



OUT-OF-FOCUS

By Dennis W. Rook

The popular and pervasive research procedures we today call “focus groups” emerged in the early 1940s from what pioneer Alfred Goldman describes as a “rich stew of socio-psychological and psychotherapeutic traditions and techniques.” By 1950, focus group research had diffused rapidly to ad agencies and marketing research organizations in New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia. Over the next half century, focus groups continued to flourish, and they now support an industry that involves more than 1,000 permanent research facilities; extensive cadres of moderators, recruiters, technicians, caterers, and travel agents; and many thousands of willing focus

such popularity attracts detractors. The perspective offered here raises concerns about the growing gap between focus group theory and practice and the consequences this has on a study's effectiveness, specifically its external validity and reliability.

Theory and Practice Disconnect

I have participated in more than 250 focus group projects, some of which explored important and interesting issues in depth and yielded useful insights and strategic direction for the clients. More commonly, the focus groups were basically cookie-cutter affairs that begin with respondent introductions and then jump quickly into verbal and written evaluations of various marketing stimuli. This tends to be pretty dull stuff, and relatively superficial. Yet focus groups seem to “work” and provide managers with just enough information to make decisions and identify “next steps.” On the other hand, I don't think they work very well, particularly in light of their costs and research yield. And they rarely work in the ways our focus group pioneers intended.

Actually, the pioneers were hardly single-minded, and marked differences of opinion and approach reflect distinctive intellectual priorities between the two fields from which focus groups emerged: social psychology and psychotherapy. Early social psychological uses of focus groups concentrated on understanding the effects of media communications such as radio broadcasts, government fundraising appeals, and World War II military training films. Psychotherapeutic uses of group research were historically motivated by the different priorities of clinical psychological diagnosis and treatment. Interactive group discussions were used to surface repressed thoughts

Groups

It's time for focus groups to return to their original goal— understanding customers.

group participants. The attendant research expenditures may exceed a half-billion dollars annually in the United States alone.

Beyond their economic success, focus groups have a strong presence in managers' minds. Some virtually equate qualitative research with focus groups, demonstrating no awareness of alternative qualitative techniques. Inevitably,

Executive Summary

Focus groups are now in their seventh decade as a research tool, but this growth has been accompanied by a slow but steady separation of practice from underlying theory. As a result, focus groups have devolved into little more than superficial, hurried, and expensive group surveys. This article offers specific suggestions for making focus groups more consistent with their historical objectives of achieving in-depth customer understanding by observing the dialogue and interactions among group participants.

and feelings. Group therapy sessions also offered time and cost savings over individual sessions with a therapist. Marketing researchers immediately grasped the fast and cheap advantages of group research. They also valued the ability of group discussions to elicit extensive, wide-ranging, and spontaneous expressions that approximate what clinical group therapy sessions yield. Logically, if clinical patients could reveal feelings about their mothers in a group, consumers should be able to express their sentiments about Betty Crocker or Mrs. Butterworth.

The social psychological school of thought focuses on within-group research that is more evaluative in its purpose, direct in its questions, and lower in respondent interaction. Focus groups conducted this way often gather consumers' reactions to product concepts, marketing communications, and competitive brands. Researchers influenced by the psychotherapeutic school tend to favor focus groups that are more developmental in orientation and design. Such groups place less emphasis on evaluative tasks, tend to use more non-directive questions, and encourage extensive interaction among group members.

The intellectual tension between the two schools is often below the surface and emerges in vague notions about what constitutes "scientific" research and what's just messing around. Actually, few researchers today are even aware of these historically competitive ideologies, having learned focus group practice through the oral traditions and research manuals of ad agencies, marketing research, and client organizations. The resulting focus group hybrids reflect varying degrees of psychotherapeutic and social psychological influence. A main thread connecting the diverse family of focus group buyers and sellers is the belief that live encounters with groups of real consumers will yield significant, incremental, and actionable in-depth understanding of marketing questions.

