8

Making Research Decisions: The Focus Group

Chapter Contents

The focus group long has been a mainstay of public relations and marketing research, but it remains a controversial method for research and message testing. Practitioners often tell horror stories about focus groups that provided misleading information for a campaign that later failed. Nevertheless, the method recently has begun to gain more respect as a valid research tool, rather than a cheap and dirty alternative to so-called real research.

A recent proliferation of scholarly and how-to books and articles has made it possible for more practitioners to use the tool more effectively and

wisely. Although focus groups still have limitations, careful application of the method can provide indispensable guidance available from no other tool. As John Palshaw of Palshaw Measurement, Inc., cautioned (1990), however, focus groups are designed to generate ideas, not evaluate them.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

A focus group is a semistructured, group interview analyzed using qualitative methods, which means researchers interpret responses instead of trying to count them. Focus groups explore the attitudes, opinions, behaviors, beliefs, and recommendations of carefully selected groups. Focused discussions, led by a moderator, usually include 6 to 12 participants and take place over 1 to 3 hours. Sessions attempt to define problems, gather reaction to proposed solutions to problems, and explore feelings and reasons behind differences that exist within the group or between the group and the organization.

Organizations typically use focus groups to obtain feedback during product or service development, to test messages for product or service introductions, to guide decisions about packaging design and promotional messages, to determine appropriate types of outlets and target publics for products or messages, to gauge public reaction to issue positions, and to explore opinions concerning company performance and community citizenship. Message testing explores participants' perceptions of the accuracy, clarity, and relevance of a message, as well as the credibility of the source.

More specialized uses of focus groups also exist. Focus groups can be used to gain a better understanding of groups whose perspectives are poorly understood by an organization. This can help an organization respond more effectively to the group's concerns. Focus groups also can help an organization explore its strengths and weaknesses relative to other organizations. In addition, focus groups can be used for brainstorming purposes, to develop strategies for solving a problem instead of simply testing strategies already under development. Focus groups can help an organization gain insight into complex behaviors and conditional opinions, for which survey questionnaires could provide conflicting or seemingly definite information. As a result, focus groups often are used as a supplement to survey research.

Group dynamics in a focus group can be used to reach consensus on an idea, such as the most credible source for a message or the best location for an event. Finally, focus groups can be used to pretest and refine survey instruments, particularly when likely responses to a question are unknown, such as the biggest barriers to a customer's use of a proposed product or service.

Instead of using questionnaires, researchers use protocols to guide focus group discussions. Protocols range from rough outlines to carefully

constructed moderators' guides. Presession questionnaires can be used for screening. In addition, focus groups often use visual aids such as story boards, mock-ups, or other sample materials for pretesting. Whereas surveys try to take a dispassionate, outsider's perspective to obtain the most objective information about a targeted population from a representative group, focus groups try to work more from inside the target group, exploring individuals' perspectives in depth to gain a deeper understanding of their decision-making processes. Surveys, in other words, try to avoid bias; focus groups try to explore and understand it.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups should not be viewed as alternatives to survey research, as the two methods have different strengths and weaknesses. The focus group offers characteristics that give it a uniquely useful role in problem definition and message testing. Because focus groups are socially oriented, for example, they make it possible to uncover information about an issue that would not come out in individual interviews or in surveys. People initially may not recall using a product or service but may be reminded of a relevant situation as a result of another participant's observations during the focused discussion. In addition, the focused discussion makes it possible to probe positive or negative responses in depth. Because people can explain what they mean and moderators can probe for clarification, focus groups provide good face validity. In other words, managers can be confident that they are interpreting what people said in ways consistent with what they meant. This can be more difficult in a survey, for which individuals must check a box even if the question seems vague or the possible response categories do not reflect their views perfectly.

Focus groups also provide quick, relatively inexpensive results to guide a program that requires fast implementation. Although overnight survey services are available, they can be expensive and make it difficult to develop a tailored survey instrument that maximizes the relevance of findings obtained. Political campaigns, meanwhile, can use focus groups to try out possible responses to a competitor's political advertisement in time to air a response within a day or two.

