

# 8

# Planning and Conducting Focus Groups

## Learning Objectives

- 1 Introduce focus groups and their advantages and disadvantages
- 2 Describe the steps in developing the focus group methodology
- 3 Explain the personal characteristics and skills needed in a moderator
- 4 Relate how group conflict can be minimized
- 5 Explore alternative methods of conducting focus groups

## EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW IS ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB: BUT CAN YOU UNDERSTAND IT?

Students might not have thought much about pensions. However, their professors certainly will have! Employers often tell their employees that everything they need to know about pension plans is available online. Researchers from the University of Edinburgh and Herriot Watt University decided to conduct research to see if these pension information websites were meeting the needs of those seeking help. They conducted a study of current and archived websites and also used focus groups and observational research to gather data. What they learned was that the information that pension providers put onto the website was not the information that consumers wanted and needed in order to make better decisions.

*Questions:* What research methodologies should be conducted before a company's webpage is created to ensure it meets the needs of consumers? Who should be involved as research subjects?

*Source:* Harrison et al., 2006

## 8.1 Rationale for Using Focus Group Methodology

A marketing research focus group is a methodology that uses participant interaction and moderator probing to uncover consumer wants, needs and desires. A focus group is sometimes misunderstood

as being a mere discussion group where a moderator introduces a topic and then sits back and takes notes. However, it is the interaction between the moderator and group members and also between the members themselves that gets beyond participants' first responses to explore deeper ideas.

The focus group is designed to collect data and not just to air opinions. This interaction distinguishes focus groups from other types of group sessions, such as group interviews that do not encourage interaction between research participants (Carson, 2001). Used correctly, focus groups are an excellent method of generating new ideas for product benefits and promotions, exploring the causes for problems or failures, and gaining insights that can then be used to design quantitative research studies.

Focus groups are probably most frequently used as a means of generating new ideas. Product development is ultimately the responsibility of company employees. Although these employees may have marketing expertise, it is customers who will make the purchase decision. It only makes sense to ask customers for assistance in generating ideas for new or improved products. In addition, focus groups can be used to generate ideas on effective promotional campaigns including effective marketing messages and appropriate choices of media.

Focus groups are also used to learn the 'why' or cause of problems or failures. The problems explored in a focus group could be why a product is not succeeding in the marketplace. Of course it may seem to be a simple task to ask consumers why they don't like a product. For example, a simple question such as why consumers do not purchase a food product might receive the response that consumers do not like the taste. In the case of an automobile, consumers may respond by saying they do not like the design.

The problem is that simply telling the marketing department to improve the taste or style of a product does not provide any information on what consumers did not like and what they would like instead. In the case of a service product, consumers might say that staff were rude. However, without any information on why consumers felt staff were rude there is nothing for management to use in order to improve. Focus groups will explore the reasons for these problems in depth, thus providing ideas a company can use to solve the problem.

### *Appropriate questions for focus groups*

- What do you think should be done?
- Why do you prefer ... ?
- Why don't you prefer ... ?
- How do you feel about ... ?
- What would you like changed?

Focus groups are often conducted to generate a hypothesis that will be used in future quantitative research. For example, they can be used to gain insights that would help a researcher to write future survey questions. While the survey questions about why a product is liked or disliked are easy to write, the answers are not. This is because there are so many potential answers as preferences vary widely. Focus groups can be used to gather information on the answers that should be provided. For example, focus groups may have provided information that consumers are concerned about a specific product's color, size, and shape, and this information can then be included on the subsequent survey form.

### 8.1.1 Advantages of using focus groups

An advantage of using focus groups is the opportunity they provide for researchers to probe issues in depth by encouraging interaction between members. In addition, if a moderator is

unsure of any point made by participants, they can be asked follow-up questions. Finally, a focus group can be combined with the use of projective techniques to elicit nonverbal responses.

### *Participant interaction*

The major advantage to using a focus group is the interaction and synergy that increase spontaneity (Andreasen, 2002). In a one-on-one interview methodology a participant might place a researcher in a position of authority. As a result, this participant may not want to disagree or express negative opinions. However, in a focus group participants will not feel that they must agree with the opinions of other participants. As a result, they will be much more likely to disagree and express their own ideas. In addition, unlike an interview, participants do not need to speak until they feel that they have something they want to say. As a result, individuals will find a focus group a much less intimidating experience than an individual interview.

