



# Refocusing Focus Groups

By Robert J. Morais, Ph.D.

**T**he number of articles written about focus groups is probably almost equal to the number of focus groups fielded annually. But disagreements about the purpose and execution of this methodology persist. Here are a half dozen ways to keep focus groups in focus.

## **Why Are We Doing Focus Groups Anyway? Insights vs. Surveys**

Insight may be the most overused word in marketing research today. There are insight groups, insight managers, insight companies and shopper insights – in addition to that rarity, insights themselves. When a word gains such currency, it is worthwhile to recall its formal definition to be sure the meaning has not been compromised. An insight, defined by dictionary.com, entails “...apprehending the true nature of a thing, esp. through intuitive understanding; penetrating mental vision or discernment; faculty of seeing into inner character or underlying truth.”



Focus groups are an ideal research choice for gaining insights. They allow for open-ended questions and expansive answers, and the process stimulates observation room discussions that can generate the “penetrating mental vision or discernment” that defines insights. Many manufacturers recognize the value in such discussions and field focus groups for deep understanding of their customers. Sometimes, though, focus groups are selected as a fast, cut-rate methodology to answer questions that are better included in quantitative research. Certainly, responses by 20 respondents to questions regarding how often, and in what ways a brand is used are not projectable, and taking such findings to the bank can lead to financial losses for clients. In addition, questions better deployed in a survey take precious time away from probes that are the hallmark of qualitative studies. To keep the best application of focus groups in focus, when clients insist on survey oriented questions, include those questions in the screener or as a pre-session exercise in the facility waiting room. This practice will ensure that more time is spent on insight generation and less time wasted on questions that should not be asked of small numbers of respondents.

#### **The Henny Youngman Question: Findings Compared to What?**

Henny Youngman was a mid-20th century comedian with a decidedly mid-20th century sense of humor. One of his better known one-liners was, “Somebody asked me how my wife was. I said, ‘Compared to what?’” Mr. Youngman’s rejoinder is a reminder to those who may not consider that questions like, “How likely are you to purchase this product based on the commercial you just saw?” omit a critical component of consumer behavior: comparison shopping. To access consumer purchase decision making after respondents view an advertisement, expose a shelf-set with the client’s and competitive brands. Then ask consumers about their purchase decision, and elicit their full thought process. Another excellent comparison technique is triadic sorting in which consumers are asked to group together two of three related brands, then discuss their similarities, and finally, contrast their differences from the third brand. The pairs are rotated until all permutations are covered.

#### **The Rashomon Perspective: Different**

#### **Agendas, Different Truths**

The 1950 Japanese film, “Rashomon,” recounts a woman’s rape and the murder of her husband through the different eyes and conflicting interpretations of four witnesses, including the deceased husband. The film deals with versions of the truth as expressed by people with particular self-interests. Observers in the back room see focus groups in a way that is similar to the witnesses in “Rashomon.” Their interpretations are impacted by self-interest, consciously or unconsciously. In “Rashomon,” each of the witnesses had something to hide, protect or champion – honor, shame, theft, skill. Focus group observers are influenced by personal bias, brand history and management edicts. While they may seek the truth, it is a truth that is shaped by these factors. Focus group observers should realize that the image in the mirror is often their own reflection; as they look at the glass, they should try to see past themselves. Complete objectivity is seldom possible in marketing research, but acknowledging observer bias will enable clients and advertising agency executives to separate their interpretation of the truth from truths expressed by consumers.

#### **Lie to Me: When Consumers Lie to Themselves and What To Do About It** Jonny Lang is an American blues-rock

songwriter and guitarist. Among the lyrics in the title song of his 1997 album, “Lie to Me,” are: “Lie to me and tell me everything is all right....I’ll just try to make believe that everything, everything you’re telling me is true...” Human beings sometimes prefer to live a lie rather than deal with an uncomfortable truth. As researchers, we must recognize when this happens and understand how it impacts our findings.

Not long ago, four 40ish women entered an interview room for a focus group on food. During the session, they spoke about their long walks, other exercise regimens, and their efforts to eat right. Not one woman mentioned a weight problem, but all of these women were significantly overweight. Per the recruit, these respondents were all regular, loyal users of a brand with a name that connotes nutritional goodness, but contains ingredients that give it a sweet taste and substantial calories. The respondents described the brand as “good for them. They loved the taste of the product and praised its health benefits. It was apparent that these women did not read the brand’s nutrition labeling. If they

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had, they would have known the brand is light in nutrition and heavy in calories. Instead, they allowed themselves to be deluded by the healthy sounding brand name. These consumers wanted to live the lie that the brand was good for them because they loved the taste. The brand name gave them permission to lie to themselves by conveying that the brand was consistent with their claimed ways of managing their health. These women didn't know it, but they had a lot in common with Jonny Lang.

#### **Questions of a Thousand Dreams: Too Many Questions, Too Few Answers**

Qualitative research is free-flowing compared with other research techniques. When surveys are designed, time limitations and concerns about respondent fatigue constrict the length of the questionnaires. In qualitative research, clients sometimes feel that they can add question after question to a moderator's guide. For example, when the primary goal is to elicit responses to packaging, clients dream up additional questions about usage occasions, brand loyalty, advertising and new products. These requests are understandable; why not take advantage of having consumers in a focus group room? However, an ideal guide length for a 90 minute session is four to five pages, and we have been pressed to craft guides twice that length to answer a multitude of queries. We tell our clients that we will have ample time for the questions, but little time for the answers. We negotiate, and if we are successful, the guide is limited to only seven pages! The lesson is learned during the sessions when clients say, "We see what you meant about putting too much into the guide." The next time, they understand that only some of their dreams can be answered.

#### **Herding Cats: Managing Clients and Ad Agency Executives**

I first heard the expression "herding cats" during a speech by a chief operating officer who had recently emigrated to the advertising business from a manufacturing company. He was referring to the challenge of managing individuals with talent, creativity and commitment, but varied temperaments and agendas toward common goals. Marketing researchers

face a similar challenge when dealing with their clients. Corporate research managers have internal clients – marketing executives. Supplier research professionals serve corporate research managers, brand managers and advertising agency executives. It's a tough job, not dissimilar to shepherding a herd of cats. Treats help. In research, treats are represented by excellent listening skills, honest communication of what can and cannot be accomplished, regular progress reports and sensitivity to the pressures clients face. These practices do not guarantee that all of the constituencies will move in the same direction at the same time, but they will certainly help get their attention, and that's a start.

#### **Conclusion**

Focus groups are used so often for so many different marketing needs that loss of focus on how to best conduct

them is not surprising. Keeping these suggestions in mind will enable marketing research professionals to guide their clients toward focus group results that provide a sharper picture of marketing opportunities.



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