

The Facilitated Debriefing

The Rationale

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

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

The Process

Our approach is based on well-established principles and procedures of Synectics® group dynamics. A single, half-day work session is held after the last focus group in a series. Typically, it takes place within two days, while the information and effect are still fresh.

Participants include those who observed the focus groups, plus (other) agency and management people representing various pertinent functional specialties: R&D, product development, marketing, advertising, etc.

The debriefing session is organized and directed by a trained facilitator, who can be, but need not be the focus group moderator. It's conducted as a tightly focused meeting, geared to an expressly stipulated objective. This objective is developed in concert with the responsible market research executive at the client or agency and is tailored to fit client analytic and action requirements.

The objective is incorporated in a formal Task Statement on which all participants sign off, committing themselves to a common direction.

The facilitator provides the meeting 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.

Within one or two days, the facilitator submits a set of typed-up easel notes that organize the output and focus on the most salient findings and surprises that emerged in the debriefing session.

The Benefits

Interposing the discipline of the debriefing session - particularly since it is held promptly after completion of the focus groups - can prevent unreflective precipitous action.

During a facilitated debriefing, all the perceptions expressed by respondents in the focus groups are listed and categorized. Their attendant "vectors", positive and negative, are effectively itemized and assessed against one another.

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

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