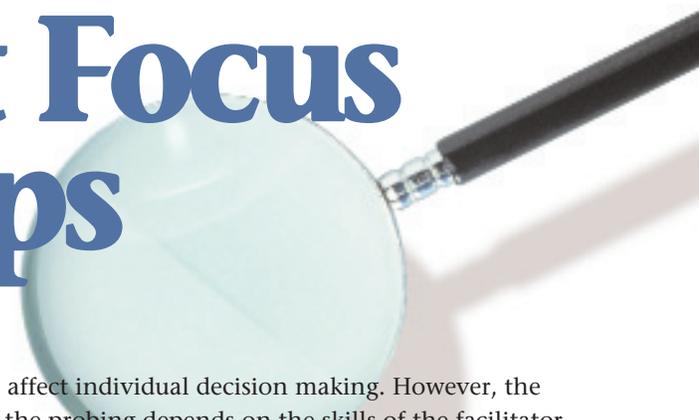


# A Look at Focus Groups



by Joseph Lopez

If you watch Hollywood movies, then the ending you saw was most likely a result of choices made by a focus group. Originally, focus groups were used within communication studies to explore the effects of film and television. Group processes can help researchers determine and clarify participant views more easily than other research techniques. As a result, this strategy has been adapted far beyond Hollywood for use in many other businesses, including the publishing industry.

### *What are focus groups?*

A focus group is composed of up to a dozen people recruited from the target market segment. The moderator asks questions and leads the direction of discussion, often with a pre-planned discussion guide. She or he ensures that all group members contribute and avoids letting one participant's opinions dominate.

To arrive at a reliable conclusion, you need at least three focus groups. Why three? If two groups contradict each other, the third will point out the mode.

The discussion guide will explore the group members' opinions and attitudes towards a given subject. This can be a product, concept, advertisement, process, or any other subject of interest to your publishing house. In professional facilities, focus groups are usually recorded on audio and video machines through one-way mirrors. In my experience, the audio and video recordings often serve as back-up resources because the moderator and other observers will generate a report on the discussion. The implication here is that so long as there is a moderator, a transcriber, and observers, you can have a successful focus group under a banyan tree, in a classroom, or in a living room... without the use of technology and a research facility.

Focus groups are not just face-to-face. Telephone conferences and online groups present opportunities to talk as a group about a new product or service while eliminating inhibitions that exist in a personal setting. Of course, there are guidelines as to when to use these alternative group processes.

The strength of the focus group methodology is in its probing. The researcher or facilitator can observe how the individual subconscious reveals itself and how group cultural

variables affect individual decision making. However, the depth of the probing depends on the skills of the facilitator. The moderator must be capable of developing rapport with the group and prompting a lively discussion that stays on track. An independent, impartial moderator is key. In looking for someone to lead the group, it is best to hire an external candidate to ensure objectivity. If internal, select an employee with a reputation as a good meeting leader.

The moderator should follow a standard focus group sequence. Steps to include:

- An introduction by moderator of subject matter and ground rules.
- Providing disclosures pertaining to confidentiality of opinions and audio/video recording and asking if there are any objections.
- A self-introduction of group members.
- A time to address the issues.
- A wrap up. The moderator should thank the participants and tell them how the data will be processed.

There must be the utmost respect for the thoughts and concerns of the participants. Additional things to consider include provision of meals and transportation.

### *When to use focus groups*

Focus groups are a marketing tool. When the book market is stagnant or publishing initial financial outlays are huge, then there might be significant return on investment on focus groups. Focus groups do take time, effort and resources, so it is best to use them correctly. This methodology works well when the subject or message is sensory and requires vision, touch or smell. However, if your information is quantitative, complex or abstract, then it is best to use other types of surveys.

Focus groups are good for illustrated publications such as history books, children's Sunday school materials, and cookbooks. They are also helpful when applied to web sites, print, radio or television ads, and publication layouts. Focus groups also work well when group chatter and consultations may affect purchases. Examples of these include discussions on customer loyalty programs and sales promotions.

