Great focus groups: Part 1: Steps to take before the session

| By Gary Frieden

How can we best understand the psychology of focus groups and how can we utilize this knowledge to make the sessions more insightful? Interestingly, more than what happens during the focus group can affect the focus group experience. The recruitment process can set the stage for how respondents begin thinking about the group experience. Even what happens in the lobby can ultimately affect the psychology of the focus group.

This two-part series deals with aspects that occur prior to the start of a focus group session and later how the focus group is conducted – each of which contribute strongly to the psychology of the group.

Rules for recruiting

Properly setting up the focus group is essential to putting respondents in the right mind-set to participate in a manner that will ultimately generate insights that the client is seeking. I've discovered the following six rules:

1. Never say this sentence during the recruit: "The group will last anywhere between 90 minutes to two hours." If it is possible – or even probable – that the group might hit the two-hour mark (as they often do) it is far better for recruiters to simply state two hours as the time frame. Some respondents remember 90 minutes and hold you to it and at the 88-minute mark they remove their keys and shut down. Sure, recruiters will have greater success in recruiting respondents with the "90-minute" phrase but it will only bring down the group – and the mood – when utilized.

2. Start groups early. I've found the traditional 6 p.m. and 8 p.m. groups to be problematic. When a group takes place is also critical. Groups held at 8 p.m. will end at 10 p.m. and by around 9:30 p.m. respondents will have had it. Many have woken up at 5 or 6 a.m. and have been at work all day and must get up early the next morning. Do yourself a favor: try for 4 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. groups. Recruiters will undoubtedly tell you that it is far more difficult to recruit a 4 p.m. group. While this is true, it is certainly not impossible. Simply over-recruit by an additional two people and you should be fine.

3. Recruiters should say there will be a light snack provided instead of dinner. The latter term creates false expectations that can only lead to unhappy respondents. If told, "light snack," and then served more than that, respondents will be nicely surprised and in a good mood, which will enhance your discussion.

4. Don't allow the recruiters to improvise if respondents ask them questions and they are unsure of the group's agenda. This can be dangerous as they are under pressure to recruit and will often say anything that makes the study sound more interesting, such as: "I think you'll be tasting a new product." The respondent will be left disappointed if the activity does not happen, or left waiting for a golden promised moment. Set expectations that the group will provide an interesting experience – period.

5. Remember to provide all instructions on the screener, such as, "Please visit the Web site prior to the group so you may familiarize yourself." This helps to provide a great discussion. If hardly any respondents actually do the pre-task, the group will be less informed and the discussion will not be at its peak of effectiveness. Have a way for respondents to prove that they completed the assignment when signing in at the front desk.

6. Please be sure your focus group facility provides important information to respondents and to clients, including the facility phone number and the specific address. This is vital in case clients wish to send testing materials in advance, or if a lost or late respondent would like to phone the facility. While the above may seem obvious, I've had countless experiences with facilities throughout the country that needed to modify direction sheets. If a respondent is late or directionally challenged, and unable to phone the facility, he or she will arrive in a foul mood which is not conductive to a great discussion.

Save time – prepare the lobby

Respondents' moods inside the focus group can be greatly affected by a late start. Here's the problem: many facilities provide a grid for checking in participants and place a checkmark by the names of individuals as they arrive – this only leads to gridlock! When clients study the page to select the participants, they are left to examine the relevant columns and then figure out whether that person has arrived. No good! My method for check-in is to highlight the entire line for each person who has arrived. That way, when looking at any column of interest, you will see exactly which individuals are in the facility – no more guessing or having to return to names and do finger counts! By taking this simple step you save time in the lobby and end up with a better group.

In addition to a faster check-in it is good to remember that a well-fed respondent is a happy and attentive respondent. Why spend thousands of dollars and potentially ruin the group because people have low blood sugar and their stomachs are louder than they are? My motto: Feed them first and you'll be glad you did! They will be able to think about the topic at hand and not their next meal.

Part 2 of this series will focus on what happens inside the conference room that will affect the group, such as the moderator's subtle signals, why the first three seconds of the group are crucial, the divergence of the moderator's point of view versus that of respondents, the idea that respondents are people, too, and more.

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