



qualitative reflections

Focus Groups: A Four-Course Meal

The four stages of conducting focus groups can be compared to eating a four-course meal.

By Naomi R. Henderson

No matter how long a focus group is, it can be divided into four distinct areas: introduction, rapport and reconnaissance, in-depth investigation, and closure, with the lion's share of time being spent on in-depth investigation. That is where respondents address the items of importance to the client.

I noticed the similarity between these four stages of a focus group and the four phases of an elegant dinner: appetizers, soup/salad, main course, and dessert. You can count on me to stretch this metaphor to the limit!

Once, a client asked me to "cut to the chase and skip all that palaver at the beginning of a group and get right to the questions." It took all my best moderator skills to convince him that it was very hard to serve the steak as soon as he sat down and that it would take a while to cook it to his liking. He understood and we began with metaphorical appetizers.

When I go out to dinner, I like to take the time to read all the items on the menu and construct a dinner that is different from what I cook at home and that still honors my desire for high flavor and low calories. I usually find a dessert that is fruit based and convince myself that it will be lower in calories. Along the way, I like to take the time to savor my meal and enjoy the different tastes and textures.

When dining out, the right appetizer sets the tone for a meal. When you make the right selection, the rest of the meal is enhanced with those initial bursts of flavor. In a focus group, the appetizer covers the initial welcome by the moderator and the introductions from respondents. This is a time for the moderator to assess the tone of the group to determine quiet, shy types vs. those who talk. It is also where the ground rules for participation are given.

After leading more than 5,000 focus groups and watching hundreds led by other moderators, I've noted that the way ground rules are handled seems to break down into seven types. The names given here are illustrative of the styles of the moderators I have seen and do not refer to any "real" people.

Chatty Cathy/Carl. A very breezy style of giving the rules, often with a preamble that says, "I have a few housekeeping tasks to cover before we start the fun." This style relies on the warmth of the moderator to impart the key information to keep group discussion on target.

Serious Sue/Sam. This sounds more like the reading of the

charges in a courtroom or instructions to the jury. The tone is more of "You will ____" or "I won't tolerate ____." This approach can be off-putting to respondents.

Warm Wanda/Willy. This style of ground rules is meant to put respondents at ease and welcome them to the session, as well as honor them as individuals. The tone is more inviting with phrases like, "It would work best to ____" or "I would appreciate if you would refrain from ____."

Slam Dunk Sally/Stan. This style incorporates a crisp but not brusque attitude with a "let's get down to business" tone. It's usually preceded by the phrase, "Before we get to the topic at hand, there are a few things you need to know."

Willy-Nilly Betty/Billy. "Um...ah" is how this moderator begins the group: "I need you to um, do ____ and then ah....not do ____." This moderator sometimes doesn't get all the rules delivered because the attention is on himself/herself rather than telling participants what the boundaries are.

Careful Cassy/Charley. This style is often a long laundry list of every conceivable situation that might come up. One might

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hear phrases such as "I may have to cut you off and move on." Or, "If the power goes off, please remain calm." This much pre-anticipation can sometimes lead to over-orchestrating a session and can drain out the spontaneity of a group.

Fast Freida/Freddy. This type of moderator doesn't give ground rules or guidelines or disclosures at all! They may or may not introduce themselves or ask participants to provide self introductions. They start the group with the first question and sometimes they can be pushy, surly, or simply adversarial. It sounds like this: "Okay, my time is valuable. Just tell me why you buy Brand X towels."

The role of ground rules is to set some boundaries for the group discussion and to honor the time participants are spend-

ing in the research environment. Those boundaries need to be like the ropes on a boxing ring; flexible enough to allow a boxer who has been hit to bounce back into the fray without falling over.

Basic ground rules/guidelines are needed to cover these requirements:

- Speak up
- Speak one at a time
- Honor the opinions of others

- Excuse self [one at a time] for the restroom
- Have the courage of one's convictions
- Allow for equal air time for each participant
- Refrain from side conversations

In the past, there was frequently a no smoking rule, but government legislation has removed a need to make that statement in American focus groups.

Some moderators also add ground rules about eating/drinking during the groups, keeping the data discussed confidential, or

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other elements that are project-specific. The trick is to deliver exactly what respondents need to know to help achieve the research objective without including every possibility that may arise.

The best advice I ever received about delivering ground rules/guidelines is to make them sound fresh and new each time and to keep them short. In the years I've been moderating, I've found it helpful to also pass out the ground rules as a handout so that when one is violated, I can simply say: "Remember guideline number ____?" Respondents can then check their list and comply quickly.

Some moderators feel they shouldn't offer any guidelines or ground rules at the outset. Rather, they insert them when the need arises in a group. For example, if all respondents are talking at once they might ask them to speak one at a time. I feel that breaks the flow of the discussion and, since it is inserted at that specific point in the discussion, respondents may hear it as a one-time admonition, instead of a blanket ground rule, and continue the behavior.

It also is difficult to make corrections in group behavior under the pressure of managing the conversation, staying on track, and including everyone without coming across more brusque than intended. This turns the moderator into a finger-pointing teacher rather than a researcher charged with collecting data using UPR (unconditional positive regard).

At a restaurant, soup or salad comes after the appetizer. In a focus group, this is the rapport and reconnaissance (R/R) stage. Soup or salad is not the whole dinner, yet it is a complete section and, when cooked and served well, it sets up the palate for the main course.

R/R is a complete section of the guide with the two distinct purposes of giving respondents a chance to answer easy, baseline questions (e.g., product/service usage) and allowing the moderator to gauge who talks a lot or a little. In this section, it's important to ask short questions and to probe lightly to get more than top-of-mind answers and "train" respondents to go deeper to provide information.

Moving on to the main course at a restaurant often requires a change of silver and a fresh plate for the one dining. The primary entrée is attractively served with a colorful array of vegetables and an eye to providing color and texture differences. In the focus group, the section called "in-depth investigation" is the main course. This section, taking nearly 65% of the time allotted to the group is where the "meat" of the discussion takes place and where consumers help illuminate key areas of interest for the client. Interventions and demonstrations act like "specialized silverware" to "cut up" the main course and make it easier to digest. Projective techniques act like garnishes to a dinner plate and not only please the palate but satisfy the eye as well. Just as the plate for the main course must be kept hot to keep the food at its most desirable, so must the moderator keep the conversation "hot" and on topic.

The finale to a good restaurant meal is a selection of desserts, with chocolate almost always being on the menu. The ending of a focus group should be soft and sweet, like chocolate mousse, leaving a good taste in the mouths of the respondents and the clients. A good moderator makes sure that key issues have been explored in detail and that the research objectives were met. As well, respondents are thoughtfully acknowledged for giving their time and opinions and are, of course, paid a stipend for attending.

If the service is good in a restaurant, a 20% tip is considered an appropriate reward for those that waited on the table. In focus groups, the "tip" that moderators desire is to be told something such as: "Good job! We got the data we needed." And it is always nice to hear, "Thank you."

RIVA believes the best focus groups have just the right marriage of good ground rules, effective rapport, and strategic probing to get past "top of mind" and help clients see the world from the consumer viewpoint. When the waiter comes with the final bill for the dinner, it's nice to feel that the one dining got fair value and enjoyment for money spent. Clients want to feel that way too, and it's very satisfying for a moderator to hear a client say, "We got our money's worth on this qualitative research project." ●

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