### *Use of follow-up questions to probe*

One of the advantages of a focus group over a survey is the ability of the moderator to ask follow-up questions. When a participant responds to a question with a general comment that they do not 'like' a product, the moderator can keep asking for additional information. The final answer may be that the participant does not like the color, size, taste, packaging or cost. The moderator can then ask what they might prefer.

### *Combine with other techniques*

While focus groups allow participants to interact with each other and the moderator, they also allow participants to interact with their physical surroundings. To help gain information, a moderator may allow the participants to handle or taste the physical product. This method could not be used when conducting a survey. In addition, the focus group methodology can be combined with projective techniques by using video clips or photos of the product in action.

## 8.1.2 Disadvantages of conducting focus groups

While focus groups are an excellent means of generating ideas, they are not useful for proving facts. In addition, results from focus groups are dependent on the correct choice of research participants and the use of a skilled moderator.

### *Doesn't supply proof*

One of the disadvantages of focus group methodology is that it cannot be used to support a hypothesis. Only quantitative techniques using an appropriately chosen sample can do so. Management can use focus groups to gather data to make decisions on such topics as brand names, advertising copy or new product ideas. However, they should not base decisions solely on focus group evidence. Even though focus group participants will have been chosen to reflect a target market segment, the range of views in a focus group is still too small to generalize to the larger population (Hackley, 2003). If the wrong research subjects are chosen to participate, the wrong information will be obtained. Even where the participants are chosen carefully, if the moderator is unskilled, the results will be useless.

### *Results dependent on skill of moderator*

A disadvantage to conducting focus group research is the effect that an unskilled moderator can have on the results obtained. An ideal focus group uses the interaction between members to spur

new ideas and insights that may not be uncovered if the participants were interviewed individually. However, this interaction depends on the skill of the moderator to keep the discussion on the topic without leading the participants in the views they express. In addition, a skilled moderator will ensure that every participant is treated equally. The moderator must also, in a non-confrontational manner, ensure that the group members are respectful of each other's ideas and opinions.

### *Results dependent on choice of subjects*

The success of a focus group in producing useable research data depends on the appropriate choice of research subjects. A well moderated focus group will produce useable research data. However, if the wrong research subjects are included the information provided will be worthless. Even worse, the management of the company commissioning research may not understand the importance of verifying how the participants were chosen. They will therefore base decisions on the information and then be surprised when their actions are not productive. They might blame the methodology when the true cause of such a failure was actually the choice of participants.

While there are disadvantages to the focus group methodology, they continue to be a popular choice among researchers. In the box below are some suggestions on how focus groups could be improved.

#### REINVENTING THE FOCUS GROUP

The first focus groups, held in the 1930s to gather information on consumer products, were conducted in the evening. This time of day worked well, as it allowed Mom to attend while Dad watched the kids. While a lot has changed in society since then, focus groups have basically remained the same. However, market researcher Naomi Henderson asks fellow colleagues in the field to consider the 'What If?' of the following questions.

- What if a focus group didn't have to be two hours long?
- What if the researchers used videotape to study subjects in their natural setting?
- What if the researcher worked more closely with the client to ensure that the right participants were chosen?
- What if the research clients actually sat in on the focus group rather than observe from behind a mirror?
- What if researchers and clients met in person immediately after the conclusion of the research to discuss issues?
- What if researchers met at the beginning of the year with clients so that research needs could be anticipated?

Addressing these 'What Ifs?' could help focus groups become more aligned with modern marketing theory.

*Source: Henderson, 2006*

### 8.1.3 Combining focus group and survey research

In the past, marketing research was often viewed as an either/or proposition. Either researchers believed in the primacy of quantitative research or they were believers in qualitative research.

While there is more attention being paid to qualitative research than in the past, academic researchers continue to focus on quantitative studies for their own research. A study of 1,195 articles in three marketing journals found that 25 per cent used qualitative methodologies, while 46 per cent used quantitative. What was of particular interest was that between 1993 and 2002 there was no increase in the usage of qualitative methodologies (Hanson and Grimmer, 2007).

Even if researchers prefer using quantitative research, they should consider combining methodologies. Once ideas (such as new brand names, promotional messages and product benefits) are generated by a focus group, the ideas can then be further researched using a quantitative technique such as a survey. This type of two-stage research project uses the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative research by first generating ideas and then confirming them. While more costly in terms of time and resources than a single study, such a two-stage study makes sense when expensive decisions must be made. This is because the cost to a company of a wrong decision can be very high.

