branches in various parts of the country or world.

**Active/Creative**

Active/Creative focus groups are conducted in order to get participants thinking about what drives them to purchase products and what attracts (or does not attract) them to certain types of packaging and advertising. Stimuli along with projective techniques are often used to get the Respondents actively involved in the discussion. Projective techniques get information on a topic by asking about an easier or different topic, leading the Respondent to tap into different styles of thinking and extend his/her imagination. Some examples of projective techniques include the following:
- **Brainstorming** asks Respondents to think of words that are associated with a product or brand. It is commonly used in business meetings and is useful in a focus group to identify specific issues.

- **Word sorting** presents groups with a number of words or sentences and asks to sort them into groups according to the attributes of a product, brand, or need that they have. This technique is frequently used to evaluate advertising research and to identify positioning statements for products and brands.

- **Developing a campaign** challenges a group to work together to come up with a marketing campaign. This projective technique might ask the group, for example, how to get people like themselves to shop at ABC Mall.

- **Creating a fantasy** gives the group the power to change anything in regard to the discussion topic. For example, “If you had a magic wand and could change anything about the purchase experience, what would you do?”

**Advantages and Disadvantages of Focus Groups**

The focus group is an extremely useful tool in many fields. They allow for the exploration and discovery of issues and/or groups of individuals that are not easily understood. They also allow for both context and depth aspects to be portrayed, allowing the background behind Respondents’ thoughts and experiences to emerge. Interpretation is also an important aspect of focus groups since it gives insight as to why things are the way they are, and reasons as to how they came to be. More often than not, the
participants will create a process of “sharing and comparing.” During this process they will explore their interests and ideas, delve into issues of context and depth, and finally form their own interpretations of the focus group discussions.

Although focus groups can be very informative and can give insight into the attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of Respondents, the advantages and disadvantages of this research method must be taken into consideration. The following are the pros and cons of focus group research.

**Advantages**

- Moderator guides the group in the appropriate direction
- Ability to observe a large amount of group interaction, experiences, feelings, etc.
- Ability to obtain spontaneous in-depth information
- Use of visual stimuli to engage the group
- More flexible than other forms of research

**Disadvantages**

- Discussion takes place in an unnatural setting
- Output is limited mostly to verbal behavior
- Self-reported data might not mirror actual behavior
- Accuracy of what is said can be questionable; due to social desirability or forgetfulness, verbal reports do not necessarily describe actual behavior
- Much time, effort, and expense put into each Respondent
- A highly trained Moderator is needed
- Cannot make generalizations easily because small groups are used
Focus Groups in Comparison to other Methods of Research

There are several methods of qualitative research that prove useful in the research setting; each of these have their own pros and cons.

Observation

Participant observation is used primarily for roles and organizations. Naturalistic observation allows the Researcher to collect data on a larger range of behaviors, observe a greater variety of interactions, and generate an open discussion of the research topic. In contrast, focus groups are used primarily for attitudes and cognitions and are limited to verbal behavior, consisting only of interaction in discussion groups, and must be created and managed by the Moderator.

All interviews, including focus groups, are based on verbal responses and typically consist of self-reported data. Therefore, in order to collect information on actual behaviors, the behavior must be observed. Observations should be unobtrusive so that the participant forgets they are being watched. Researchers can see first hand the actions of the participant. Unlike in a focus group setting, the Researcher cannot ask the individual to explain the mental processes behind the action. Researchers see what the person is doing but do not know why they are doing it. The decision on whether to use observation or focus groups depends on the research topic, the interests of the Client and Researcher, and the research audience. Usually the best results occur when both methods are employed.
**In-depth interviews**

In-depth interviews may be necessary if there is a geographically dispersed and/or small sample of participants, a sensitive subject matter, possible bias introduced by others, the need to formally control the sequence of questioning, or the need to obtain results quickly. Interviews could also be used to avoid the hazard of “group think,” when the group is attempting to maintain a display of consensus. Individual views are lost in a group think environment.

The decision to use in-depth interviews or focus groups should be based on the subject of the study and the desired nature of data. On some topics, individuals might be more honest with a Researcher in an in-depth interview or they may be more honest with their peers in a focus group setting.

**Focus Group Use**

As previously mentioned, the focus group can be used as a self-contained method for conducting research, or it can be used in conjunction with other methods. The focus group is used in research projects designed to answer “why,” “what,” and “how” questions. These questions can be answered by using the self-contained method, the supplementary method, or the multimethod design.