Another advantage of focus groups is their flexibility. Literacy, for example, is not needed for a focus group whereas it is required for a written questionnaire. People without land-based telephones or with caller ID may never respond to a telephone survey but may participate in a focus group if recruited properly. In addition, focus groups can be held in different locations, even in a park. This makes it easier to recruit from populations that may be unable or unwilling to travel to a research facility.

Focus groups have drawbacks that limit their usefulness and increase the risk of obtaining misleading information that can compromise

communication program effectiveness. For example, although the group dynamics of a focus group make it possible for information to come out that might not be uncovered through individual interviews, group dynamics also make it more difficult to control the direction and tenor of discussions. A carefully trained moderator is essential to draw the full range of opinions out of focus group participants and to prevent individuals from dominating the group. Groups vary depending on the characteristics of the participants, the timing, and the environment, which makes their reliability questionable. They also can be difficult to assemble because individuals from targeted populations may be busy, resistant, or forgetful.

Because of these limitations, focus groups should never be used in confrontational situations, for statistical projections, if the unique dynamics of social interaction are unnecessary for information gathering, if confidentiality cannot be assured, or if procedures such as sampling or questioning are driven by client bias rather than by researcher design.

The usefulness of a focused discussion depends on the willingness of participants to share their perspectives freely and honestly. As a result, focus groups must take place in a comfortable, nonthreatening environment. The composition of an appropriate setting requires attention to the makeup of the group itself, as well as the surroundings in which the discussion takes place. A poorly constructed environment can hamper discussion or make it difficult to ascertain true opinions. A focus group of parents, for example, may mask differences in perspective between mothers and fathers. Misleading information obtained from a restricted discussion can doom a campaign.

SELECTING AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

People tend to feel most comfortable when they are with others like themselves. As a result, focus group participants usually are selected to be *homogeneous*, which means similar in certain characteristics. These characteristics depend on the issue explored by the group. For example, a discussion of a college's responsiveness to student financial aid issues could mix male and female students because they are likely to share similar problems regarding funding their education. On the other hand, a discussion of date rape is less productive if the group includes both men and women. Because women often are the victims of date rape, this may make both the men and the women uncomfortable talking about it in front of each other. As a result, separate focus groups can take place to separately explore the beliefs and feelings of men and women about date rape. Similarly, a discussion of workplace issues may need to probe the views of managerial personnel and secretarial personnel separately because employees may not feel comfortable speaking freely in front of their supervisors.

The most productive focus groups recruit participants who are similar but who do not already know each other. If they know each other, interpersonal dynamics such as power roles already have been established and can make open discussion and discovery more difficult. This becomes important in focused discussions that must mix participants with different perspectives, such as employees and supervisors, to explore the dynamics between them. This type of situation can work only if the participants feel they can be open with one another and only if the discussion can take place in a constructive, civil way. In other words, if participants need to include employees and supervisors, they should not include employees and their own supervisors.

Focus group participants often are recruited with respect to homogeneity in demographic characteristics such as age, income, educational level, product usage patterns, or group membership. Screening tests ascertain these characteristics to ensure that participants qualify for inclusion in the study. Such tests can be performed via telephone during recruitment or in the outer lobby on arrival. Several separate focus groups may be required to obtain reactions from different target publics.

Because the focus group method is qualitative not quantitative, it is not necessary to hold a certain number of focus groups to ensure a corresponding degree of reliability. Whereas a survey uses probability sampling to provide reliable results within a 95% level of confidence, focus groups are inherently biased by design. As a result, organizations typically rely on a combination of intuition, budgetary restrictions, and time constraints to determine the number of focus groups that will be held. If time and budget allow, focus groups should continue until all vital target publics have been represented or until the information obtained seems redundant; that is, little new information emerges from additional focus groups. In reality, however, organizations rarely have the time or budget to hold more than two to four focus groups.

