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Online focus groups bring new flexibility to a tried-and-true market research tool

Posted on February 22nd, 2016 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



Looking to validate important opinions about a product or service you are offering, or perhaps considering? Need to measure perception or response to an advertising campaign you are formulating? Rather than second-guessing or potentially making faulty (often costly) assumptions, investing in marketing research is a smart strategy that allows a company to test the water before diving in.

With the advent of online analytics and any number of reporting tools, coupled with the increased squeeze by the C-suite to measure and report ROI, marketers these days must incorporate market research into their wheelhouses. Although smaller marine businesses with skeleton staffs may lack a research budget, that doesn't mean they can't take advantage of today's technology to improve marketing performance.

The use of focus groups as a market research tool is as relevant today as it was two decades ago. The good news? Now there are exciting online alternatives to employ this methodology.

A brief overview, first. The focus group is a popular qualitative research method used to measure opinions and perceptions. It involves a skilled moderator who focuses on a specific topic with a select group. The moderator leads discussion, with the goal of eliciting detailed responses to open-ended questions. The feedback generated provides a company with critical consumer opinions regarding the topic of choice. This research platform also allows the company to test pre-existing or internal assumptions.

During my 30-plus years in the marine industry, I've planned and moderated dozens of focus groups on everything from product introductions and concepts to new logo, advertising creative and sales promotion effectiveness. Without exception, the focus group outcomes always prove invaluable. They either validate the product or marketing direction being considered or they raise red flags to signal that further work is needed. A few times, they have shot down concepts that clearly would have died without this early intervention.

Until recently, focus groups were traditionally onsite events, staged at a specified physical venue such as a corporate conference room, rented hotel meeting space or research facility. This format is preferred when there is a "feel/touch" requirement and allows for a comfortable group dynamic and interaction. The moderator also enjoys the benefit of direct observation of nonverbal communication. In addition, the content delivery is secure, meaning only those with invitation and access can participate and observe. The moderator has greater control in this environment, where members are expected to pay attention and participate.

However, the newer online focus group has advantages, too. It works particularly well when a company needs fast feedback on visuals, such as advertisements or videos, requiring no real group dynamic or interaction to succeed.

The online version is less expensive, requiring no facility rental fees or catering and no travel or mileage costs. Using an online moderator in a chat room or online meeting format broadens the participant playing field and can embrace a national (or international) geographic base from which to choose. Another major advantage to the underwriter is the observation capability from his own screen and the ability to communicate privately with the moderator via a split screen during the actual session.

The downside of online focus groups is the lack of group dynamic and the inability of the moderator to read body language. In addition, the online option is less secure in terms of guarding against potential content leaks. Unless you know the individuals invited to participate, you really can't confirm who is on the other side of the computer. Wherever possible, hand-pick online participants from your own resources rather than using faceless participant pools to meet your criteria.

Whether you choose to host an onsite event or an online session, and whether you prefer to moderate yourself or employ an outside professional or research firm, here are my 10 best tips for success:

- Record the session. Video recording is ideal because facial and body language expressions are valuable. At the very least, use audio recording.
- Start by defining the purpose of the research. What is the problem you need resolved or question you need answered? This purpose statement should be clear and concise.
- As a general practice, focus group sessions should run between one and two hours. Plan time wisely and home in on what is realistic to cover in the window available.
- For once, it is politically acceptable to profile. In fact, you want to define the profile of your focus group participant as closely as possible. Create a list of required or most desirable attributes. For example, it might be a current owner of a certain size or brand of boat. It may be gender-specific, with household income, age range and geographic location. Only you can define this profile, based on your projected target market.

Some companies compensate focus group participants with a flat fee; others contribute gift bags or other in-kind contributions. The compensation terms should be disclosed fully. Participants who are affiliated with or who are loyal to your company often appreciate a more custom gift or in-kind approach. Outsiders with no direct connection will expect a flat fee.

- The size of the group should range between eight and 12 participants. I always shoot for the higher number to allow for cancellations. Identify how you will source and invite focus group members. Use your own resources whenever possible.
- Create a timeline to complete all of your tasks. Allow sufficient time to develop the purpose statement, identify the group profile criteria, research and choose a moderator, collaborate to develop the script and questions, format the presentation and tweak. This process normally takes me between six and eight weeks, although I have turned faster when working with a well-organized and motivated client. Sometimes the timeline may stretch longer because of creative or support materials that are integral to the presentation. Once when I conducted a focus group to gain feedback on a new cruiser, the company actually produced a mock cardboard layout to scale, which obviously took longer than a simple floorplan illustration.
- One of the most important components of focus group success is creating relevant questions that will elicit the depth of response desired. A skilled moderator will warm up the group with a few introductory and more general questions, then fire with more in-depth questions once the group is comfortable.

My strategy for developing questions is to brainstorm everything the company would like to understand about the topic, and initially rule it all in. Once you have exhausted the list, then and only then begin to narrow down and prioritize the important questions. Tweak until the questions are crystal-clear.

- Your moderator will make or break the session. I personally advocate retaining someone either from within your organization or from the outside who is knowledgeable about the product, service or concept being presented. An insider who is fast on his or her feet and who presents well can get the job done, as long as there are no hidden agendas or prejudices in play. For example, I once did a new product focus group and had a member of the company's engineering team involved. He was coached to present the concept factually, without attempting to influence the feedback. His segment was rehearsed and approved. However, less than five minutes into his presentation I had to intervene because he shifted gears and began selling his design concept instead of just presenting the facts. Moral of the story: If you use in-house talent, choose wisely and make sure all involved clearly understand the purpose of the exercise.

The moderator also must possess good time management ability and excellent people skills. He or she must know how to deal with various personalities, from the dominant to the less forthcoming.

If you choose an independent moderator or research firm, do your due diligence and check references. An online search for focus group facilitators will yield many qualified organizations and options.

- Once the questions and the moderator are finalized, it's time to flesh out the script. That includes the moderator's opening remarks, group introductions, review of the purpose statement, group protocols and procedures, followed by the questions. The summary winds the presentation to its close, including final opportunity for input, verbal thanks for participation and the big picture plans moving forward. Those who have invested their time in these research projects appreciate understanding how their contributions will be used in the overall scheme of things.
- You'll also want to consider the moderator's toolkit. If onsite, stock the room with well-positioned AV equipment, a large clock, flip charts and markers, pens and note pads, name tags, refreshments, etc. If online, make sure the technology software or meeting program you select accommodates the presentation and offers recording and transcript capability.

At the event's conclusion, the moderator should provide a transcript of the notes and a detailed report of the findings. Coordinate an internal meeting to review the outcome and identify further actions. A word to

the wise: Schedule the review session as soon as possible while recall and impressions are still fresh.

The bottom line: It pays to focus.

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