The self-contained focus group is one in which the results stand on their own. It does not limit the research from becoming part of a larger project, nor does it deny the possibility of ongoing research. However, the results obtained are sufficient enough to be summarized and reported.

The supplementary method allows the focus group to be used before or after a different form of data collection to help identify or expand on topics/issues of interest.
For example, a series of focus groups could lay the foundation for the construction of surveys/questionnaires or experiments by allowing the Researchers to find out what a sample of people may think and feel about certain topics and issues before further research techniques are developed.

The final use for focus groups as a method is as part of the multimethod design, where several different methods of data collection are used as independent components of the entire research “system.”

The type of design chosen will depend on the objectives of the research. When the focus group will be used as the sole source of data, the objectives are centered on the identification and exploration of a topic. When the objectives are coupled with quantification, a multimethod designed is preferred.

**When to use Focus Groups**

Group discussions are useful techniques for researching new products, testing new concepts, or determining “what might happen if…?” They work because of the interaction between the group members and because individuals are not under pressure to give spontaneous answers. Respondents have time to process the points raised by other group members, thereby allowing ideas to be generated; all of this would be unattainable in an individual in-depth interview.

There are many cases when a focus group is in the best interest of the research. A focus group could be used:

- To unravel complex processes (complex purchase decisions)
- To identify customer needs (when many motives are present)
- To identify how a product is used
Focus groups are not always practical. One of the major obstacles is geography. In general a focus group should not be used when:

- Measurement of size and distribution is required (focus groups are qualitative in nature, not quantitative)
- The sample base is widespread and/or small
- There is a need to protect the Respondent from possible bias introduced by others
- The topic area is sensitive
- Respondents require preparation to answer knowledgeably
- Looking for “quick and dirty” research solution (focus groups are better than no research at all)

It is important to keep in mind that not all discussion groups are focus groups. There are several instances where individuals may gather to discuss specific issues but the discussion may not be for qualitative research; the discussion may not be focused, and most importantly the discussion may not be meaningful. Focus groups are not:

- Sales attempts or educational seminars
- Ongoing committees
- Decision-making groups or consensus-building sessions
- Support groups or therapy sessions
Planning a Focus Group

Much thought goes into planning a focus group for a Client. Issues such as budget, time constraints, group size and selection, Moderator involvement, interview content, and managing Client expectations need to be thoughtfully considered before undertaking focus group research.

Budget

It is necessary to budget appropriately for a focus group. Major costs to running a focus group include the salary of the Moderator, travel expenses to the research site, payments to participants, and transcribing tapes. Market Researchers suggest that a Client can expect to pay around $5,000 for each focus group conducted and often more. The largest portion goes to planning and analyzing the discussion. It could cost a Client $15,000-$20,000 to conduct the minimum number of required focus groups on a topic. The rate can fluctuate based on Moderator experience, difficulty in planning, or recruiting needs.

Renting a focus group facility needs to be considered in the budget as well. Although a focus group could technically be conducted in any room, focus group facilities are designed to make sure participants feel comfortable and are conducive to free-flowing discussion. Most rooms are set up conference style with a large table and chairs, however, some facilities have a living room type setting. There is a one-way mirror that allows the Client and Researchers to observe the focus group. This “back room” allows a Client to see first hand the responses of participants. It is important that a Researcher be present in the back room at all times so that the Client can ask questions about the focus group process and the Researcher can manage Client expectations.
Facilities usually serve refreshments, which are included in the budget. The Researcher should be sure to ask the input of the Client on any preference in room setting or refreshments.

For recruitment purposes, it is often necessary to offer an honorarium for a participant’s time and effort. There are two main benefits to paying subjects for participating in a focus group. First, paying people saves money on the project because it ensures attendance, reduces recruiting costs, and avoids the cost of having to reschedule a group. Second, a focus group is more demanding of participants than many traditional forms of research because people must travel to the research site, at the Researcher’s convenience, for a length of time that the Researcher decides.

*Time constraints*

Traditionally focus groups are conducted in approximately 1.5 hours so it is important for the Moderator to keep the conversation moving. There is typically only enough time to discuss a small numbers of questions, so careful planning must be exercised when writing the Moderator’s guide. As stated earlier, the Moderator’s guide acts as a blueprint for the discussion. However, an experienced Moderator will be able to adapt the guide to fit the flow of the group. If deviation occurs, the Researcher in the back room should assure the Client that all topics will be covered in the allotted time.