While research can be surprising at times, it can help you get on the right track. Focus groups can uncover new perspec-

tives and sensitivities that your marketing staff might have easily missed. For example, Scribner tested two versions of a cover for Faye McDonald Smith's *Flight of the Blackbird* before it was printed. Surprisingly enough, the cover with a portrait of a family beat out a cover with a blackbird in flight in focus group sessions. Furthermore, peer consultation in focus groups can tell you how the important second and third purchase might be catalyzed or inhibited.

*New York Times* business writer Daniel Gross cautions that research indicates that most of the thoughts and feelings that influence human behavior occur in the unconscious mind. "The primary function of focus groups is often to validate the sellers' own beliefs about their product," he says. This can be avoided by using placebo products and presenting several types of messages, including contradictory statements.

### Cultural variables

By its very nature as an assemblage, qualitative research from focus groups is more sensitive to cultural variables.

In Japan, where formal communication is the norm, focus group participants must first be recruited face-to-face. Then they receive a follow-up phone call. Finally, they are sent an informational e-mail. This process differs greatly from focus groups in the US where enlistment is largely done by phone.

Compared to people in the U.S., in many Asian countries people are somewhat reserved and tend to keep their opinions to themselves. The moderator has to be adept at encouraging participation and putting the members at ease. In such cases, the warm-up period is often longer.

In the U.S., focus groups are normally completed in two hours, but in France, the process may last up to four. European focus groups often prefer to dig deep into the underlying causes of behavior on a psychological level, and are often moderated by trained psychologists. In contrast, moderators in the U.S. tend to be communications professionals.

In Thailand and India, focus groups are separated by gender, age, and social class. In the U.S., focus groups within the Hispanic population must take into account differences in the country of origin of the participants. A mixed group might come up with different results than a country-specific group.

Regardless of where you are holding your focus groups, take note of cultural variables that affect group interaction. Knowing that group dynamics differ from country to country means that it is best to hire a local moderator and recruiter.

### Hold your own focus groups

A good gauge as to whether you should embark on a focus group methodology is to answer the following questions. If you answer yes to at least two questions, then you

might want to consider using focus groups.

- Is my investment large enough on a publication that increased assurance of sales is necessary?

- Will my new publication affect the reputation of the company and other sales?

- Am I going into unknown territory? Examples might include e-books, tie-ins with radio ads, toys or local sports teams.

- Is my product or service capable of being grasped or understood within 10 minutes? (E.g. book titles, front cover concepts, full color versus one or two colors, page proofs of the first chapter, table of contents, back cover concepts, graphics, and typeface.)

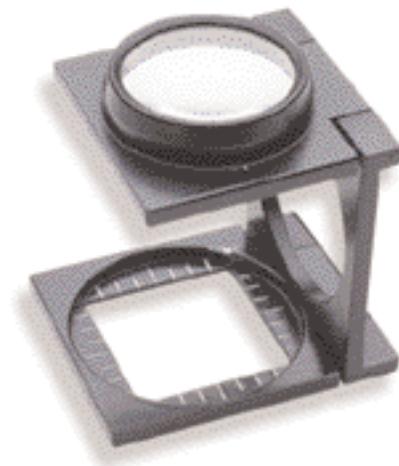
- Would the sale of my product or service be influenced by advertising, promotions, presentations, or individual testimonials?

- Do I need to see other angles, opinions, attitudes, and frameworks of understanding in order to come up with a better marketing plan?

- Can I easily assemble a representative set of the target audience (e.g. trivia lovers, teachers, retailers, birthday gift buyers)?

- Do I have the resources to afford focus groups?

There are many sources on the Web that will help your company organize your own focus groups. With a good moderator and recruiter, your company can perform the same job as that of a professional research company. ❖



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