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The Missing Link in Focus Groups: Debriefing Sessions

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All too often, the invaluable leads, direction, and learnings generated in focus group research are diffused, distorted, or denatured after the research is done.

By the time the moderator's report, presentation, or even a topline summary is processed, there has been plenty of time for the "Tower of Babel" effect to set in.

Everyone has his or her own view of what transpired, the participants' comments are regurgitated rather than appraised and synthesized, and the determination of next steps or even of immediately actionable findings becomes an occasion for debate, delay, and disappointment.

Recognizing this, a number of leading marketers have taken advantage of disciplined post-focus-group debriefing technique.

Known by a variety of names, the process we call "Focused Debriefing" is based on well-established principles and procedures in group dynamics. Its benefit lies in the fact that it can provide the often-missing link between qualitative and quantitative phases of research, between concepts and the people who must deal with them, between insight and application.

Here's how it works. A single, half-day session is held immediately after the last focus group in the series. Typically, it takes place within no more than two days, while the information and effect are still fresh. And it should be held in the morning, not at night after the last focus group when everyone is tired out.

Participants include those who witnessed the focus groups, plus agency and management people representing concerned functions: R&D, product development, marketing, advertising and promotion, and packaging.

Thus, the meeting provides the perfect forum for combining the knowledge of the marketing specialists with the realities of what actually took place in the focus groups.

Additionally, one simple but often overlooked benefit is that people who attended some but not all of the groups get to combine and compare their perceptions.

The session is organized and directed by a specially-trained facilitator, who can be, but need not be, the focus group moderator. It's conducted as a tightly focused meeting, geared to a single objective, unlike the coffee klatch that often follows the last focus group.

The climate of the debriefing is quite different from conventional meetings: it's nontraditional and nonhierarchical. It is, therefore, particularly conducive to getting below the surface.

Going beyond the reactive nature of focus

groups, it can become the creative springboard for the generation of new insights, ideas, and hypotheses.

The specific objective of the debriefing session is developed in concert with the responsible market research executive at the client or agency and is tailored to fit client requirements. It's incorporated in a task statement on which all participants sign off, committing themselves to a common direction.

The facilitator provides the focus, keeping the group on track, moving ahead briskly, and taking responsibility for the process so all of the participants are free to concentrate on content. Being objective, with no axe to grind, the facilitator encourages and enables participants to offer their ideas and observations freely, without fear of rejection, criticism, or recrimination.

Ideally, when a thought or idea is presented, it would be heard, listened to, understood, refined, and then finally evaluated. But we are not a generation of listeners. Both as individuals and in groups, we tend to leap to judgment, to premature evaluation.

People speak at an average speed of about 150 words a minute, but we hear—and think—at speeds ranging from 800 to 1,200 words every minute. Conventional listening, therefore, becomes a series of quick scans where we go in and out of the attention mode.

The role of the facilitator is to get the participants to become more active listeners. They will be encouraged, for example, to drop out of the attention mode from time to time, to make notes of their thoughts, and then rejoin the discussion.

The facilitator will move them in the direction of constructive responses, inviting them to build rather than demolish and to look for the useful parts of others' hypotheses.

The goal is to open up consideration of solutions, concepts, and actions that might otherwise never have been articulated or even conceived. To that end, the facilitator may urge participants to present their concerns using special problem-solving language which helps them more easily turn negatives into potential opportunities.

Moreover, when these concerns are then seen in this "problem-solution" light, it tends to invite a greater level of constructive direction from participants than might ordinarily emerge in a conventional meeting climate.

In one case, the focus groups had evaluated four positioning statements related to direct mail solicitation of credit card accounts.

The responses of both "revolvers" (those who build up credit balances) and "transactors" (those

who pay their accounts promptly) were solicited.

The debriefing participants not only analyzed and digested the respondents' reactions, but then moved forward to the generation of new positionings and were able to outline core elements pertinent to any selling proposition.

In another study, a microwave formulation for a food product was not doing well in the market. Focus groups consisting of those who liked the product and those who rejected it were conducted.

At the debriefing, the responses of both groups of consumers were analyzed and then the meaning of those responses, plus their implications for other new microwave products being developed by the client, were identified and organized for actionable next steps.

Within one or two days—at most—after the debriefing session, the facilitator submitted a set of typed-up easel notes, focusing on the most interesting findings and surprises that emerge from the focus groups, reconsidered.

In real life, as differentiated from theory, focus group monitors do not always wait for the report of the moderator or a considered review; they spring into action based on some, but not necessarily all, of the things heard during the groups.

Interposing the discipline of the debriefing session—particularly since it is held promptly after the groups' conclusion—is a prophylactic against precipitous and unreflective action.

During a Focused Debriefing, all the perceptions expressed by respondents in the focus groups are listed and categorized. Their opposing elements, positive and negative, are effectively itemized and balanced against one another.

Key hypotheses are identified, and an action agenda of next steps can be articulated. It is notable that all debriefing participants take ownership of the plan the group devises, so the individuals directly responsible for the research process can move freely, and in a timely manner, on a shared action plan.

Focused Debriefing clearly isn't a replacement for the detailed, analytical report and synthesis of the focus group moderator, nor is it intended to be.

The facilitator's easel notes, in fact, should be studied in conjunction with that report, to constitute a thorough, reasoned analysis and to inform suppliers of subsequent research, product development, advertising, or marketing tasks. ■

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