Seven habits of highly effective moderators

by Robert Schnee

Fifteen years of moderating experience, including observing talented—and not so talented—moderators has helped me to identify a set of habits and skills that produce the best work. Moderators who have these seven good habits stand the best chance of delivering what qualitative research can do best: provide rich insights, new learning, and fresh ideas.

1. Establish personal contact with each respondent early in the session. Call each respondent by name, and thank them for their comments when they introduce themselves.

2. Help respondents feel relaxed early on. Simple humor involving words that always get a smile is the best. I always manage to work the words "Hostess Twinkie" into my introduction, such as: "Sometimes I talk to little kids about Hostess Twinkies. Today we'll be talking about..." For whatever reason, Twinkies is funny.

3. Win respondents to your side. I ask respondents to help me do my job. My job is to get their honest opinions, and I'm dependent on them to get it. I have twin boys. Whenever the opportunity arises in the focus group room, such as if a parent of twins or two young children is attending, I say, "Oh, I have twins too. My boys are 15—it gets better once they're out of diapers."

4. Deal with loud respondents without intimidating the rest. Don't criticize or put down the too-frequent talkers, because this risks making the rest afraid to speak.

5. Deal with inconsistent, unclear answers by mobilizing the group to help.

6. Create an environment where anything a respondent wants to say is acceptable. This way you hear the surprising things that produce new insights.

7. Don't assume you know what a respondent means by an ambiguous answer. Ask.

Assuming is leading the respondent to what you think you know. This means you won't learn anything new. If the comment does mean what you think, fine. Often it does not, and then you'll learn something new by opening the door for respondents to say the unexpected.