

# Bank Marketing

Vol.. 29/Num. 9/Sept. 1997 The Premier Source of Innovative Marketing for the Financial Services Industry

## Focus Groups

# THE HUMAN SIDE OF RESEARCH

## The Facilitated Debriefing: Interpreting Focus Group Results

by Nino DeNicola

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

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 actionable findings becomes an occasion for debate, delay, and disappointment.

Recognizing this, a number of financial services marketers are now taking advantage of a disciplined post-focus-group debriefing technique.

Here's how it works. A single, half-day session is held 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. Participants include those who witnessed the focus groups, plus agency and management people representing concerned functions, product development, marketing, and advertising.

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 late at night.

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 generations of new insights and hypotheses.

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

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

People speak at an average speed of 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 meeting facilitator is to get participants to become more active listeners and 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 and actions that might otherwise never have been articulated or conceived. To that end, the facilitator urges participants to present their concerns using special problem-solving language which helps them turn negatives into opportunities.

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

Interposing the discipline of the facilitated debriefing — particularly since it is held promptly after the group's conclusion — prevents precipitous and unreflective action. Key hypotheses are identified, and an action agenda of the next steps can be articulated. It is notable that all the debriefing participants take ownership of the plan the group devises, so the individuals directly responsible for the research process can more freely, and in a timely manner, on a shared action plan.

The facilitated debriefing 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. ■

---

*Nino DeNicola is president of Dialogue Resource, Inc., of Fairfield, Conn., a market research and consulting firm with a primary focus on banks and other financial service organizations.*

**Too often, the focus groups themselves are considered to be 'the end of the story' rather than the raw material for professional analysis and interpretation.**

---

**Focus  
Group**

Reprinted with permission of Bank Marketing magazine, 1120 Connecticut Avenue NW, Washington DC. 202.663.5378. #378289 Reprinted by Reprint Management Services. 717.399.1900 To purchase reprints online, visit [www.reprintbuyer.com](http://www.reprintbuyer.com).