## 8.2 Steps in Developing the Focus Group Methodology

The focus group methodology consists of the three stages of preparing, conducting and analyzing as shown in Table 8.1. Preparation for a focus group requires that researchers meet with management to discuss the research objectives. The researchers together with management will then develop the research participant profile, after which the participants will be invited and a moderator will be chosen. The researchers will then use both the research objectives and the participant profile to write a focus group script. Conducting the research involves preparation of the facilities, moderating the group, and gathering the material. After the research has been conducted, the researchers must transcribe the proceedings, code the results and prepare the report.

**Table 8.1 Focus group process**

Preparation	Meet with management to clarify issues Develop the participant profile Invite subjects to participate Choose a moderator Write the focus group script
Conducting	Prepare the facility Moderate the proceedings Gather and maintain the information
Analysis	Transcribe the information Code the information Write the report

### 8.2.1 Focus group preparation

During the preparation stage of the focus group methodology researchers meet with management and also those staff from departments that have a stake in solving the problem. Qualitative research is conducted when management is exploring new ideas or the cause of a problem. Therefore at this meeting it is important to have a broad, wide ranging discussion on the issues

that management is concerned about. The vaguer the research issue, the more important it is for researchers to clarify what management wants and needs to know.

One of the problems researchers may face in the preparation stage is communicating to management that the focus group discussion must stay 'focused'. Unfortunately management may have the misconception that an hour long focus group with eight participants will result in eight hours of information. As a result of this belief, they will give researchers a long list of topics they want covered during the focus group. Of course in a focus group only one person can speak at a time, which limits the amount of information that can be gathered. In addition, it is important to remember that besides the time limitation the purpose of a focus group is to discuss an issue in depth. A focus group should not be conducted as a group survey, where researchers have a list of questions and then allow each member to respond only quickly. Researchers should come away from the meeting with management with two to three topic areas at most that the focus group will address.

### *Participant profile*

After the research issues have been defined, the participants for the focus group must be chosen. Researchers and management will together develop a participant profile. For example, the research question may ask about the opinions of current customers. In this case, the participants will be chosen to represent the segmentation characteristics of the particular segment the question addresses. Groups that do not wish to participate may require a special means of invitation (see the box below). At other times the research question may ask about the opinions of a potential market segment and it will be chosen with these characteristics in mind.

#### HOW DO YOU GET YOUTH TO PARTICIPATE IN A FOCUS GROUP? MAKE SURE THEY ARE WITH THEIR FRIENDS!

Researchers from the University of Strathclyde and the University of Edinburgh conducted a study of British young people, aged 13–17, to determine how they used their mobile phones and their attitudes toward commercial messages sent to them on their phones. To determine the answer, the study involved 175 participants from three different schools on the east coast of Scotland. First the researchers asked each participant to complete a questionnaire on phone usage and their attitude towards marketing. The researchers then wanted to conduct focus groups. However, they already knew that young people would not be interested in the traditional focus group format of six to eight strangers sitting around a table. Instead, the researchers conducted mini-groups containing three people in each. These mini-groups consisted of young people who were already friends. This way they already had a bond and were willing to talk. The research findings? Their phone is 'a friend in their hand', so they hate it when a commercial appears.

*Source:* Grant and O'Donohoe, 2007

### *Choose a moderator*

After the participants have been invited a moderator must be chosen. If a company or organization is large enough to support their own marketing research division, the moderator may be

someone internal to that company. If not, a moderator must be hired to conduct the focus group. Moderators may be professionals who work in a full-service advertising agency, or they may be consultants with their own company.

The moderator should not be familiar with the participants. In fact, it is best if the moderator has no contact with the participants before the focus group session. Having a pre-existing relationship with a member of the group makes building a rapport with others in the group more difficult. A pre-existing relationship may cause a division in the group between those who know the moderator and those who do not.

### *Focus group script*

The final step in the preparation stage would be to write the focus group script. The script will include the questions that will be asked during the focus group. These main research topic areas will be addressed with general questions that will then lead to additional follow-up questions. The script should be broken down into the three sections of a focus group; building a rapport, probing and closing. Besides the questions, the script will describe the techniques that will be used to gather information. The technique may be simply a question and discussion format. Alternatively, the focus group may use projective techniques. A focus group script may appear deceptively easy to produce. However, to have everyone agree on the final script can take as much effort and time as writing a survey form. In the box below is a sample focus group script.