Cost varies widely for focus groups. Hiring a professional firm to run a focus group can require $3,000 to $5,000, but organizations can run their own focus groups if they prepare carefully. The cost of using existing staff and volunteer participants can be as low as the cost of popcorn or pizza and soft drinks. According to Morgan and Krueger (1998), fees for professional moderators range from about $75 to $300 per hour, or $750 to $1,500 and upward on a per diem or per group basis.

Focus group participants usually are paid for their time. The going rate depends on the type of sample recruited. Researchers undertaking focus groups of children may rely on prizes or free products as compensation. Focus groups of adults usually pay around $35 to $50 apiece. Recruitment of expert participants such as executives, physicians, or other professionals may require significantly greater payment, perhaps $300 apiece.

It is necessary to recruit more participants than are actually needed for the group. In fact, researchers usually recruit twice the number needed to allow for no-shows and individuals who for some reason become ineligible. When recruiting from special populations, in particular, unforseen circumstances can prevent attendance. People also tend to forget, so preparation requires a multistep process of recruitment, acknowledgment, and mail/email and telephone reminders.

When time is tight, on-the-spot recruitment of focus group participants can take place in a shopping mall that has a market-research facility on the premises. Usually, however, focus group recruitment takes place 1 to 2 weeks before the session. Respondents can be recruited using different methods, but often they are contacted by telephone. Following the initial contact, recruits should receive a written confirmation of the invitation to participate that also serves as a reminder. Reminder phone calls the day or two before the session also helps to boost attendance. If possible, attendees should provide contact numbers and email addresses upon recruitment so that they can be reached at home or at work.

The location of focus group facilities can help or hurt recruitment. The facility should be easy to find, such as in a shopping mall; be relatively close to participants' homes or work places; and have plenty of safe parking available. When recruiting parents, researchers also may find it necessary to provide child care. Proper facilities and staffing must be provided to gain the confidence of parents.

Timing can make a difference for focus group success. Most focus groups take place in the evening and avoid weekends or holidays. Other times, such as the lunch hour, may be appropriate for special cases. If two groups are planned for a single evening, the first typically begins at 6:00 p.m. and the second at 8:15 p.m.

THE FOCUS GROUP SETTING

Participants tend to speak more freely in an informal setting. Conference rooms are better than classrooms, circular seating is better than lecture-style seating, coffee tables are better than conference tables, and comfortable chairs or sofas are better than office or classroom chairs. Some organizations rent hotel suites for focus group discussions, whereas others use rooms specifically built for focus group research. Focus group facilities typically include a two-way mirror, behind which clients can sit to observe the discussion as it unfolds without disturbing the participants. This mirror looks like a window on the observers' side but looks like a mirror on the participants' side. Facilities also may include a buffet table or another area for refreshments because snacks and beverages tend to promote informality. Snacks need to be simple, however, so that the participants pay more attention to the discussion than to their food. Food can

range from a complete meal such as sandwiches to a small snack such as popcorn.

To aid analysis and for later review by the client, discussions are recorded unobtrusively on audiotape, videotape, or both. Participants are advised of all data-collection and observation procedures. Taping and observation are never done in secret or without the participants' consent. Participants also must be informed if their anonymity may not be assured, such as by their appearance on videotape. Often, for the discussion, participants wear name tags but provide only their first names. Sometimes they go by pseudonyms for additional privacy protection. At no time should participants be identified by name in focus group transcripts or reports.