Historically, the "in-depth" promise of focus groups positioned them against experimental and survey research studies, which are straw men with respect to depth. Today, other qualitative research techniques compete strongly with focus groups on the attribute of depth: individual depth interviews, projective methods, ethnographies, and semiotic analyses. So what makes focus groups distinctive? It seems to me that their signature quality is the ability to influence and observe the group dynamics that affect consumers' perceptions, information processing, and decision making. When the moderator presents questions and other stimuli to an assembled group, this provides direct and immediate observations of how and why consumers accept or reject the reactions and ideas of others in the group. It also helps us understand how individual views change (or don't) over the course of a group discussion. Depending on the demographic diversity of a particular group, the different perspectives expressed may point to market seg-


mentation issues—for example, when men and women evaluate new product concepts differently.

An explicit emphasis on group composition and dynamics has grown fuzzy and faded over time. Today, few researchers design consumer samples that go beyond fairly blunt cuts on basic demographics and only satisfy a few product usage criteria. Also, discussion guides rarely include group activities other than talking. The current preferred format tends toward a brisk, moderator-dominated Q&A session, with little group interaction and a lot of voting. Instead of true groups in a sociological sense, today's focus groups are populated with "groupings" of individual hirelings who share some common demographics and product usage patterns, as Robert K. Merton pointed out in a 1987 *Public Opinion Quarterly* article. In the worst cases, focus groups have little singular focus, elicit superficial consensual data, and rarely provide in-depth information.

This unfortunately common type of "focus group" is more a highly flawed group survey than a qualitative study. The good news is that things don't have to be this way, and some of the most attractive focus group improvement possibilities are relatively cost-neutral.

Getting Back on Track

Too often, managers become comfortable with a particular focus group format and apply it generically and automatically to all circumstances. The fact is, marketing questions are many and varied, and getting answers to different types of questions requires different approaches. In other words, research design per se is a critical activity, and focus groups' prototypic prob-



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lems often result from upfront design failings. This problem is particularly serious with focus groups because, as Sidney J. Levy notes in *Brands, Consumers, Symbols, and Research: Sidney J. Levy on Marketing* (Sage Publications, 1999), “so many eggs are being put in one basket.” A single “bad” interview among 100 gathered is not a big deal generally, but a failed focus group is more costly and disappointing. The following recommendations address issues relating to a focus group’s length, workload, type of questioning, and sampling.

Take more time. Managers today seem to prefer relatively short groups that go about their business like a corporate committee, efficiently evaluating new product concepts, advertising copy, and other marketing stimuli. As a consequence, such groups rarely generate incremental depth and interpersonal interaction. I was recently discussing this apparent trend toward shorter groups with Miriam Catterall, an Irish qualitative market researcher, who started laughing and told me, “Oh, we call those (short groups) *les focus groups américains*.”

Europeans tend to approach focus groups like they take lunch, leisurely and unhurried. Focus groups rarely last less than two hours, and often take up to four or more. As I write this, I can hear the groans of American readers, but consider the possibilities that longer group sessions present. As an alternative to the typical scheduling of two evening groups at 6 and 8 p.m., managers might consider working with only one group for the entire time. This innovation would be basically cost-neutral, although respondent incentives would likely increase, recruitment costs would be halved, and facility and moderator fees largely unchanged. In addition, eliminating the mundane logistics of a second group saves time and energy.

More important, a long group helps managers get more things done in a single session, and it also allows the respondents to get more involved, participate in more time-consuming tasks, and interact more extensively. The net effect can actually be time-saving. As an example, when I was director of qualitative research at Conway/Milliken & Associates in Chicago, we designed a two-phased research protocol that first explored respondents’ reactions to new product concepts in a morning group session. Over lunch, the research team incorporated this learning into revised concepts, which became the focus of the afternoon’s group discussion and activities. In one day, we accomplished what had previously required a minimum of three weeks.