## SAMPLE FOCUS GROUP SCRIPT WITH PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Research questions to be addressed in park use focus group:

1. Which parks are frequented by the participants and why?
2. What are their opinions of the facilities/activities?
3. What suggestions do participants have for improvements?

### **BUILDING A RAPPORT**

Purpose: To relax and bond the group and to connect the group to the subject.

Method: Welcome and general discussion.

Question: Which park do you usually visit?

Additional questions: What other community parks are you familiar with?

*Technique: To spur thought and conversation a map and photos of the city's parks will be on display.*

### **PROBING**

Purpose: To uncover information useful in answering research questions.

Method: General discussion followed by projective techniques.

Question: Why do you or why do you not visit your community park?

*(Continued)*

*Technique: Speech bubble sentence completion, with picture of person in the park commenting to fellow park visitor, "The reason I visit (or would visit) the park is \_\_\_\_\_."*

Additional questions: What is your favorite activity? Do you feel safe in the park? What type of facilities or activities should be in the park?

*Technique: Ideas generated by participants will be listed on large pieces of paper. Each participant is given five pretend \$100 bills and push pins. They will use these to vote for where to spend money. They can pin all their money on one idea or spread it around.*

## **CLOSING**

Purpose: To move the group towards the next step.

Method: Discussion to determine depth of commitment.

Question: If you had the power to insist the Mayor take one action to improve the parks, what would it be?

*Technique: Pass around index cards. Ask participants to each list their idea for the Mayor.*

## 8.2.2 Conducting a focus group

A marketing research firm or large corporation may have a specialized focus group facility. This facility would consist of a reception area where focus group participants would be greeted. A separate room where the focus group would take place would provide a table with comfortable seating. Also in the room would be projection equipment for showing any video clips the moderator might use. A table for displaying products, an easel with paper for writing and a side table with refreshments would all be in place. In addition, the room would contain a means for taping the proceedings. Attached to the focus group room would be a side room that would be used by researchers and management to view the proceedings using a one-way mirror.

While such a setting is very professional, it is also costly, and it is not necessary to have such a suite of rooms to conduct a successful focus group. In fact it may be argued that it is counterproductive. This type of corporate setting is the natural environment of researchers and corporate employees. However, it is not the natural environment of most consumers and many might find it intimidating.

It is possible to have a focus group in any type of location where eight to ten people can be comfortably seated. If technical equipment is needed, it can easily be brought to the location. For example, if a corporation wants to study the needs of young people, it makes more sense to have the focus group in a bar or restaurant where young people congregate. Likewise, people from a specific ethnic group would be more likely to speak candidly if the focus group were held in a community center in their own neighborhood. A focus group with children requires special planning (see the box below).



## CHILDREN ARE SPECIAL SO THE FOCUS GROUPS SHOULD ALSO BE SPECIAL

It will take additional planning to run a successful focus group with children. Despite the added difficulty, companies that sell products geared to children, such as toys, must rely on focus groups if they are to have successful product development. However, companies that produce other products such as food, clothing, furniture and even tourism understand that children must also be included in their research plans because they have input into the decision-making process. To ensure that their ideas and opinions are included in product development and promotion, focus groups are necessary. However, when recruiting children for focus groups it is important not only to assess their demographic characteristics but also their verbal ability.

Of course any focus group involving children should ensure that they will be comfortable and protected. In addition, to run a successful focus group with children the following guidelines are suggested:

*Group size:* Keep it small, four to five is enough, don't mix by age and it's best to separate by gender.

*Time:* Keep it short, one hour at the most.

*Setting:* Adapt the physical environment by making it kid-friendly.

*Skills:* The process should be at the appropriate cognitive level, as age six is very different from age ten.

*Play:* Use games to bond and reward, as kids get bored very quickly.

*Tasks:* Give familiar tasks and get responses through nonverbal means, as marking a smiley face or frowning face is easier for children than giving a verbal response.

