

A Perspective on Focus Group Research

Periodically, focus group research is “rediscovered”; and then - abused, misused, or overused - it falls into temporary disfavor.

Actually, the focus group is a classic research mode that can serve many purposes well. Unfortunately, it is too easy for a marketing research or consulting practitioner to claim competence in the method; but it is too hard for more than a handful of top-notch qualitative specialist firms or individuals to handle properly from start to finish. And, unless focus group research is done right and used appropriately, the results can be virtually useless, or even misleading and actively harmful. When this happens often enough, disillusionment with the technique sets in and takes over until the next “discovery” starts the cycle over again.

These days it seems that focus group research is enjoying one of its recurrent popularity surges.

In part, this is a “backlash” reaction to a broad movement in marketing toward the rapid generation of enormous amounts of quantitative descriptive data. This “numbers” orientation dates back quite some time, but it has been newly refueled by technological advances such as supermarket scanners and structured online interviewing in which consumers’ responses are entered directly into computers. Even as these new modes feed managers’ hunger for reliable quantitative information quickly (in some cases, almost instantaneously), it removes them further from understanding their customers as people.

This is where focus groups come in. The method is uniquely suited to probing the dynamics - the whys and hows and attendant feelings - that underlie the

numerical facts about the customer behavior. Focus group results help convert “mere information” into the contexted understandings that are crucial to the development of effective strategies rooted in customers’ own perspectives.

Quite apart from the formal analysis of the discussion content (presumably the reason for undertaking the research in the first place), the opportunity for first hand observation of the “real people” who comprise their market can be a revelatory experience for managers ordinarily immersed in the day-to-day technical aspects of their work.

Dialogue Resource, Inc. is highly experienced and exceptionally competent in focus group research.

We have conducted hundreds of focus group studies - among consumer, commercial, industrial, technical, and professional customer constituencies - covering an extensive array of product and service categories. We know how to do this type of research right, step by step, from beginning to end.

For starters, we use focus groups only when appropriate. For example, for...

- Exploratory purposes (understanding the “whys” and “hows” of past, present and likely future market behavior)
- Diagnostic purposes (e.g., identifying market needs/wants, segments)
- Developmental purposes (e.g., generating hypotheses, developing concepts)

and **not** for...

- “Hard” testing, auditing, tracking, checking or forecasting
- Obtaining projectable data of any sort

We emphasize preparedness. That means fully understanding the client's needs and objectives, and organizing these understandings beforehand into a complete moderator's outline or discussion guide. This is not to say that we advocate following such a guide to the letter, but it does help to ensure "zeroing in" on what's wanted and complete coverage of the issues. Furthermore, we have found that the discipline of developing the guide is one of the best ways to sharpen our understanding of the objectives; and the guide itself serves as an excellent working document for discussions with the client to ensure that all those objectives are met.

We have several experienced and highly skilled moderators on our staff. Our people are trained and talented in...

- Establishing rapport with and within the group
- Keeping the discussion on the subject without shutting off productive by-ways
- Moving the discussion forward while relating it to earlier content
- Minimizing "socially acceptable" responses
- Bringing out dissenting opinions
- Dealing with negative aspects of group dynamics (e.g., "dead" groups, side conversations, problem-type respondents)
- Stimulating intra-group conversation

We are comfortable with using special techniques and stimuli in groups, if and as appropriate - concept statements, advertising copy / storyboards / videos, packaging and product prototypes, projective exercises, etc. Frequently, too, we use self-administered rating scales at key points during the groups, not principally for the hard numbers they generate, but rather to augment the data and provide cross checks on qualitatively derived information.

We have some of the best focus group analysts in the business - skilled, competent professionals able to...

- Analyze the data fully and accurately
 - ... making order out of chaos
 - ... separating "truth" from various kinds of "dross"
 - ... distinguishing between dominance and consensus
 - ... etc.
- Convert the findings into actionable recommendations for our clients

This is, perhaps, our strongest competitive advantage, because...

Despite all the problems and pitfalls of moderating, there are many more good focus group moderators around than there are good focus group analysts.

DRI reports include both detailed findings (with verbatims) and a management summary with strategic implications and recommendations. Consequently, clients tell us that in addition to serving the immediate purposes of the study, DRI reports often have "library" value, providing useful reference / background information for years to come.

In sum, Dialogue Resource is a leader in focus group research, a "caveat emptor" field where many practitioners are poorly or only partially qualified. We treat this research as a rigorous discipline, rather than an art form, and we have the experience and resources to ensure solid, actionable results for our clients.



Dialogue Resource is a marketing research and consulting firm located in Boston MA.