

The Focus Group Panacea

Are marketers spending their money wisely?

March 27, 2006 By Ingrid Fetell

A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Don't believe it? Neither do many marketers, judging from the way they treat focus groups -- as a quick-and-dirty solution to every knowledge need. But a brief review of the common focus group seems to indicate that when forced to choose between a little research and none at all, you might do better to save your money.

After all, 80 percent of new products fail within six months, and almost all of these pass through focus groups on their way to market. [1] NBC relied on focus groups when it adapted the Brit-com *Coupling* for the U.S. market, only to have to pull the show after four episodes. [2] Conversely, the *Seinfeld* pilot nearly met its death in front of the one-way mirror -- needed a stronger supporting cast, groups said. Also rejected: the Sony Walkman, Baileys Irish Cream, and the ATM (considered "too impersonal"). [3]

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And yet the focus group is the most popular tool in the market research arsenal. Used to elicit feedback on everything from breakfast cereal to condoms to politicians' sound bites, it has become a prerequisite for almost every marketing decision.

It's an epidemic that has spread far beyond the corporate and political worlds. I recently heard of a local public library that ran focus groups to decide which chairs to buy for its reading room. Turning moviegoers into scriptwriters, movie studios use focus groups to tailor endings for films. At one research facility, in an unsettling twist on the focus group, men who are down on their dating luck can pay to have a panel of women, culled for their merciless candor, evaluate their "dateability." [4]

The focus group's prevalence wouldn't be a problem if we were getting valuable results. But its notorious failure record begs the question: Why aren't we?

Authors such as Harvard Business School professor Gerald Zaltman [5] have recently cast aspersions on the focus group's ability to accurately gauge consumer opinion, given the deeply unconscious nature of the decision-making process. These writers suggest the future lies in ethnographic techniques, such as observing consumers in the process of

comparing fabric softeners, or examining their closets to understand how they use the clothing they buy.

Cambridge SoundWorks' use of ethnographic research presents a particularly compelling example. Determined to find out why sales of its new speakers were tepid despite giddy enthusiasm from male prospects, the retailer sent researchers armed with video cameras to follow prospective customers for two weeks. What they discovered was a phenomenon they dubbed "spousal acceptance factor," in which men were being talked out of the purchase by girlfriends and wives who found the speakers ugly -- an insight men would be unlikely to offer up in a traditional focus group. The result: a new range of speakers that look more like furniture, offering the same sound quality and the added benefit that women don't hide them behind plants in the living room. And for Cambridge SoundWorks? The best-selling product line in the company's history.

These new techniques may well prove extremely useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the purchasing decision process. But before we start sounding the focus group's death knell, we might consider a more basic reason for its poor record -- that we're simply not using it properly.

Though effective when used as intended -- as a tool for idea generation and development -- the focus group now faces pressure to fill every possible market research need, from segmentation to brand awareness to visual testing. Forgetting that the purpose of qualitative research is to understand attitudes and not to measure them, researchers make misleading generalizations using sample sizes too small to be representative of the wider population.

It's not all the fault of the researcher, either. Penny-wise and pound-foolish, marketers incline toward focus groups because they're cheaper than other forms of research, not considering the costs they incur when results are flawed. Research reports are imbued with the credibility of scripture, with marketers readily basing decisions on data of questionable accuracy. I agree with Dev Patnaik of Jump Associates, who refers to focus groups as the "crack cocaine of market research" -- many marketers are so dependent on them, they're terrified of making a decision on their own.[6]

I'm not convinced it's time to throw the focus group out the window. But it will be if we don't get more rigorous in how we use it. We need to start fitting the research methodology to the goals of the study, rather than defaulting to focus groups because they're budget-friendly. We need to be less credulous about the way we read research reports -- just because 7 out of the 10 respondents say a product is too expensive doesn't mean 70 percent of the market think so. We need to remember that focus groups are a first step in the research process, not the whole journey.

And finally, we need to learn when to stop listening. There are times when it's important to listen to consumer perspectives. But research is no substitute for vision, and there are instances where, like the poor focus-grouped bachelors, we should learn to shrug off public opinion and start thinking for ourselves.

1. Daniel Gross, "Lies, Damn Lies, and Focus Groups", " Slate, 10 October 2003 www.slate.com/id/2089677/ (accessed June 5, 2006).
2. Philip Hodgson, "Is Consumer research Losing Its Focus?" www.userfocus.co.uk/focuspocus.html (accessed June 5, 2006).
3. Ruth Shalit, "Out of Focus," Salon, 23 April 1999.
4. Ibid.
5. Gross, "Lies, Damn Lies."
6. Alison Stein Wellner, "The New Science of Focus Groups," American Demographics