*Source:* Faulkenberry Summers, 1992

A focus group consists of three stages. The first stage is used to build a rapport. This can be accomplished by having the participants give first name introductions. The moderator can then introduce the subject by asking an easy, non-threatening question. Once a rapport has been established, the moderator will move on to more probing questions on the issue. During this portion of the focus group interaction will be encouraged and follow-up questions will be used. Finally, the moderator will provide a sense of closure by asking a final question or by requesting some last thoughts on the subject.

After the conclusion of the focus group, the moderator will thank the participants for their attendance. Once they have left it is the moderator's responsibility to maintain all information in an orderly fashion. Any large sheets of paper should be taken down and labeled. Projective material such as drawings should be collected and placed in a file. Finally, the recording of the proceedings should be labeled together with the date and the topic.

### 8.2.3 Focus group analysis

After a focus group has been conducted, the final step is to analyze the research findings. This is the responsibility of the moderator, as part of the skill they bring to the role is their ability to interpret

**Table 8.2 Successful moderators**

Personal characteristics	Interest in research process Empathy with participants
Skills and knowledge	Knowledge of research methods Skill in group dynamics Skill in analyzing data and writing reports

what has occurred. The focus group proceedings may have been videoed or taped. In addition, there may be written notes and also material from projective techniques. All the recorded and written information will be analyzed by the moderator for common themes and unique insights.

After the analysis is completed, a final report will be written. A research report for quantitative techniques will have statistics that are presented in graph or chart form to support its findings. A qualitative research report will rely on supporting its findings using quotes or projective materials. The final task of the moderator is to provide an oral report of the findings.

## 8.3 Desirable Moderator Characteristics and Skills

One of the key measures in having a successful focus group is to write a focus group script that addresses the research question. In addition, the subjects must meet the participant profile. Lastly, the right moderator must be selected. A skilled moderator will be able to run a successful focus group even if the subjects aren't as motivated to participate as would be desired and the questions are a bit too vague or too narrow. However, a poor moderator will result in an unsuccessful focus group – even with the most carefully chosen and motivated participants and the most well-written script. Choosing a successful moderator requires paying attention to both personal characteristics and skills as shown in Table 8.2 above.

### 8.3.1 Desirable personal characteristics

Successful moderators will find the research process interesting. It is not necessary, or even advisable, for them to be knowledgeable about the research topic. However, good researchers continue to find the process of obtaining needed information exciting no matter what topic is under discussion. A moderator will treat each focus group as being important and will be concerned that it provides the information needed by the company or organization. If they do not feel like this, they might not be willing to spend the time in developing a script and other techniques that will provide the needed information. Instead, they may conduct a focus group using the same procedures and techniques that they used last time.

A moderator also needs to be comfortable with and feel empathy for the participants. This is especially important if a moderator is a different age and from a different income level, religion or ethnicity. Empathy cannot be faked. If focus group participants come from a group whose opinions are usually ignored, they will quickly notice if a moderator does not treat them as equals. For this reason it is best to have a moderator with at least some similar demographic or psychographic characteristics as participants. If this is not possible, the moderator should have at least worked with similar types of participants in the past.

### 8.3.2 Required skills

A moderator should not only be familiar with focus groups, but should also have at least a basic understanding of all research methodologies. Management is often unclear as to what research method should be used to answer each type of research question. A knowledge of research methodologies will help a moderator to know when the information a company wants would be best discovered through the use of another method.

A moderator should also understand group dynamics. They will be unable to direct a group in a productive direction without a strong understanding of how groups function. Finally, a moderator should be skilled in the analysis and reporting of focus group data. Survey data can be analyzed by someone who had no input into the design or conducting of a survey. This is not true of a focus group, which is an interactive process between the moderator and the participants. The box below provides information that can be used to assess a moderator.

#### IS YOUR FOCUS GROUP MODERATOR UP TO THE JOB?

Much has been written about the abilities needed by a moderator. Not as much has been written about how to know if the focus group moderator is doing a good job. Here are some suggested questions. (The answer should be yes for all of these except for question five and question eight.) Does the moderator:

- 1 Flow from point to point without abrupt shifts?
- 2 Keep the discussion 'on purpose'?
- 3 Probe for clarity?
- 4 Ask questions that allow respondents to open up so they can give full answers?
- 5 Lead the respondents, put words in their mouths, or inappropriately summarize/paraphrase?
- 6 Establish and maintain a rapport?
- 7 Include everyone in the discussion?
- 8 Conduct serial interviewing?
- 9 'Read' the room, stay with the respondents, and keep attention off of self and the guide?
- 10 Keep self/ego out of the discussion and avoid talking too much?
- 11 Attend to nonverbal communications?
- 12 Give clear ground rules/purpose statement/full disclosure about mirrors/microphones/observers/stipends?
- 13 Use a variety of research tools/techniques?
- 14 Provide linking and logic tracking for respondents and observers?
- 15 Listen to rather than inform participants?
- 16 Vary their voice tone during the process?
- 17 Change location/body position during the focus group process?
- 18 Give clear instructions/direction to respondents/set up and appropriately introduce stimuli?