STAFFING

Focus groups generally require a team effort. Besides staff for the planning and recruitment phases of the focus group, the interview itself usually requires several staff members. In addition to the moderator, who leads the discussion, the event requires at least one other staff member to serve as coordinator. The coordinator (or coordinators) welcome and screen participants; handle honoraria; guide participants to the refreshments and make sure refreshments are available; check and run equipment; bring extra batteries, duct tape, and other supplies; and interact with the client. In addition, the coordinator or another staff member takes prolific notes during the session. This is necessary because (a) transcription equipment can and does break down and human error with equipment does happen; (b) some people may speak too softly for their comments to register on an audiotape; (c) it may be difficult to identify the source of a comment, particularly if several participants speak at once; and (d) the note taker can provide an initial real-time analysis of themes emerging from the discussion. The note taker may develop the final report in collaboration with the moderator.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MODERATOR

The focus group moderator is the key to an effective discussion. The moderator must be able to lead discussion, providing both structure and flexibility to keep the discussion on track but allow participants to pursue issues in depth. Because the moderator must be skilled in group dynamics, some people specialize in focus group leadership and can command an expert's salary to do so.

The moderator must display an air of authority while establishing an atmosphere of warmth and trust so that participants feel free to speak their minds. The moderator strives to keep the structure of the questioning strategy from becoming too obvious because that could detract from the

informality that increases the likelihood of open discussion. In addition, the moderator must treat all participants with equal respect, staying neutral while encouraging all points of view. Moderators never offer their own personal opinions, and they also must avoid using words such as *excellent*, *great*, *wonderful*, or *right*, which signal approval of a particular point of view. The moderator also must be able to prevent any member of the group from dominating and must be able to draw out hesitant members.

Effective moderators memorize their topic outlines or protocols so that they can pay full attention to the unfolding dynamics of the group. An abbreviated checklist can help them keep on track. The best focus groups direct the discussion themselves to a great extent, instead of having their discussion directed by a highly structured questionnaire. As a result, moderators must be ready to make adjustments, including the sudden addition or deletion of questions by the client, who can convey messages to the moderator during the focus group by way of an ear microphone or notes. The moderator may need to modify a questioning strategy that fails with a particular group or pursue an unexpected discovery that, although unplanned, can provide useful information. Morgan and Krueger (1998) recommended the use of *5-second pause* and *probe* strategies to elicit more information from respondents (see also Krueger, 1994). The 5-second pause can prompt others to add their comments to one just made. The probe responds to an information-poor comment such as "I agree" with a rejoinder such as "Would you explain further?" or "Can you give an example of what you mean?"

Moderators have a sharp but subtle awareness of their own body language so that they can provide nonverbal encouragement without biasing responses. For example, leaning forward toward a participant can encourage the individual to go more deeply into a point, but too much head nodding gives the appearance of endorsement that can make another participant hesitant to express disagreement. Similarly, eye contact can provide encouragement to a member who seems withdrawn, whereas a lack of eye contact can help prevent another individual from dominating discussion by denying that individual the attention desired. Eye contact can seem aggressive to individuals who are shy or who come from cultural backgrounds in which direct eye contact is considered confrontational, which means that the moderator needs to understand and act sensitively toward cultural differences.

Even the moderator's dress can make a difference. Although a blue suit, white shirt, and tie can provide an air of authority, for example, it also can give the impression of formality and leadership that some may find offensive or threatening. The moderator needs to both lead the group and fit in with group. As a result, there may be times when the ethnic background, gender, and age of the moderator emerge as important characteristics. Participants often assume the moderator is an employee of the

organization under discussion, which can hinder or bias responses. The moderator needs to do everything possible to communicate neutrality.

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT GROUP MEMBERS

Moderators must anticipate the possibility of losing control of a group. Usually, dominant or disruptive participants can be managed using body language and occasional comments. For example, a moderator can hold up a hand as a stop sign to one participant and signal to another, "Let's hear from you now." A moderator also can suggest that participants answer a question one by one, going around the room, rather than allowing the most assertive respondents to speak out first every time. Seating charts, along with place cards on the table, can help moderators refer to people by name. If a group becomes too wild or conflictual or if individuals become too antagonistic or disrespectful, a 5-minute break can help calm everyone down. In extreme cases, a particularly disruptive individual can be asked to leave during the break. The individual is thanked for participating and told that he or she was needed for the first part of the discussion but that the second part of the discussion will be different and not everyone will be needed. It is important to be firm but polite.

