

# Behind the Looking Glass: Making Focus Groups More Effective

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Much has been written on what a moderator should do to make marketing focus groups more effective, yet what happens “behind the looking glass” is at least as important as what happens in the focus group itself. Events behind the mirror are driven by interactions and thought processes that anthropologists and psychologists have studied in depth. This article will offer guidance to focus group observers to help them be better users of focus groups in general.

## Is Anyone Listening?

Everyone is aware of two standard caveats about the use of focus group learning: (1) that such learning cannot be statistically projected and (2) that key results should be verified with quantitative research. However, a more fundamental concern involves whether anyone behind the mirror is really listening and, if so, whether they are listening and learning as effectively as possible.

Events behind the mirror often follow a pattern. For the first few

minutes, observers sit upright with eyes, ears, and even minds wide open. Over the course of a session or multiple sessions, however, candy and caffeine consumption peaks as attentiveness wanes. Quiet listening transforms into a dull roar of idle conversations, and jokes about respondents replace customer-centered thinking.

Why does this happen? Listeners may get bored. A rush to gain insights out of impatience, a desire for personal glory, or a wish to support a preexisting position may distort the experience. Such political problems are outside the purview of this article; assuming there is an honest desire to learn, however, certain steps can be taken to avoid the above pattern and the marketing missteps that can result.

## An Observer's Guide

**Listen and Observe.** Observers should listen to and watch the proceedings closely without discussing insights until late in the process. Observation is a creative process and not everyone in the

room will “see” the same things. What they see and hear is a reflection of who they are—their values, expectations, and views—as much as what actually happens. The well-documented and striking differences in eyewitness testimony about crime scenes, which are much simpler events than two-hour focus groups, provide clear evidence that people watching the same event see and hear different things. A person who discusses his or her views too quickly will influence others and thereby reduce their ability to form unique and valuable perspectives on what is being learned. Psychologists find that observers are heavily influenced by the comments of others, even for something as objective as the length of a line. Observers shown three lines of obviously different lengths will tend to agree with prior answers of other observers as to which line is shorter, even when research skills have intentionally chosen the clearly longer line. Imagine how much influence can be exerted on the much more subjective stimuli of focus group reactions by the comments of those rushing to a conclusion.

## Be a Systematic, Active Listener.

Focus group observers can be unduly influenced by one or two observations that they consider striking. Consequently, an observer might ignore or not hear other comments. The solution is to be systematic in one's observations, an expertise that anthropologists have honed. Observers should tally specific behaviors and answers to avoid concluding that a specific response was rare. One should listen and watch for contradictory statements and body language.

Contradictory statements can be highly revealing. Without probing such disconnects, a re-

spondent's conflict or closely held belief might go undiscovered. In the process of being an active listener, one can better manage a moderator. For example, one can send in a note asking the moderator to explore contradictions and delve deeper with respondents through sequenced benefit questioning, in which a chain of questions and responses (the "means") are designed to achieve an "end." Ultimately, the reward of systematic, active listening will be what anthropologists call "thick description": a more profound and meaningful recording of behavior and attitudes.

**Read Between the Lines.** Noting what is said is just the first step in understanding what is meant.

*The Cultural Context.* One must be aware of the cultural context in which a statement is made. Be sensitive to the respondent's worldview (i.e., "where he or she is coming from") in interpreting comments. Focus groups can be useful for gaining insights into psychographics and for "cultural-graphic" information—how social class and status, ethnicity, and values can affect a person's attitudes about products and communications. More focus group research should gauge these influential factors as part of respondent screening. Additionally, insights on the linkage between cultural factors and marketing issues can be the starting point for market segmentation research.

*Subtle Verbal and Nonverbal Clues.* Anthropologists pay a great deal of attention to language use and body language in their research; focus group observers should do the same. Language categories reveal a great deal about how people perceive their world and the

strategies they adopt to deal with problems they encounter. This can have marketing value. For example, probing for types of colds or headaches and the brands considered appropriate for these segments could spark new product and positioning ideas.