*Determining the number of focus groups*

The number of focus groups in the project is a primary determinant of how much data the research produces. Usually three to five groups are judged sufficient enough to gather an adequate number of viewpoints about a topic. After that, “saturation” occurs, which is the point where additional data collection will not produce any new
understanding. Saturation depends on several factors, the most important being the variability of participants within and among groups. Within group homogeneity is desired to sort out coherent sets of opinions and experiences. Across groups comparison of several distinct population segments can allow saturation within each segment, leading to in-depth information about a segment.

The degree of the structure of the interview also has an effect on the number of groups needed in a study. Generally, projects that use a less structured Moderator’s guide and a lower level of Moderator involvement will result in the need for more groups.

*Focus group size*

The determining factors of overall group size are the level of individual participation and the amount of detail the Researcher needs from each participant. It is typically thought that an ideal group contains between six and ten Respondents. The purpose of the research and the constraints of the field situation must be taken into account when determining the ideal group size.

Small groups work better when Respondents are interested in the topic and respectful of others’ opinions. Since each person has more time to talk, small groups are more effective when the Researcher is interested in each participant’s reaction to a topic. However, a disadvantage of a small group is that it may be difficult to sustain the discussion. Small groups also run the risk of being less productive, because they are sensitive to individual characteristics.

A large group works well to gather numerous opinions; in a small group the number of opinions is limited. A disadvantage of a larger group is the difficulty a Moderator faces when trying to manage the conversation, especially when the
Respondents are highly involved in the topic. Larger groups have the ability to break into side conversations. This can result in lost data because the conversations are not on tape. Usually, large groups require high Moderator involvement, and it takes a skilled Moderator to manage the discussion without resorting to continuous discipline.

**Participant selection**

There are five principal ways to locate people to participate in a focus group. The first way is to use lists of contacts that the Client provides to the Researcher. This approach can be used when the participants are very difficult to find due to unique specifications, and when the Client wishes to use his or her own customers or prospect lists to find participants. The second way is to use a database that local recruitment facilities have developed over time. These databases contain people that have agreed in advance to participate in a focus group if they qualify. The recruitment organizations maintain these lists and refer to them when participants are needed. A third way is to advertise for participants (e.g. in local newspapers, on the radio, or at high traffic shopping locations). This is not a favorable method and is only employed when the previous methods are unable to locate qualified participants.

A fourth way is to recruit participants by a process of random digit dialing from a delimited geographic area. Still a fifth, and an increasingly popular one, is to use a list of name (with phone numbers) purchased from a company selling such name lists.

**Moderator involvement**

The Moderator’s level of involvement refers to the management of the group dynamics - whether the Moderator controls the discussion or allows free participation. A low-involvement approach is best used in exploratory research. Interested participants
often have the ability to carry on a lively discussion without guidance from the Moderator’s questions. It allows the group to pursue issues that are of interest to them. The disadvantage of the low-involvement approach is that it is harder to compare between groups since the same topics are not discussed in each session.

The high-involvement approach is useful when there is a strong, preexisting agenda for the research. The structured interview assures that certain topics will be discussed. A problem with the high-involvement approach is that an unduly limited set of questions can lead to limited data, concentrating upon the topics of interest to the Researcher, and not what is important to the participants. An experienced professional Moderator knows how to balance high and low involvement to get the most valuable data.

**Moderator guide content**

The Moderator’s guide must pay attention to the time restraints of the focus group. It must also be concise and try not to explore too many topics. It may be best to use a funnel technique with the questions, starting broad and narrowing to a specific point. A natural progression across topics with some overlap between the topics may work well.

The Researcher and the Client decide on the issues that they want the group to discuss. These issues often come from the research objectives. After deciding on five or six distinct topics, the Moderator is aware of where the discussion needs to go and how to guide the participants. As stated before, the Moderator does not need to strictly adhere to the outline, but rather to freely probe deeper when necessary, skip areas that have been covered, and follow new topics as they arise. The Moderator’s expertise allows the
discussion to flow from topic to topic without the participants realizing the conversation is being led.

Client expectations

The interaction between the Researcher and the Client is important. Prior to conducting the groups, a Client must make sure that the research team conducting the research has the experience and expertise necessary. The Client should have input on the design of the research but also realize the Researcher is, at least relatively speaking, an expert on conducting effective discussions in focus groups.