*Source: Henderson, 1992*

## 8.4 Handling Group Conflict

The success of a focus group depends on the interaction between group members. There is no reason that a focus group should not be a pleasant experience with friendly interaction between participants. Of course, not all people have pleasant dispositions. As a result there may be times when focus group discussion becomes a bit 'heated'. One of the causes of having a focus group become confrontational is simply group dynamics. Before a group can work together successfully there are always some formation issues that must be worked through. An understanding of group dynamics can be helpful in learning to diffuse these conflicts.

### 8.4.1 Stages of group development

There are many different models of group dynamics. One that has gained popularity in the business world is called Tuckman's Stages (Tuckman, 1965). This model, which was originally created to explain the behavior of work teams, describes four stages of group dynamics: forming, storming, norming and performing. While a focus group differs from a work team in that there is a moderator facilitating the process, this model remains useful as these stages will still be in evidence during the focus group process.

#### *Tuckman's Stages applied to focus groups*

- Forming – strangers sit down together and must quickly make judgments about each other
- Storming – opinions are expressed which may result in conflict
- Norming – the moderator handles conflict by acknowledging the importance of all contributions
- Performing – the focus group can now concentrate on the topic rather than each other

'Forming' occurs when the participants, who are strangers, make judgments about each other. They need to know how other people in the group should be treated and how they will treat them. People will often make these judgments based on stereotypes rather than knowledge. 'Storming' is where strong opinions may result in strong reactions. Personalities may very well conflict, as the focus group participants are not chosen for their compatibility. During the 'norming' stage the moderator's role is to diffuse the conflict while acknowledging the contributions of all members. If the moderator can successfully diffuse the conflict, the focus group can then settle into a discussion. Even if at times there is disagreement, focus group members must have trust in the moderator's ability to handle any conflicts. At this stage the focus group can perform by having an interactive conversation on the topic. Even the most skilled moderator may have participants that never fully participate in discussion of the topic. However, after diffusing conflict during the storming stage enough so that the focus group can continue, the moderator will strive to have everyone participate during the 'performing' stage.

### 8.4.2 Focus groups using nominal grouping

Sometimes focus group proceedings can become heated because of the topic being discussed. There are some topics that evoke such strong responses that the usual interactive focus group will not work. It is the marketing of ideas that most often elicits these types of responses rather than the marketing of products. Consumers may have strong feelings about the color, taste, style

or design of a consumer product. They may even strongly disagree with the opinions of fellow focus group members, but rarely would such disagreements be so vehement that it would disrupt a focus group.

Market researchers working on issues regarding ideas may find that some of these do elicit very strong responses. Research involving political campaigns, environmental issues, health care accessibility and other social issues may prompt very strong opinions and disagreements. For example, if a focus group was held where members felt so strongly either for or against the introduction of genetically altered food, they may either become argumentative or stop participating altogether. Sexual behavior is another sensitive topic. If a focus group needs to be conducted to get ideas on how to prevent teenage pregnancies, the participants may have strong ethical and moral beliefs. Even the food you eat can provoke strong feelings, as can be seen in the example below.

### HOW WOULD YOU LIKE YOUR STEAK? CLONED OR NOT CLONED?

A current issue before the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is whether to allow meat to be sold from cloned animals. A five-year study and almost 700 pages of testimony found that cloned animal products are safe to consume. However, the International Dairy Food Association decided to research consumers' views on the issue. The participants in the study were all women who were the primary food buyers in their families. The study found that consumers have very strong feelings about cloned food that will not be changed by any FDA report. The research found that 14 per cent of the women would stop using dairy products altogether if cloned food was introduced. A similar study by the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology found that 46 per cent of consumers were 'very uncomfortable' with using cloning in food production.