Obviously, many research issues don’t require half- or all-day groups; some group advertising copy testing could probably be accomplished in 30 minutes! On the other hand, many of the most important market and consumer research issues that managers confront might need more time for extensive exploration and discovery. Spending more time with respondents yields more data points per individual, which not only increases the depth of a study’s findings, but provides more evidence of their reliability and validity.

Ask fewer questions. The group length issue is not an isolated one. It is intertwined with a second key factor: the number of questions in the discussion guide. One of the biggest problems with focus groups today, in my opinion, is the tendency to prepare discussion guides that pose far too many

Exhibit 1 Response time per question per respondent

Number of Questions	Focus Group Length		
	75 min.	90 min.	120 min.
15	:30	:36	:48
20	:23	:27	:36
25	:18	:22	:29
30	:15	:18	:24
35	:13	:15	:21
40	:11	:14	:18

Note: The analysis assumes a group comprising 10 respondents.

questions, which virtually precludes any depth of coverage or any significant group interactions. Several factors contribute to this. Managers want to get their money’s worth, so it makes some sense to ask every question they can think of. Also, managers of related brands in a company (e.g., Michelob and Michelob Light) may jointly fund a focus group project. This generates research cost savings, and it may be quite logical, but the common result is to double the questions. The “focus group” turns into a group interrogation or survey, but without the controls and statistical power of scientific surveys. On a cost-per-respondent basis, these faux focus groups are the most expensive variety of survey research.

In order to think more explicitly and logically about the number of questions to ask, managers should examine the interactions between the length of the focus group and the size of the discussion guide. As illustrated in Exhibit 1, more questions and less time combine to create a research environment that elicits responses that are mere survey-like sound bites. Also, moderators who have to plow through 40 questions in 90 minutes are likely to feel rushed, unable to probe interesting responses, and inclined to be abrupt with long-winded or slow individuals. As we move up and to the right in the table, these pressures and constraints diminish. With fewer questions and more time, respondents can elaborate their answers, moderators can probe more effectively, and the pace becomes more relaxed, natural, and humanistic. This design helps make the choices more explicit and the trade-offs more transparent, particularly with respect to their impact on respondents’ air time. If a manager really wants to field a study with 40 questions, a focus group may not be the ideal venue for this purpose. By contrast, if in-depth exploration of a smaller number of questions is the goal, a focus group should fit the bill effectively.

A final problem with too many questions is the discussion guide rigidity this induces. Getting through the guide becomes the priority; deviations from it are difficult and discouraged.

As Levy points out, the “surveyor’s urge” takes over, and the moderator goes about briskly polling the group members and even counting the votes. When the moderator is rushed, respondents pick up on this and try to help out by keeping their responses brief, not asking questions, and nodding in agreement to others’ comments. This generally has a chilling effect on the quality of respondents’ expressions and the likelihood of extensive, meaningful interactions with group members.

Enough talk. Focus groups tend to rely heavily on self-reported verbal data. Also, the questions posed to respondents are typically quite direct and undisguised and often involve mental evaluations of various marketing stimuli. This approach is logical, at a basic level, and managers seem generally satisfied with the results. On the other hand, an unrelenting, strictly Q & A research format tends to engage only part of respondents’ mental processes, generally skates across the surface of things, and often contributes to a fairly dull group environment. As an extreme example of this, several years ago I observed a focus group about Yellow Pages phone directories. In approximately 75 minutes, the moderator made her way through more than 40 questions, all of which elicited verbal responses to direct questions about Yellow Pages usage patterns, directory characteristics, and competitive brand offerings. On more than a few occasions, respondents simply couldn’t satisfactorily explain their positions. Here is a sample of the dialogue:

Respondent: “I think it’s harder to find things in the ABC directory than in the XYZ directory.”

Moderator: “Because...?”

Respondent: “I don’t know; it’s just harder.”

Moderator: “Can you tell me why it’s harder?”

Respondent: “No, it’s just not as good.”