During the focus group, if the Client is observing (e.g. through a one-way mirror), it is important for the Researcher to be in contact with the Client. When at all possible, a member of the research staff should be in the back room to answer questions and further explain the process. The Researcher acts as a liaison between the Client and the Moderator, making sure Client concerns are expressed and addressed. It is wise to go over the goals of the focus group before starting so that the Client is reminded of the objective and desired output. Since the Client may hear unfavorable comments, the Client must be prepared to hear them and to be reminded that such comments can lead to a greater understanding of the topic at hand.

At the conclusion of the series of focus groups, the Client should expect to receive an objective as possible interpretation of the research usually within a week or two. The report should include the Client’s situation and the research objectives of the study. It should also define the methodology, the recruitment process, and the Moderator’s guide. The final report should concisely provide the key findings, implications, and recommendations for the next step and further research ideas. A verbatim transcript of
the participant’s dialogue should also be included to provide a “true feel” of what was expressed in the focus group. The report should lead the Client to some insight and give direction about any other research that might be required to answer their research questions.

**Conducting the Focus Group**

After careful planning, all parties involved will be ready for the focus group. The Researcher, Client, and Moderator should arrive early to finalize any last minute changes with the discussion guide. This also allows everyone involved time to become familiar with the facility. By the time the participants start to arrive at the facility, the Researchers and Client should be in the back room. The Client should not interact with the participants. While the Respondents are waiting for other participants to arrive, there are usually refreshments available.

The Moderator usually starts the discussion with a general introduction explaining the purpose of focus groups (not the purpose of this specific study) and by going over a few housekeeping items. These are just the ground rules for the discussion: one person talks at a time, everyone’s ideas are important, and (if appropriate) all statements are confidential. It is important to stress confidentiality so that the Respondents feel that they can be honest with their opinions. No names are ever attached to the report.

After going over the ground rules, usually the Moderator uses an icebreaker to get everyone talking and to build rapport with the group. Rapport can be built by going around the table and having the participants introduce themselves. Once introductions have been made, the Moderator can dive right into the guide and direct the discussion. After the discussion ends, the Moderator thanks the participants for their time and
Dealing with Respondents

The exciting component of a focus group is that there is a variety of people with different backgrounds and experiences; however, these individual characteristics could potentially cause problems for the Moderator. The following are six common challenges to focus groups and ways to avoid them.

Expert and influentials

Experts can be valuable or a hindrance to a focus group. Participants are often intimidated by those they perceive to have more education, experience, money, or influence; therefore, what experts say and how they say it can inhibit others in the discussion. Since experts expect someone to be in control of the focus group, they might feel anxious if they feel that the group is not under proper control. In fact, experts might misinterpret the Moderator’s techniques as control failure, and they might step in and try to move the conversation along.

There are several techniques to deal with experts and influentials. One strategy is to acknowledge their expertise and ask to hear from another member of the group. For example, “John, it seems like you’ve had a lot of experience with this topic. I’d like to hear what others hear about it. Who else would like to share?” Another way to handle the situation is to underscore the fact that everyone is an expert and that everyone in the group has important insights that need to be shared.
Disruptive participants

A Moderator may encounter a participant that engages in behaviors that are disruptive to others in the discussion. The person could be antagonistic, opinionated, or disrespectful of others. That person might even be unable to follow the rules that guide the focus group. That individual can prevent free-flowing ideas and discussion with repeated interruptions. Disruptive participants are often driven by extreme views and consider their own agenda superior to others.

First, the Moderator should remind the disruptive participant that all views are welcome and the purpose of the focus group is to hear everyone’s opinions. For example, “We’re not asking you to agree with each other but listen to each other’s views.” If the person cannot control him or herself and show respect for other views, then the Moderator must remove the participant from the focus group.

Dominant talkers

Dominant talkers are often spotted in pre-session small talk. They sometimes consider themselves experts but are unaware of how others perceive them. They feel that they have much to contribute to the discussion and do not allow other participants to express their own views.

One way to deal with a dominant talker is to seat the individual next to the Moderator to allow control to be exercised with body language. Nonverbal control techniques include avoiding eye contact with the talker and appearing bored with his/her comments. If this does not work, then a more direct method must be used. For example, the Moderator can shift attention verbally by saying, “Thank you, John. Does anyone else have an opinion to share?” It is very important to be tactful and kind when
employing these methods because harsh and critical comments might distract the rest of the group.