Experts believe that farmers will use cloning to breed prized livestock, not to produce food. However, even with cloning one generation away from the steak on their plate, consumers still have strong negative opinions. So don't go looking for cloned food in your local grocery store anytime soon!

*Source: Pollack and Martin, 2006*

Under most circumstances a skilled moderator can prevent or diffuse conflict amongst focus group members. However, a technique to handle focus groups on especially sensitive topics is called nominal grouping. Using nominal group session techniques is a way to gain opinions and insights when the topic under discussion may prompt either overly disruptive arguments or silence on the part of participants. Nominal grouping involves first grouping participants by common characteristics and then having the participants silently list their ideas. These are presented in turn without discussion. Each idea is then discussed for its importance and relevance to the issue. However, they are not criticized based on merit. Each member ranks the ideas and then the rankings are discussed until a consensus is reached.

For example, a researcher for a community organization might want to gather information on why young people engage in sexual activity. This information will then be used to create a

public service announcement. Participants in such a focus group would be young people who were currently sexually active. Each participant lists a reason why teens become sexually active. However, here the moderator does not allow participants to argue their ideas with each other. Instead of criticizing each other's ideas, they will discuss how these ideas should be ranked by importance.

### *Nominal technique for sensitive topics*

- Have participants silently write their response to a question.
- The moderator gathers these responses and lists them on a board.
- The responses are discussed for relevance, not correctness.
- The participants rank these responses by importance.

## 8.5 Other Venues for Focus Groups

The traditional focus group is conducted with the participants and the moderator sitting around a table. However, focus groups can take place using other means than face-to-face personal communication, such as by videoconferencing and online.

### 8.5.1 Videoconferencing focus groups

Videoconferencing is a technology that can be used to conduct focus groups. Using videoconferencing research firms can reduce the expense of bringing the moderator and participants together in one location. Videoconferencing has the advantage of allowing the participants and moderators to see each other. They can therefore react to each other's body language and communicate more effectively. A sophisticated videoconferencing system allows all the members to see everyone's reactions to each other even when they are in many different locations. Another advantage of videoconferencing is that it allows products that are the subject of research to be shown and some projective techniques can also be used.

The disadvantage comes in that focus group participants must travel to a special facility where videoconferencing equipment is available. These types of facilities are generally only found in corporate offices and large universities. Not all participants would feel comfortable going to such locations. Even if they do go to the facility, not everyone would be familiar with communicating using this method. It might take a while for participants to feel comfortable enough to actively participate. In addition, the research firm sponsoring the research would need to pay for use of the facility.

### 8.5.2 Online focus groups

Online technology is being adapted for use with focus groups. This includes using existing Usenet user groups or internet chatrooms that attract people who have mutual interests. This shared interest or lifestyle might vary from a love of comic books to the enjoyment of gourmet foods. Therefore online focus groups are very useful when the research participant profile calls for subjects who are similar psychographically. A focus group can be conducted 'live', with a moderator posting questions while subjects respond immediately online.

Even more importantly than with a traditional focus group, when conducting a group online moderators should always identify themselves, the topic of the research and for whom the research is being conducted. It is unethical for a moderator to conduct research while posing as just another user.

Often members of an online community are eager to communicate their opinions. After all, people who chat online are a self-selected group that wants to communicate. Using this method can be helpful in gaining insights from groups that would not normally attend a traditional focus group. Groups that feel disenfranchised from society, such as the young, ethnic groups, or people who live alternative lifestyles, can be successfully reached with this method. In fact, how the online experience can be used in marketing can be explored (Sweeney and Perry, 2004).

Using such online sites limits the use of demographic criteria as there is no way to control for gender, age and economic level. Another consideration when using online focus groups is that this method will not reach a cross section of everyone interested in a topic. Instead, it will attract only those who are comfortable or interested in communicating online. This will mean that participants are more likely to be younger and better educated. Another disadvantage is that a moderator cannot see body language, although the online community is quite skilled at communicating feelings by using both words and symbols.

A moderator should have experience in conducting online focus groups because opinions can become extreme when expressed online. In addition, people may adopt a very different persona to the one they use in their everyday lives. Whether the opinions of alternative personas are more or less real is a question best left for psychologists and philosophers. However, moderators need to be aware that extreme opinions may not be acted upon in real life. There are now specialized tools for conducting online focus groups. In this case, participants come online specifically to participate in a focus group.