PROTOCOL DESIGN

The focus group protocol, or outline, is designed to provide a subtle structure to the discussion. Unlike surveys, which rely primarily on closed-ended questions, focus group questions must be open ended. They include a combination of uncued questions and more specific, cued questions (probes) that can help spark responses if discussion lags. Uncued questions are ideal ("What impressions do you have of the XYZ organization currently?") because they give participants the most freedom to introduce new ideas. Cued questions provide more context or probe for more depth ("What about the news coverage of the incident bothered you the most?"). The protocol provides just enough structure to help the moderator stay on track. It also progresses from general questions to more focused questions so that participants have a chance to get comfortable before confronting the most difficult issues.

   Closed-ended questions also can be useful if the focus group is being used to explore reasons for answers that might appear on a survey. Analysts, however, must be careful not to extrapolate from focus group participants' answers to closed-ended questions. Clients often appreciate both types of information but can be tempted to make more out of focus group "surveys" than is appropriate.

   The subtleties of question construction can have a great effect on the type of discussion that takes place and the value of the information shared.

Question phrasings need to avoid using *why* because that term can seem confrontational and can stifle open responses. Instead, questions should rely on *how* and *what* phrasing. For example, instead of asking respondents, "Why do you dislike this poster?" ask, "What did you dislike about this poster?" Questions also need to avoid dichotomous phrasing ("Did you enjoy the event?") because participants may answer the question literally or ambiguously ("Yes," or "Pretty much") without providing any context ("What do you remember about the event?"). Sometimes, however, a yes/no question can prod a reticent group into a simple answer that can be explored in depth through follow-up probes. Krueger (1994) also recommended opening with more positive questions and saving negative questions for later so that the overall tone of the group remains constructive, acknowledging both sides of an issue.

Two especially useful question strategies recommended by Krueger include *sentence completion* and *conceptual mapping*. Sentence completion questions can be introduced verbally by the moderator or handed out in writing. Participants are asked to complete sentences that request information on their motivations or feelings ("When I first heard about the change in policy I thought . . . "), often in writing, using notepads and pencils provided for the purpose. This enables the moderator to obtain the initial views of every member even if they change their minds during discussion or feel hesitant to speak out. Conceptual mapping asks participants to consider how an organization or product relates to other, similar organizations or products. For example, participants could be asked to "map" political candidates such that the most similar are closest together. The discussion then focuses on what characteristics each participant used to establish similarity, such as trustworthiness, conservatism, or experience. Conceptual mapping requires that participants have some prior impressions or knowledge on which to base their judgments.

According to Krueger (1994), the focus group protocol has five general sections of main questions, to which cued probes can be added to ensure discussion flows smoothly.

1. *The opening question*. This question functions as a warm-up or ice breaker and is intended to demonstrate to participants that they have characteristics in common with one another. It should be able to be answered quickly by the participants, requiring only 10 to 20 seconds from each. Krueger advised that these questions should be factual ("How many children do you have, and how old are they?") rather than attitude- or opinion-based ("What is your favorite flavor of ice cream?"). Questions need to avoid requiring disclosures of occupational status because that can create power differentials that hinder group dynamics.

2. *Introduction questions*. These questions set the agenda for the discussion by addressing the topic of interest in a general way ("What was your

first impression of . . . ?" or "What comes to mind when you think about . . . ?"). These questions are designed to get participants talking about their experiences relevant to the issue but are not intended to provide much information for later analysis. During this period, participants should begin to feel comfortable talking about the topic with each other.

3. *Transition questions*. These questions begin to take participants into the topic more deeply so that they become aware of how others view the topic ("What events have you attended at the Coliseum this year?"). They provide a link between the introductory questions and the key questions that follow.

4. *Key questions*. These two to five questions form the heart of the focus group inquiry and directly address the issues of concern to the client. They can focus on message testing, conceptual mapping, idea generation, or whatever information is of interest to the client. These questions usually are written first, with the remaining questions built around them.