Observers should notice what is not being said. Sherlock Holmes solved one case by noticing that a dog did not bark during the commission of a crime; therefore, it was an inside job. Notice what respondents do not say as well as what they do say. The absence of certain comments can reveal their orien-

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tation to an issue or what aspects of it they do not consider salient.

Nonverbal behavior, such as gestures, facial expressions, and the use of personal space by the speaker and among respondents reacting to the speaker's comments, should also be analyzed. For example, while a commercial is being shown, it should be noted whether or not the respondents smile, nod, or look away. This can reveal reactions they may have chosen not to verbalize.

*The Type of Questioning.* Observers should consider the type of questioning in weighing the response. Spontaneous comments can be highly revealing. Comments that emerge only when elicited by direct questioning are sometimes less indicative of a respondent's real attitudes. However, formal elicitation techniques, such as sequenced questioning and guided

retrospection about the respondent's life history, can be extremely useful in probing deeply into the minds of the respondents. Projective techniques, such as the use of photographs and storytelling, can also be effective.

*The Setting.* It is important that observers understand the effect of, and at times modify, the setting. A focus group is not always the ideal environment for forthright expression. Consider the degree to which the setting produces the response. For example, respondents pay more attention to an ad played in a focus group than to one on their television at home. This can exaggerate how well they understand a complex message and how strongly they will object to a less-than-logical plot.

Respondents are often more relaxed and expressive in natural settings than in a focus group room. Homes and stores also provide stimuli, such as a medicine cabinet or pharmacy counter, that reveal otherwise hidden consumer behavior and attitudes. Pittsburgh-based H. J. Heinz conducted very useful focus groups on their ketchup in restaurants. Fieldwork has been performed in homes and stores on categories as diverse as herbal remedies, household cleaners, and durable goods. In each case, reactions by respondents were garnered, which would have been hard to achieve in research facilities.

**Do not Judge Respondents.** Unproductive backroom behavior consists of comments about respondents rather than about what respondents say. Some marketers have an overly narrow view of who a typical customer is, and want to see and hear only from this one type of respondent. Consumers who use or might use a

product are worth listening to, especially if they look, think, and/or act differently than one would have expected. These people may provide just the unexpected learning needed to stimulate new ideas.

**Be Alert to Other Tip-offs.** Sometimes the observer is fortuitously treated to a good clue as to how important something is to respondents. Observers should take full advantage through careful observation. After the group ends, note how many participants stay to discuss the topic further and how many ask, "Are they really coming out with that product?"

**Be Prepared.** Anthropologists and psychologists always begin their observations with a plan. They have hypotheses, they have considered what observations would support or refute those hypotheses, and they have a research design to ensure that they can conduct their observations as accurately as possible. Observers should also construct hypotheses about what they believe is worth observing and learning. Along with the moderator's help, the observer should plan in advance (not five minutes before the session starts) what will be done to create the opportunity for critical behaviors and observations to occur. Observers should then arrive with the energy and resolve to listen, record, and think

throughout the sessions, with the goal of capturing observations needed to support, amend, or refute their hypotheses. They should not be afraid to modify hypotheses or to press for additional questions as sessions progress.

**Close With Insight.** The session should close with tentative rather than final conclusions. It is tempting to end a day of focus groups by summarizing the day's observations in an act of closure. However,

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er, a more cautious but ultimately more productive approach is recommended. Beginning with the moderator, who has probably been the most attentive listener and most objective member of the team, each observer should offer one insight or finding that he or she has found particularly surprising or compelling for everyone to consider. Beyond this, it is usually best to delay discussion until at least 24 hours after the last session. This

should provide enough time for the events of the focus group to settle in the observers' minds and allow the more deliberate thinkers a chance to be heard. The team members should then contact the author of the focus group report with their final thoughts.

## **Conclusion**

A more objective, systematic, and patient approach to focus groups will yield more accurate learning and a stronger rationale for one's conclusions. Most importantly, improving one's skills and attentiveness behind the looking glass will provide an observer with a better launching pad for ideas to ignite marketing plans. This, after all, is what qualitative research is about.

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