## Summary

- 1 Focus groups are a qualitative research methodology that is used to generate ideas, explore the causes of problems and gain insights for use in the design of quantitative research. The major advantage in using focus groups is that interaction between group members can result in new ideas and insights. Another advantage of focus groups is that superficial answers can be further explored in depth by asking follow-up questions. Focus groups can easily be combined with projective techniques to allow participants to communicate ideas in ways other than verbal answers. However, focus group data cannot be used to prove a fact. In addition the quality of the data is dependent upon the appropriateness of the participants and the skill of the moderator.
- 2 Focus group methodology consists of three phases of preparing, conducting and analyzing. In the preparation stage the researcher meets with management to define the research issues, to develop a participant profile and choose a moderator. The researcher will then prepare a research script. The conducting phase will involve preparing the facility, moderating the proceedings and collecting the information after the group has concluded. The analysis stage will include transcribing and coding the information. The final report will then be written.

- 3 Much of the success of the focus group methodology depends on the skill of the moderator. The moderator should have an interest in the research process and an empathy with the participants. The skills needed include a knowledge of research methods, the ability to handle group dynamics and skill in analyzing and reporting data.
- 4 Conflict can arise during focus groups. A knowledge of group dynamics including the forming, storming, norming and performing stages can help a moderator to constructively direct the conversation. Nominal grouping can be used when particularly sensitive topics are discussed. With this technique, participants first privately list ideas that are then discussed for relevance rather than correctness.
- 5 Other means of conducting focus groups include videoconferencing and online. Each has its advantages that include cost savings and reaching particular groups. However, they all have the disadvantage of limiting the personal interaction between a moderator and focus group members that forms the basis of the focus group technique.

## Key Terms



**focus group** qualitative research technique, led by a moderator, consisting of 6–10 people who exchange views

**focus group script** written overview of the topics to be covered during the focus group including opening, probing and closing questions

**moderator** leader in a focus group who poses the questions, encourages responses, and handles conflict to obtain useable research data

**nominal focus group technique** focus group technique for use with sensitive topics that reduces conflict by encouraging prioritizing rather than disagreement

**participant profile** description using segmentation characteristics of who should be chosen in a focus group

## Discussion Questions

- 1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of using focus groups to explore the consumer preferences of young people?
- 2 How would you answer the claim that focus groups are not useful because too few participants are involved?
- 3 What issues could be explored using a focus group made up of students?



- 4 What argument would you present to management for the expense of conducting both a focus group and a survey on the food service available at a university?
- 5 Why should both management and researchers be involved in the development of a participant profile?
- 6 Why would moderators be able to obtain better data when they have empathy with the research subjects?
- 7 Which is more important to a focus group's success – a skilled moderator or the right participants? Support your argument.
- 8 How could Tuckman's Stages of Group Dynamics be used when conducting a focus group that consisted of sports fans from rival teams?
- 9 Why would nominal grouping be used to conduct a focus group that discusses better ways to promote HIV awareness on campuses?
- 10 What would be the advantages and disadvantages of using an online focus group to discuss older consumers' purchasing of travel tours?

## Recommended Reading



Carson, David., Gilmore, Audrey., Perry, Chad and Gronhaug, Kjell (2001) *Qualitative Marketing Research*. London: SAGE. The authors of this book believe that statistical information must be balanced with intelligence gathered through qualitative methodologies. The book includes chapters on focus groups, observations, ethnography and grounded theory.

Michman, Ronald D. (2003) *Lifestyle Marketing: Reaching the New American Consumer*. Westport, CT: Praeger. This book stresses the importance of segmenting the consumer by lifestyle. It also has a chapter that discusses Asian, Jewish and Italian market segments.

Moisander, Johanna and Voltonen, Anu (2006) *Qualitative Marketing Research: A Cultural Approach*. London: SAGE. Examining qualitative methodologies from a cultural perspective or how products affect consumers' lives.

Puchta, Claudia and Potter, Jonathan (2004) *Focus Group Practice*. London: SAGE. A book that deals with the issue of the moderation of focus groups based on interaction theory.

Stewart, David., Shamdasani, Prem N. and Rook, Denis W. (2007) *Focus Groups: Theory and Practice*. London: SAGE. Thoroughly covers all aspects of focus groups from planning to implementation. It also presents information on the application of online and video focus groups.