The moderator gave up trying and went on to the next question, without learning why one directory was viewed as more difficult to navigate. A simple solution to the problem would have come from asking the respondent to physically search the competitive directories for a particular listing or category. This exercise would have provided the respondent with an opportunity to demonstrate rather than verbalize his point of view. Even when focus groups include tangible, physical stimuli to elicit responses, this doesn’t guarantee the quality or depth of the responses or any incremental learning from group members’ interactions. For example, advertising copy and concept testing research often materialize as little more than reading comprehension tests. Participants are typically asked to read a written concept about (hypothetically) a new frozen pizza that’s described as “tasty,” and as having “the crunchiest crust.” The moderator then asks the respondents to explain what the concept tells them about the product. Unless the copywriters have had a bad day, respondents are likely to play back the idea that the pizza is tasty and crunchy.



The problem here goes deeper than blunt, literal-minded questions. Gerry Zaltman explains in a 1997 *Journal of Marketing Research* article that most human thought is tacit, unconscious, and image-based deeply in neurological substrates. Consequently, research that relies entirely on verbal responses to direct questions is severely and automatically handicapped in its ability to tease out subtler and more deeply seated aspects of consumers’ motivations and meanings. In these circumstances projective research methods offer their unique contributions. Projective techniques were designed to explore topics that individuals were, for various reasons, likely to be unwilling or unable to discuss. By structuring questions indirectly and ambiguously, respondents are encouraged to express their thinking through picture drawing, story telling, collage construction, incomplete sentences, word association, and role playing.

In the context of focus groups, projective methods help reduce the problems associated with too much literal-minded talking. Obviously, such dialogue is important and necessary in most focus groups, but projective methods break the monotony. More important, they provide something interesting to talk about. For example, respondents who have spent 15 minutes drawing a picture of their bank are likely to be quite eager to show and tell.

And the subsequent dialogue provides a link between their surface thoughts about the bank (length of lines, promptness, friendliness) and their deeper feelings (civility issues, trust, comfort, acceptance). Respondents generally find projective methods interesting, involving, and fun, which helps keep the energy of the group high.

Recruit groups, not “groupings.” Using groups of individuals to investigate a topic is the distinguishing feature of focus group research. Yet this aspect doesn’t get much serious attention today when it comes to selecting focus group samples. Typically, respondents are screened and recruited on a small number of demographic and product usage data. The resulting groups are not groups in any real sociological sense. Yet, in the real world, marketing communications and influences filter through individuals’ everyday interactions with family members, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and other social networks. It’s surprising that researchers rarely tap these natural, existing, and accessible groups. Instead, they rely on the convenience of professional recruiters’ extensive lists which, experience suggests, are full of “professional” respondents. And this service is rarely cheap. It often exceeds the amount of the incentive the respondent receives. For the \$500-\$1,000 that recruitment for one 10-person focus group often costs, a community organization, church, fraternal group, or social club might be thrilled to open its doors for a discussion with a sample of its membership. Not only would this provide access to real groups of people interacting naturally; the financial incentive would be limited to the contribution to the organization, thus eliminating a significant cost factor.

Realistically, researchers are unlikely to abandon professional facilities for church basements, and group members

could be invited to a local research outpost in any case. The point is to think about sampling issues more intensely and creatively. The focus group literature in marketing seems to favor samples that are demographically homogeneous. This supposedly reduces the possibility that respondents will feel uncomfortable among people who are different from them. Homogeneous groups also minimize the likelihood of intra-group disagreements and conflicts that may issue from gender, age, social status, or ethnic differences. The implicit idea is that focus groups should be pleasant experiences, but says who? Marketing managers often confront difficult issues that span different demographic groups, so why not reflect this in the focus group sample? Cadillac, for example, has an age problem; the average Cadillac buyer is age 61, almost 20 years older than the average for other luxury brands. Younger consumers generally have a fairly negative image of Cadillac. So why not throw the young and old in a group together and let them share and challenge each others' perspectives?

