

# Qualitatively Speaking

This month we introduce Qualitatively Speaking, a regular column in which a revolving cast of authors will offer their thoughts on various aspects of the multifaceted world of qualitative research — in 1,000 words or less! Submissions are welcome. Send your ideas or manuscripts to [joe@quirks.com](mailto:joe@quirks.com).

## *The end of focus groups*

By Robert Morais

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**A** couple of marketing anthropologists from a company called Cultural Dynamics sell their services on the basis that focus groups have little to do with actual behavior and beliefs. As they put it, "Why did it never occur to an anthropological fieldworker to sit his or her respondents around a table in the middle of their village, feed them a sandwich and a soda, then ask them to describe their lives, rituals, social hierarchy and sense of kinship?" The reason: respondents cannot and should not be expected to accurately characterize their lives in such a situation, nor should their on-the-spot reactions to advertising or new product ideas be viewed as a reflection of their actual beliefs. Respondents live their lives subjectively; anthropologists, after observing respondents, explain their lives objectively.

According to a *Wall Street Journal* article<sup>1</sup>, over 100,000 focus groups were fielded in 1999. Still, marketing and advertising professionals have mixed feelings about their value. On one hand, focus groups are seen as a fast, inexpensive way to hear consumer language, watch consumers react to advertising, and see how they respond to new product ideas, among many other possible uses. On

the other hand, executives admit that they often succumb to the temptation to let one or two focus groups select a "winning" creative idea or predict the sales potential of a new product. Executives also worry about the artificial setting of focus group rooms, the perils of "professional" respondents, and the dominance of a session by a few highly vocal participants. Jon Steel, author of *Truth, Lies & Advertising*, expresses the industry's ambivalence about focus groups in two separate sections of his book. At one point he says, "I believe that the thoughts and behavior of a human focus group respondent are as representative of the broader population as the thoughts and behavior of a chimpanzee in San Francisco Zoo are of chimps in the East African forests. Which is to say, not very representative at all." Later, he argues that only focus groups are suitable for gaining consumer responses to advertising concepts and contends that interaction among focus group respondents often brings insights that other research cannot<sup>2</sup>.

I have personally witnessed hundreds of focus groups. On occasion, I have moderated them. I worry that, despite the advantages of focus groups, the instant judgments, non-projectable conclusions, and the demise of groundbreaking creative ideas are so counterproductive that the liabilities of this methodology often outweigh the benefits. After due consideration I find myself wondering,

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Should focus groups be banned from the marketing tool kit? Or, at the very least, should we professionals create a law that prohibits even fielding a focus group that asks questions for which techniques such as one-on-one interviews, observational research, or quantitative testing are better suited?

Venerable companies like Procter & Gamble and most qualitative researchers themselves advise marketers and advertising agency people to be circumspect about what they observe in focus groups. Never, never should focus groups be used as a basis for decision-making. Although the duly advised nod their agreement, they soon forget or ignore the admonitions. Before the last respondent leaves the focus group room, off go the observers into generalization-land.

Focus groups are often cited as excellent means of accessing deep consumer motivations and understanding brand imagery. But is a 90-minute group composed of people who have never met, answering questions that force them to rationalize reactions that are normally automatic, the best way to get at these subjects? I don't think so. Marketing researchers use other qualitative methods that are superior for unveiling consumer attitudes and beliefs: in-depth one-on-one interviews, sometimes with life history discussions and projective devices such as photographs and collages; dyads and triads that avoid the group dynamics in sessions of eight-plus individuals; and in-home and in-store observation, among others.

These techniques overcome one of the major flaws of traditional focus groups: consumers are asked direct questions about life events, product usage or creative concepts, and their answers are taken at face value.

A better way to learn about consumers' product needs and attitudes is to first understand their lives. Once the texture of consumers' lives is revealed — their roles and responsibilities, their trials and their triumphs — an examination of where the product category and brand fit in can begin. This protocol is best undertaken by using some of the alternate research techniques I just mentioned. Although these methods are no more statistically projectable than focus groups, they produce richer and more bona fide attitudes and sentiments.

I am not suggesting that focus groups be totally abolished. Instead, I propose that their use be more restricted. Field a focus group to hear consumer language, generate hypotheses for future research or screen particularly expressive respondents for later in-depth interviews and observational research. Let's stop using focus groups as a quick, cheap way to gain consumer knowledge. Because when we do so, we endanger the future of our brands. If we discipline ourselves in this manner, we will improve the quality of qualitative research. 

### References

- 1 "Advertising" column by Vanessa O'Connell, *Wall Street Journal*, November 27, 2000, p. B21
- 2 *Truth, Lies & Advertising*, by Jon Steel (John Wiley & Sons, 1998), pp. 79, 202-205.