

X-Groups—“Truth or dare” in focus groups

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There are many different ways to use focus groups in new product development, and most of these have some usefulness. Here the author presents a new one he is convinced yields a more robust picture of how consumers really think and feel, by using innovative elicitation techniques.

Ever felt like throwing a chair through the mirror at a focus group panel member? You need *X-Groups*. Sick of junk food and junkier ideas in focus groups? You need *X-Groups*.

Focus groups have been under the microscope for years. Fast, inexpensive and comfortable, they are, nevertheless, far from proven as a sound research methodology. In fact, focus groups often give marketing professionals and advertising strategists bad directions because 10 randomly selected respondents do not represent the “real” world, or one or two highly opinionated participants shanghai the proceedings. Many advertising agency creative staffers believe that focus groups shut out their more innovative ideas. Indeed, the most original, edgy ideas are those most likely to be dismissed as “too out there” when the focus group mob mentality takes hold.

Demand continues unabated

And still, the demand for focus groups by marketers and many advertising agency personnel continues unabated. But rather than toss this method out of the marketing research toolbox, perhaps it is time we reinvent the traditional focus group with an approach we call *X-Groups*.

Our concept of *X-Groups* is focus groups in the extreme, designed to get the truth from respondents. They draw methods from the social sciences, ideation and police interrogation. And they purposely violate the rules of traditional focus groups. *X-Groups* are distinguished by inventive techniques that enable marketing and advertisers to uncover what consumers really think and feel.

A new direction

X-Group methods include a wide range of approaches and are customized to the marketing challenge at hand:

- **Challenge Questions**, in which consumers are dared to provide real-life support for their claimed attitudes. For example, “You said you change your air freshener once a month. When, exactly, do you change it? How do you keep track?”

- **Metaphor Elicitation** using visual stimuli to tap unarticulated customer attitudes. One of the most well-known practitioners of this method is Gerald Zaltman, whose new book, *How Customers Think* examines the way the consumer’s mind processes marketing messages. We recently exposed abstract visual representations to explore consumer emotions surrounding dandruff. The process stimulated several new advertising directions.
- **Deprivation**, in which respondents are deprived of a product or ingredient, then asked to talk about the experience. How, for example, would you feel if you couldn’t serve your favorite spicy mustard at your next 4th of July barbecue?
- **Semantic Word Chains** that unveil the deeper meaning behind respondents’

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words and phrases. “You said you feel achy when you have a cold. How does feeling achy make you feel?” Answer: “Miserable.” Then, “How does feeling miserable make you feel?” Answer: “Weak and helpless.” Enter the brand with the power to heal.

- **Life History Probing** to connect respondents, real lives to brand selling propositions. “How did having bad breath in high school affect you? How do you feel now that you can do something about it?”

An example of breaking the rules

When exposing advertising in focus groups, the standard rule is to show only two or three ideas to avoid consumer overload. This means that marketing professionals instead of consumers make the first cut at which ideas are most effective, thus short-circuiting the creative research process.



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We have used *X-Groups* to ensure greater inclusiveness in creative idea assessment. In one *X-Group* on a consumer wellness product, we exposed 12 storyboards in two hours and gained valuable input on a wide range of ideas. We wanted to know two essential things: a) did the ideas expressed in the storyboards have appeal, and b) did these consumers believe what we were saying in our ads? Each storyboard was read once, then respondents were asked for an instant reaction, which psychological testing suggests is the truest response. If they collectively said or indicated in body language that they disliked an idea, the storyboard was jettisoned immediately. If they responded positively,

we pressed them as to why, challenging their superficial “because it’s short and to the point” answers. When respondents appeared to give answers to please the moderator, they were challenged: “Do you really feel that way? I don’t believe you!” All of the observers felt that the rapid fire, slightly more confrontational approach produced richer, more honest responses than typical focus groups.

X-Groups are not yet widely used, at least in name, but better moderators are employing *X-Group* techniques. Moderators who continue to rely on tried and untrue focus group methods should not be surprised if one day the chair flying through the mirror is from a frustrated observer who has seen an intrepid *X-Group* moderator dare a respondent to tell the truth. 🌱

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