Focus groups sometimes proceed like committee meetings, where issues are progressively placed on the table, discussed politely, and disposed of, with a subtle pressure to achieve some kind of consensus. The marketplace diffusion of products and communications does not work like this; different consumer segments accept or resist marketers' offerings for reasons that often relate to their group affiliations and identities. Men, for example, tend to view diet beverages as feminine; working-class drinkers consider wine too "snooty;" and younger consumers frown on coffee (Starbucks notwithstanding) and prefer branded water and tea. These represent serious marketing challenges to improve a product's perceptions and expand or defend its customer base. Focus group samples that incorporate such market segment heterogeneity are likely to get to the heart of the matter quickly. Rather than viewing within-group differences as sources of bias, researchers should consider them opportunities to replicate interpersonal aspects of the marketplace in a focus group room.

Adjust Your Focus

Most managers learn about qualitative research on the job, but what they learn depends on their companies' research norms, practices, and intellectual capital. The majority of managers with whom I have worked seem ambivalent about qualitative research. They express concerns about small samples and prefer the numbers that surveys provide. Thus, it should not be a big surprise that focus groups often materialize as group surveys with many questions. It's not surprising, but it's disappointing and often frustrating. I have seen even

the most gifted and serene moderators lose it when, 20 minutes before the start of a 10-person group, they are handed a 40-question discussion guide and told to get through it in 80 minutes or less.

This is not an easy situation, and research suppliers and moderators have few incentives to rattle the client's cage.

Fortunately, there are many clients who are thoughtful, open, pragmatic, and willing to experiment with alternative approaches to consumer research.

The basic opportunity recommended here derives from restructuring focus groups to make them more productive and consistent with their potential to yield original, in-depth findings. Managers will quickly grasp the practical benefits of group research that delivers novel and useful discoveries to facilitate marketing strategy development and planning. More explicit attention to the "group" aspects of focus groups will create deeper understanding. Groups that include heterogeneous individuals will be not only interesting, but effective in providing simulations of marketplace dialogue and interactions across consumer segments. In the introduction to their book, *The Group Depth Interview* (Prentice-Hall, 1987), Alfred Goldman and

Susan McDonald describe focus groups as a "blend of art and science" along with a "mix of stage management and research techniques." To arrest the devolution of focus groups into group surveys, I believe we should place much more emphasis on their "stage" aspects—script them with more care and creativity, cast them more boldly and strategically, and let the show begin. ●

Additional Reading

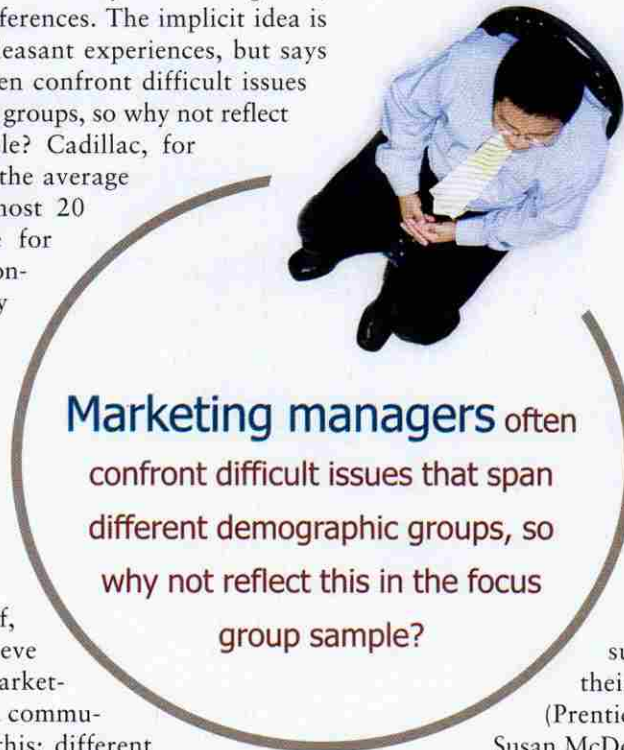
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