5. *Ending questions*. These questions bring closure to the discussion to make sure all viewpoints have been represented and to confirm the moderator's interpretation of overall themes expressed. These can take the form of suggestions, recommendations for the client. Respondents are asked to reflect on the comments made throughout the session. These questions take the form of a final reaction ("All things considered . . . "), which often is asked of each member one by one; a summary confirmation, in which the moderator gives a 2- to 3-minute overview of the discussion followed by a request for verification ("Is this an adequate summary?"); and a final, standardized question ending the discussion following another overview of the study ("Have we missed anything?"). Krueger (1994) recommended leaving 10 minutes for responses to this question, especially if the focus group is early in a series. The answers to this question can give direction to future focused discussions.

MESSAGE AND IDEA TESTING

When using focus groups to try out campaign strategies, it is important to investigate a full range of possibilities and not just the one or two favorites of the client or agency. The manager does not want to limit the ability of the focus group to produce surprises or upset assumptions. Given the crowded marketplace of ideas that exists in the media and everyday environment, breaking through the morass presents communication programs with a challenging task. This challenge can tempt message producers to "push the envelope," going for the most shocking message or the most colorful message or the funniest message. As chapter 14 explains, however, messages need to accomplish more than getting the target audience's attention. They also need to be perceived as relevant, memorable,

motivating, accurate, and credible. Extremes may or may not be necessary to break through the clutter, and extremes may help or may backfire once people begin to pay attention to the message. As a result, it is useful to test strategies ranging from the tame to the outrageous. The messages tested for the "Talk to Your Kids" campaign, shown in Figures 8.1 through 8.3, provide such a range.

Managers must keep in mind that the target publics for messages may include gatekeepers as well as the ultimate audience. The Washington State Department of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, for example, wanted to run a media campaign exhorting parents of children between 3 and 10 years of age to talk with their children about alcohol. Because funds for paid placements were limited, they needed the cooperation of the Washington State Association of Broadcasters. As a result, they tested messages with parents and with broadcasters, who had different concerns. Because many broadcasters accept advertising for beer, they shied away from messages
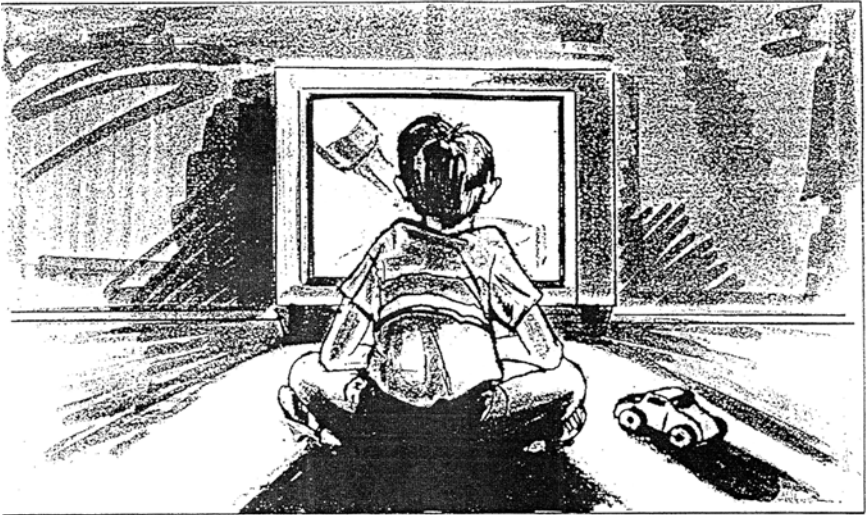
Make sure the most important messages about alcohol come from you.

FIG. 8.1.   Rough of "Boy and TV" alcohol campaign advertisement. This image of a boy in front of a television was changed to a girl in print advertisements after feedback from focus group participants suggested that the image was too stereotypical. The image of the boy was still used for a television ad. Image courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.