*Quiet and shy Respondents*

Shy Respondents seem to think before they speak, whereas others may think and speak at the same time. The shy volunteer little to the discussion and speak with soft voices. Reluctant participants usually have a lot to share, but require additional effort by the Moderator to encourage them to elaborate their views and to feel that their comments are wanted. Quiet and shy Respondents need the Moderator to draw them out of their shell and to feel comfortable giving their point of view.

It may be helpful to place a shy or quiet Respondent directly across the table from the Moderator to increase eye contact. Eye contact provides encouragement to speak, and such nonverbal cues as smiling and nodding when they do speak allow the participant to feel accepted. The Moderator can also call on the person by name to ask an opinion. “Sue, you haven’t had a chance to say anything on the topic. What do you think?”

*Ramblers and wanderers*

Rambling participants are unduly verbose when talking and often have no point. They are comfortable with talking and waste valuable time by droning on and on. As a rule of thumb, the Moderator should discontinue eye contact with the rambler after 20 or 30 seconds. Look at anything else but the rambler! As soon as the rambler pauses, ask the next question or repeat the current question. For the remainder of the focus group, the Moderator should limit eye contact with the rambling participant. The response to the rambler is similar to the expert, dominant, and disruptive participants: look away, do not take notes, and interrupt if needed.
Inattentive participants

Inattentive participants have a hard time staying on task. Not only are the answers off topic, but the inattentive participant may not understand the question. They may seem preoccupied and unable to connect with the questions. Inattentive participants forget or do not know where they are going with their answers. Stress, medication, or anxiety could cause such a problem.

A method to reconnect to inattentive Respondents is to call the person by name, repeat the question, and then ask if he or she has something to contribute. It might be impractical to do this for every question; however, it is imperative that it is used on key questions. Another strategy a Moderator could use would be a flip chart with one question per page for everyone to see and remember.

Dealing with Awkward Situations

Group conflict

A focus group is intended to be filled with stimulating conversation. Participants have different experiences and have their own feelings about the topic of discussion. There can be a problem when participants forget the ground rules of listening to each other and being respectful of other views. The Moderator can anticipate such differences and address the point while going over the ground rules. For example, “We expect that we might have differing opinions on this topic. You may hear points of view that you do not agree with. If this happens, we ask that you be respectfully listen and share your view.”
Respondents lacking information

Another obstacle that a Moderator could run into is a group lacks information on the topic. Usually this is not a problem because, due to the prescreening process, participants fulfill the basic requirements to be part of the focus group. Also, a participant may seem to lack information when actually they are a quiet/shy Respondent, and must be coaxed out of their shell. If the Respondents truly lack information, it must be noted in the report. It could possibly show the Client an area that needs to be improved (such as informing the public about the product).

Issues to Keep in Mind about a Focus Group

Confidentiality measures

Confidentiality is always a research issue, but it has an even greater impact on focus groups due to the nature of how the data is gathered (audio or videotape). It is important up front to decide who will be hearing or seeing the tapes, and it is often best to restrict distributing the tapes to the research staff. Participants might have reservations about sharing their opinions on sensitive topics if they anticipate that the tapes could be made available.

It is imperative to assure the participants in the beginning of the focus group that their conversation will be taped to assure accuracy when writing the final report. The Moderator, though, must be careful not to draw too much attention to the tape recording; otherwise, the Moderator might create an environment that restricts free flowing conversation. Participants must also be informed that names will not be used in future reports. For example the Moderator might say, “We are tape recording our discussion
today, because we do not want to miss any of your comments. In our later reports, there will be no names attached to comments so you can be assured confidentiality.”

*Observing statements; not actions*

In a focus group, careful consideration must be given to the idea that research is being gathered on what participants *say* they do or feel and not actually what they *do*. The disjuncture between participants’ statements and their actual thoughts or behaviors can be due to any number of factors such as social desirability or forgetfulness. In this aspect, a focus group could produce inaccurate data, because the participants may think/behave one way and report another. This is one reason that several focus groups should be conducted in a study. Holding several groups allows the Researcher to collect a wider variety of data to hopefully present a more accurate report to the Client.

*Cultural differences*

One of the most interesting trends in the research industry in the 1990’s was the expanded use of focus groups by U.S. companies overseas (Greenbaum, 1996). This created a new set of concerns that are unique to overseas focus groups. One of the biggest issues is time. Many companies are accustomed to developing a project and completing it within three weeks, but this is often impossible to do in foreign countries. Time frames are different. If it takes three weeks to set up groups in the U.S., it may be almost double that timeline in most of Europe and even more in Asia.

