



Great focus groups: Part 2: Inside the conference room

| By Gary Frieden

In last month's article, I outlined how recruiters, moderators and facilities can affect the quality of focus group participation – and ultimately insights – prior to the start of a session. This second and final article of the series deals with how the psychology of the focus group is affected by what occurs during the focus group and how certain factors impact the overall insights.

Beginning the group: The first three seconds are critical

A restaurant server can make or break an evening in the first few seconds. The same factors are in effect when respondents enter the focus group conference room. Moderators who immediately show a friendly and fun attitude are more likely to create a welcoming space than those already sitting at the table, silently smiling and nodding. The former suggests that this will be a wonderful experience, while the latter may leave the respondents thinking, "We're doomed for the next two hours."

Put yourself in the respondents' shoes

From the very first moment, the moderator's view of the group is quite different from the respondent's view. This is very similar to that of a magician and his or her audience – the magician knows what is about to happen, while the audience does not. This gives the magician an advantage.

In a focus group, the moderator may simply be giving a standard introduction. The respondents' points of view are possibly quite different; they might be thinking:

- *The others seem smarter than me.*
- *He hasn't looked at me once.*
- *Is there a bathroom break?*
- *I'm already feeling embarrassed.*
- *I should have stayed home – not worth it.*

Moderators should do all they can to allay these fears and provide a comfortable environment to put respondents at ease. I have a set of funny anecdotes that I always use to begin a group. First, these anecdotes help to provide the intended effect. Second, they help me to gauge the group at a glance – I learn what I need to

know about many of the respondents during this initial byplay and how to interact with them. All of this needs to be done while remembering to consider the situation as the respondents perceive it.

Probing without monotony

Respondents are pretty sharp. They know the signs of someone digging deeper with the same probes: “And why is that?” and “Please explain more.” When used often, respondents tune them out.

Find alternative ways to probe the “why” question. I’ve found that a bit of theater helps. Sometimes I take a sip of coffee as they are explaining their thoughts, with my eyes imploring them to tell me while I’m drinking up their thoughts. I smile, nod my head and take a sip, which leads to respondents adding more to what they are saying. Sometimes, there is nothing in my cup! They need not know that, however – it’s our secret.

Find your own comfortable ways of probing without having to ask the same question over and over again.

If moderators understand marketing research – and specifically the objectives at hand – they will work to ask the right questions at key moments. Experienced moderators know when to detour from the discussion guide to mine for surprise gems as they probe deeper for hidden insight.

Moderating like a movie

A great focus group has the properties of a fabulous movie. Do movies use one still camera shot throughout? Of course not! There are different scenes. Close-ups. New angles. The moderator should be active, engaging the respondents. Moderators who sit in a chair for two hours do not realize the potential of maintaining respondents’ interests. Moderators should move around, speak to respondents from different vantage points and allow each person to see them close up. This will keep the group interest strong, thereby generating deeper insights.

Respondents are people too

Respondents don’t agree to look or feel foolish. Embarrassing respondents does not result in good insights nor does it foster general goodwill. Several years ago, one respondent actually left the group because he thought his responses were not worthy or important – he felt that others’ comments were more useful than his. From this, I learned that how questions are framed – as well as the moderator’s reaction to responses – can make or break the group dynamics. If the moderator responds with, “No, that’s not quite right – who else would like to answer,” the person responding might feel sad and, as a result, not answer in the future. I now instead ask, “How many of you might feel comfortable telling us what such-and-such means (or how it works)?” This way, if no one volunteers, the clients have their answer without anyone feeling embarrassed!

This also plays into the moderator or client’s desire to use the latest, sexiest projective technique or other visual technique designed to gather insights. I’m all for using these as long as respondents’ feelings are kept in mind. Some respondents are not comfortable forming a team with the person sitting next to them, designing the next widget. I don’t put them in that position. If they’d rather sit it out, that is their prerogative. Respondents don’t sign up to feel uncomfortable.

Don’t overlook tent cards

Tent cards – when made right – help us to know respondents’ names as well as help respondents get to know each other’s names, avoiding the “what she said” phenomenon. In order to work, tent cards need to have names printed on both sides. I have seen some facilities find pride in beautiful, gold-backed holders which the name cards slide into. This is not helpful as when the tent is turned, half of the group cannot see the person’s name, thereby hurting group dynamics. And if the moderator walks around the room, he or she will be unable to see the person’s name – a small detail that can have profound results.

Great moderators, recruiters and focus group facilities all contribute to successful and insightful sessions. By keeping the tips above in mind when planning and conducting focus groups, you will be better prepared to handle the small things that could affect the entire focus group.

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