Make sure the most important message about alcohol comes from you.

Whether you know it or not, your children are already receiving powerful messages about alcohol.

Just by watching TV, they repeatedly see adults drinking to have fun. Drinking to relax. Even drinking to look attractive and be popular.

Parents can't control all the information young children receive about this drug. However, you can prepare them for the peer pressure and onslaught of pro-alcohol messages to come.

Call **1-800-662-9111**, or write for our free guide, "Talking To Your Kids About Alcohol."

And do it soon. Because they've already started listening.

Washington State Substance Abuse Coalition
Talking to Your Kids About Alcohol Brochure
12729 N.E. 20th, Suite 18, Bellevue, WA 98005

FIG. 8.2.   Final version of boy and television advertisement. This image of a girl in front of a television was created in response to focus group comments. Image courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.

This wouldn't look so innocent if you had heard Lisa offer Mr. Bear another scotch and soda.

FIG. 8.3.   Rough of "Tea Party" alcohol campaign advertisement. The words "scotch and soda" in the headline accompanying this image of a girl having a tea party with her teddy bear was changed to "glass of wine" after focus group respondents suggested that the hard liquor phrase was too extreme. A second focus group reacted positively to the "glass of wine" version, and the revised image was accepted for use in television ads for the campaign. Image courtesy of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse, Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State.

that seemed especially strident. They were supportive of the campaign, however, and ended up providing nearly $100,000 of free exposure for the final announcements during prime viewing hours.

NEW OPTIONS MADE POSSIBLE BY TECHNOLOGY

Focus group designers now can use hand-held response dials or keypads to gather information from participants. The use of these devices makes it possible to gather responses from every participant, even when some seem reticent about speaking their minds publicly. In addition, the electronic collection of data enables the moderator to display results from the group for discussion purposes. For example, after showing a series of five rough-cut video messages, the moderator can show the group how many participants chose each option as a "favorite" or "least favorite" choice. The moderator also can ask participants to indicate how believable each message seems and then display the results to explore what made the messages seem more or less credible.
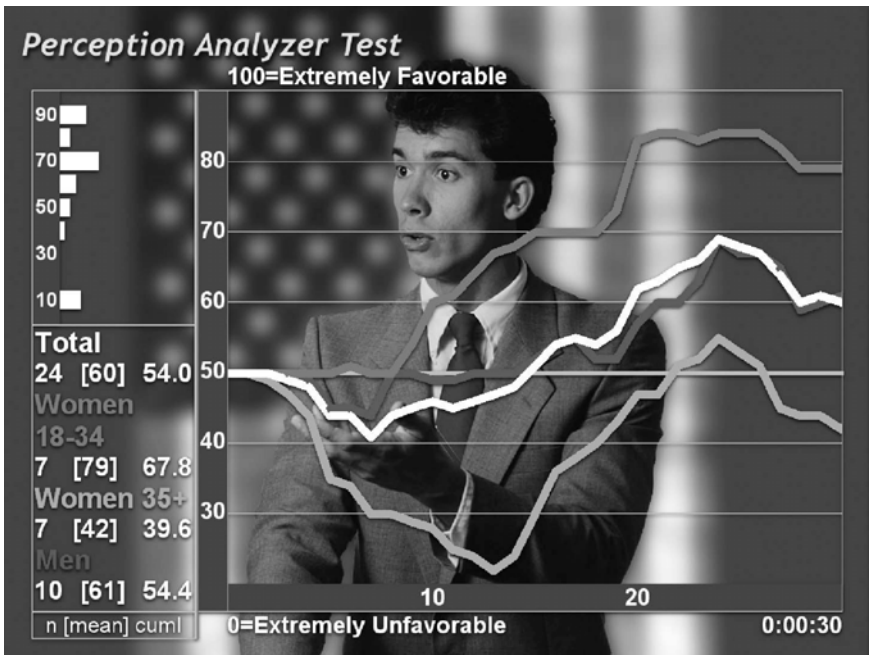
FIG. 8.4.   Sample overlay of moment-by-moment responses to a politician's speech.
Courtesy of MSInteractive, Portland, Oregon.