The structure of the focus group is also different. For most foreign groups, a focus group should contain four to six people. The length of an overseas focus group could also be up to four hours. Further, it is important to be very specific when arranging an international focus group. Foreign Moderators tend to be much less structured and
authoritative, in comparison to their American counterparts, which can result in a greater deal of down time during the sessions. They feel that it is necessary to make group members feel comfortable with each other and build the rapport needed to get the desired information. When taking into account these special challenges in regards to overseas focus groups, proper planning and supervision can produce informative data.

The cost of conducting a focus group overseas will vary considerably by region and country, and it would not be unusual to pay almost twice as much per group for sessions conducted in Europe and almost three times as much in Asia. Focus groups in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and most of Europe (including Great Britain) usually cost the most.

*Asian focus groups*

A focus group in Asia causes some of the most unique challenges contributing to the higher cost. Compared to Europe and the United States, Asian people are less open and have been conditioned to keep their opinions to themselves. This is so they do not unintentionally insult others and embarrass themselves. Therefore, a focus group Moderator in Asia has to be very skilled at encouraging participation and making participants feel comfortable. To achieve this level of rapport, the warm-up period is often longer in Asia. The Moderator also needs to be aware of the different ethnic and religious backgrounds of participants, and having multi-language skills is a definite plus.

As stated earlier, always allow more time and budget for recruitment, transcription and analysis than in other countries. The multitude of different accents and the use of different local slang can make transcription a specialized and longer job than in locations where focus group participants come from similar backgrounds.
Breaking up the focus groups according to gender and age, as well as many other criteria, should also be considered carefully (Davies, 2002). In Eastern countries it is considered very rude for a younger person to suggest that they have a difference of opinion with an older person or a person of higher status. The same occurs with females in a group of males. Especially in places like Thailand and India, it is best to keep genders segregated, and in all Eastern countries, break up groups by age and social class as much as possible.

**Final Report to the Client**

One end result of a focus group is the final report given to the Client, often within a week or two after the last discussion is conducted. Knodel (1993) describes how to analyze the data so as to systematically summarize what each group said in response to each question. Interpreting what is most important to the participants can be measured in three ways: how many groups mentioned the topic, how many people within each group mentioned the topic, and how much enthusiasm the topic generated among participants. Combining these three indicators is known as “group-to-group validation.” This means that when a specific topic comes up, it generates a consistent excitement among a consistent proportion of people across all groups.

When writing the actual report for the Client, there should be a blend between direct quotations from groups and a summarization of the discussions. Too many quotations can give a jumbled feeling. On the other hand, too much summarization can make the report dry and it loses the direct contact that verbatim comments provide. The goal is to reduce the remoteness between the Client and the sources of data. A good way to connect the Client and the original participants is to concentrate on topics that were the
most important while providing an explanation of the most significant aspects of topics. The report should also recommend future research ideas and what next steps the Client might take.

**Future of Focus Groups**

The future of focus groups looks quite good. In the U.S., people are learning more about how to conduct the most effective focus groups to provide qualitative analysis for Clients. Clients, in turn, are familiar with and find value in the focus group process. Insight is produced and preserved in its purest form for the Client to see and comprehend easily. Clients recognize that with a professional Moderator and a well-recruited sample, a focus group delivers breakthrough insights that go beyond some of the limitations of quantitative research.

Some growing trends in focus group methodology include the overseas focus group and the on-line focus group. When proper planning and budget are allotted, they can provide insight on the global market. Another area of growing interest is the utilization of the Internet to help facilitate a focus group. As discussed earlier, overseas focus groups and on-line focus groups should be used with extreme caution. As with any research method, the pitfalls of each should be discussed with the Client.

**Conclusion**

In summation, a focus group is an insightful way to gather qualitative research for a Client. It provides the Client with a window into the mind of their elusive and otherwise faceless consumers. When used in the proper context, and with proper planning, recruitment and a trained Moderator, a focus group can answer Client questions and act as the starting point of further quantitative research. A focus group is one tool in
the toolbox of marketing research. It is not meant to be an all-purpose approach, but used when it is appropriate to the objectives of the research study.
References


Greenbaum, Tom. (February 2000). Focus groups vs. online. *Advertising Age*.


