

Focus Groups and the American Dream

By Jerry W. Thomas

Even though the focus group has become a widely used research technique in the past two decades, a lot of folks still don't know what goes on behind closed doors.

Let's take a focus group junket and have a look-see. Typically, the focus group is conducted in a room that seats up to 10 participants and the moderator. One wall of the room is covered with what appears to be a giant mirror, but it's really a one-way mirror (although some call it a two-way mirror) that permits clients in the adjoining room to observe the focus group—while remaining invisible to the group attendees. The participants are recruited randomly (a rare occurrence), or from clubs, organizations and church groups, or from the focus group facility's database of professional focus group respondents. Each participant is typically paid \$40 to \$60 for participating in the focus group.

A typical session begins with an introduction by the focus group moderator, who explains the purpose of the discussion, sets important discussion rules (e.g., talk one at a time), and reveals the presence of hidden observers and tape-recording equipment (no Watergates, please). Then the topic of interest (say,

American-made cars) is introduced and the moderator, if experienced and wise, shuts up. The room is dead silent. The moderator sits patiently. Tension builds...and builds...and the room ignites with conversation about cars. The respondents talk about the decline in quality of American-made cars and the rise in quality of foreign cars, about the lack of service at dealerships, about the difficulty of working on their own cars, about the dangers of traveling by automobile, and about their fears for the safety of their children. The moderator subtly guides the discussion by hand motions, nods of the head, facial expressions, and raised eyebrows. The moderator controls the flow of discussion by probing, summarizing, paraphrasing by "reflecting" back what group members have expressed, and by direct questioning if necessary.

How It Feels

Most importantly, the moderator assumes a relaxed, nonthreatening, and nonauthoritative stance and style. The single most important thing about a focus group is how it feels (to the respondents and to the moderator). The participants must feel comfortable, secure, and free to express their opinions without fear of disapproval or embarrassment. The moderator must feel relaxed and confident (or at least be

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competent at hiding her/his anxiety and insecurity). The proper emotional chemistry is essential to the success of a focus group. If everyone is uptight and the moderator is nervous, the group's expressiveness and honesty will be greatly compromised.

Meanwhile, in the observation room behind the one-way mirror, the clients from American Car, Inc. are grimacing and getting red in the face. The truth is not easy to accept. The observers don't believe the respondents know what they are talking about. They ask, "Where in the world did these people come from? Who are they? How in the world could the group participants think that the quality of American cars is inferior to foreign-made cars?" Then the observers figure it out. The moderator is biasing the respondents and causing them to say bad things about American cars. The moderator is letting negative respondents dominate the session. The moderator is not defending the American car industry.

But the moderator is smart. He has planted an associate in the observation room, who now comes to his defense and explains to the observers that they are being defensive. The associate further explains that defensiveness inhibits one's ability to solve problems. He explains that it doesn't matter whether the respondents like American cars or not. The only thing's that important, he notes, is that the observers leave that night with an understanding of why the participants do not like American cars. If they know the why, he explains, then they have the knowledge to influence the future. So, the observers relax a bit and turn their attention back to the discussion on the other side of the mirror.

In the focus group room, the moderator puts the group into a role-playing mode. "Let's pretend," he says, "that we are the board of directors of an American car company. What can we do to beat foreign competitors?" At first, the suggestions are sparse, and then someone refers back to the

problems mentioned earlier in the groups, and this sparks several ideas from others and soon the "board of directors" have come up with three radical new product concepts:

■ *The Maintenance-Free Car*

Dealerships provide bad service and cars are too complicated for consumers to repair themselves, the participants note. Therefore, why not design and manufacture a car that requires virtually no service, and make the car simple enough that its owner can make most of the repairs himself.

■ *The Teenager Safety Car*

Teenagers tend to kill themselves in cars and this worries parents, they note. The solution: design a sporty car that appeals to teenagers but incorporates safety features to appeal to parents. Mom and Dad would be willing to pay extra for their children's safety.

■ *The Long-Lasting Car*

Planned obsolescence and frequent design changes do not make any sense in a world of scarce resources and rising car prices, respondents point out. Thus, design and introduce a 5-year or a 10-year model. Each year, instead of restyling and retooling, simply lower the car's price a few hundred dollars.

Strategic Positioning

Then the group discussion moves to the issue of strategic positioning. "What will make our cars unique and intrinsically valuable vis-à-vis foreign competition?" the moderator asks. A consensus develops quickly. American cars must be better designed, better built, and longer-lasting than foreign cars. American cars must, in essence, be of higher quality than foreign cars. So, now we have a strategic positioning and a long-term objective (building better cars) to guide research and development, product design, manufacturing, quality control, and marketing communication efforts of American Car, Inc. An hour and

45 minutes have elapsed and the discussants are growing weary and the observers are getting restless. The moderator ends the session, thanking the consumers for their help. Most of the participants mention how much they enjoyed the discussion. They leave in a chatter and 30 minutes later, out in the parking lot, several of the respondents are seen standing in a circle under a street light, continuing the discussion.

Personal Presentation

The clients come out of the observation room, chagrined and convinced that respondents were not representative, that a dominate personality in the group led the discussion and encouraged the others to say bad things about American cars. The moderator tactfully assures the clients from American Car, Inc. that no one dominated the discussion, and that what they heard was probably representative. He encourages his clients to keep an open mind. Six focus groups later, the data collection phase is complete. The moderator listens to the

groups again on tape and begins the analysis. His final report documents existing attitudes, explains how these attitudes developed and how they might be changed, suggests new product possibilities, and recommends a strategic positioning for American Car, Inc.

Because a written report seldom conveys the subtleties and nuances of consumer attitudes and because clients don't read research reports anyway, the final step is a personal presentation of the results in Detroit. The presentation gets off to a slow start, and the audience is very negative—until the Chairman of the Board (who did not attend the groups) praises the honesty of the message and notes the importance of facing up to reality. The management of American Car, Inc. applauds wildly during the balance of the presentation, repents for their past failures and sins, and promises to do better in the future for the sake of consumers, U.S. industrial leadership, and the American dream. And everyone lives happily ever after.

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About the Author

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