Some systems, such as the Perception Analyzer produced by MSInteractive, enable researchers to explore real-time responses to messages on a second-by-second basis. Respondents dial a higher number when they like what they see or hear and dial a lower number when they do not like what they see or hear. As shown in Figure 8.4, the resulting graph can be overlaid on the video to show where the message gained or lost audience support. Respondents can discuss the results or researchers can analyze the graph on their own. Although managers must carefully avoid the temptation to rely on the quantitative data produced by this technique, it can help to focus and motivate discussion among group members. Several dozen adolescents in a recent project exploring their perceptions of anti-tobacco public service announcements, for example, unanimously praised the system. Later groups with college students garnered similar enthusiasm.

RUNNING THE GROUP

The moderator begins by welcoming the participants, introducing the topic of discussion and purpose of the meeting very generally, and laying out the ground rules for discussion. The explanation of the study needs to be truthful but vague to avoid leading participants. The strategy of the focus

group method, after all, is to let the group steer discussion to the extent possible. Ground rules usually cover the following points:

1. Participants should speak up so everyone can hear what they have to say.
2. Only one person should speak at a time to make sure comments are not missed.
3. Each person should say what they think and not what they think others want to hear. Honest responses are important, and respondents have been asked to participate because their true opinions are valued.
4. Negative comments are at least as useful as positive ones. ("If we thought we were doing a perfect job already, we would not be holding this focus group. We need to know how we can do things better.")
5. No right or wrong answers exist to the questions asked.

Moderators sometimes find it helpful to have participants jot down their answers to questions before opening a discussion. Participants also can be asked to deposit note cards into labeled boxes on the table so that the raw responses can be analyzed later and compared with opinions shared only during the discussion. This technique effectively reveals minority opinions.

ANALYZING THE RESULTS

Analysis of qualitative data can range from an intuitive overview to rigorous scrutiny using methods accepted by scholars. A variety of computer programs for content analysis of qualitative data exist, including freeware programs such as VBPro (Miller, 2000). Time pressure usually prevents the most detailed analysis, but some scientific principles apply even to the most succinct report of results. Krueger (1994) and others recommended the following principles:

1. *Be systematic*. Establish a procedure ahead of time that makes it possible to disconfirm assumptions and hypotheses. The procedure can be as simple as searching for themes and using at least two direct quotes to illustrate each point. Every interpretation needs to consider whether alternative explanations might provide an equally valid analysis.
2. *Be verifiable*. Another person should arrive at similar conclusions using similar methods. Keep in mind that focus groups can provide information that a client will find threatening or disheartening. To convince a determined or defensive client that a change in policy or strategy is necessary, the evidence must be compelling.
3. *Be focused*. Keep in mind the original reasons for holding the focus group and look for information that relates to those points. Focus

groups that go on for 3 hours can produce transcripts with well more than 50 pages. Researchers must have a strategy ready to reduce the voluminous mass of data into meaningful chunks of information.

4. *Be practical*. Perform only the level of analysis that makes sense for the client and the situation. A complete transcript, for example, may not be necessary if the issues explored were fairly simple, and it may take time away from other planning activities during a tight implementation deadline.

5. *Be immediate*. During delays, the focus group observers' impressions may fade, compromising their ability to analyze the data. All observers must make notes during the focus group and immediately afterward to identify themes and direct quotes that seem important. These observations can be confirmed, fleshed out, and supplemented during later analysis but often provide the most valid and vivid conclusions.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The focus group is probably the method most often employed by public relations professionals. It also is probably the method most often misused, which likely contributes to client and managerial skepticism of its value. The focus group offers tremendous benefits to the practitioner aiming to pretest strategies or understand communication processes in some depth. As long as the communication manager respects the limitations of the focus group, it can be an indispensable tool for responsive and effective communication program planning.