

To Focus Group, or Not to Focus Group?

By Bruce Crandall

In an age of information databases, network connectivity, interactive media, and the Internet, quick access to consumer information has become the norm. Though neither high tech nor electronic, focus-group research has also become a popular tool for getting consumers' opinions quickly, because it allows observers to personally view and digest respondents' opinions within just a couple of hours.



Nevertheless, like other data collection methods, focus groups are best suited to certain research applications. They are only one means to an end, not the only means. And yet many believe that a spoonful of focus-group research alone can provide all the answers needed.

Recently, a client (let's call her "Sally") related that her boss wanted to repeat a series of focus groups that would compare changes in customer attitudes to those from earlier groups. Because a moderator

had recommended doing another "wave" of qualitative research, Sally's boss became convinced that focus groups were the correct methodology.

However, since focus groups had been conducted the year before on the same topic and with the same type of respondents (by the same moderator, incidentally), Sally pointed out that they'd already gleaned enough qualitative information on the subject and should probably use their marketing budget to start a telephone tracking study. She reasoned further with her boss that while results might take slightly longer to obtain, conducting a survey would probably cost

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them less money, could provide a statistically valid sample of respondents, and could be repeated (i.e., the results could be tracked over time, at regular intervals). Unfortunately, her boss was not dissuaded.

Nine focus groups and three cities later, the research yielded nearly identical results as the year before (the moderator simply recycled the year-old report)—and with a total sample size of less than 90 respondents.

While focus-group research is an excellent methodology for many kinds of consumer research, there are times to use it and times to not.

Conduct focus groups when...

- **Relatively little is known about a given subject (product, service, etc.).** Conduct focus groups when you know little about how your product or service is perceived by consumers, when you want to understand why consumers behave in certain ways, when you don't know what issues are most important to your customers, or when you want to define topics or develop questions for subsequent survey research.

- **You need to explore multiple topics.** While survey research has limitations

on the number and type of questions asked, focus-group queries are open-ended and interactive, so that an almost unlimited number of variables can be explored. Because of its open and exploratory nature, focus-group research can also stimulate discussion about ideas not anticipated, or topics not included in the discussion guide used by the moderator. In short, conduct focus groups when the number of issues (variables) is large.

- **The dynamics of a group would best elicit respondent opinion.** The old adage “strength in numbers” applies equally well to focus groups. When allowed to freely explore ideas, a group of respondents build on each other's comments. Through such interaction, groups often develop creative solutions and reach consensus on issues. Additionally, the group dynamics allow observers to analyze the “unspoken” language; that is, how the majority of participants react to ideas or concepts through their gestures, facial expressions, or their silence.

- **You want to personally view consumer reactions to the subject (product, service, etc.).** The focus-group setting allows observers to

witness the group discussion(s) through a two-way mirror or through television monitors in an adjacent room. There's nothing quite as powerful as actually seeing and hearing what someone else truly thinks about your product or service. Additionally, groups are often videotaped, allowing observers and others to review them later on.

■ **You want to see results quickly.**

Conduct focus groups when you want to see results instantly, before waiting on a written report. A typical group, consisting of eight to ten respondents and a moderator, lasts approximately one and one-half to two hours, yielding a wealth of consumer opinions and ideas in a short amount of time.

■ **You want to develop a survey for subsequent quantitative research.**

Because the focus-group discussion helps define the most important issues, and because respondents define those issues in their own vernacular, the actual dialogue becomes a useful tool in questionnaire design. Besides revealing topics that should be probed further, the verbatim dialogue also helps one to create survey

questions using specific insider jargon. Incorporating such jargon into a survey helps respondents understand more clearly what is being asked, lessening any potential confusion.

Do not conduct focus groups when...

■ **Major marketing or budgetary decisions hinge on the results.**

While focus groups can provide a wealth of consumer ideas, tendencies, and perceptions, qualitative data lacks statistical precision. The sample sizes are usually too small to yield much more than a series of hypotheses on the subject matter. If, for example, you only want to explore your customers' perceptions toward your company, product, or service, or if you wish only to know what, if any, minor product/service modifications are needed, focus groups may be all that's required. If, on the other hand, thousands—even millions—of dollars depend on research data (e.g., new product launch, complete overhaul of an existing product line, etc.), statistical validity is paramount. In short, use quantitative research when you have a lot at stake.

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■ **You have previously conducted groups on the same subject.** As in the example cited earlier, duplicating prior focus group research can be as wasteful as using the wrong research methodology. Before you consider doing a focus group project, a good rule of thumb is to first find out what, if any, qualitative research has already been conducted by your company. If you indeed come across similar focus group research conducted within the past year or two, you might consider expanding on that information by using a quantitative methodology (e.g., Internet, telephone, mail, on-site intercept, etc.). Use survey research to probe one or two topics from the focus groups that need further analysis; use it to track results over time (quantitative research is a superior tool for tracking and comparing results); use it to test a new

product, concept, or advertising; or use it to measure how well your company stacks up (satisfaction) against competitors.

■ **A moderator or research company suggests that qualitative research is all you need.** While moderators and research companies are in the business of supporting your company, be wary of researchers who guarantee certain results, who appear to stretch the parameters of how a pair of focus groups might benefit your company, or who routinely turn to qualitative methods to provide research solutions, regardless of the business situation or research need.

Although focus-group research plays an invaluable role in many projects, knowing when (and when not) to use focus groups can save you time and money.

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Decision Analyst is a global marketing research and analytical consulting firm. The company specializes in advertising testing, strategy research, new products research, and advanced modeling for marketing-decision optimization.



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