The
Focus Group
Planning
Guide

MARKETLINK
STRATEGIC MARKETING SERVICES

The Focus Group Planning Guide

INTRODUCTION

Focus Groups can be a very helpful decision-making tool in a great number and variety of business situations. For many marketers, focus groups have become standard procedure for everything from new products development to packaging evaluations. A large percentage of the media advertising that we see and hear every day has in some way been influenced and shaped by focus group research. For some marketers, focus groups are an important step in promotion development and pre-testing. And, for others, they are an important source of information about competitors. Focus groups are even used effectively by some companies as part of their new employee orientation procedure.

As versatile as they are in their application, one might mistakenly believe that focus groups require little effort to plan and execute. The familiar adage, "You get out of it what you put into it", applies well to the planning and execution of focus group research.

Successful implementation of focus group research can result only from careful planning and attention to important executional details. Consideration of each of the steps suggested in the MarketLink *Focus Group Planning Guide* will assure you of getting the most out of your investment in this increasingly important research technique.

The Preliminaries (Ready…)

In laying out your focus group plans, don't shortchange these preliminaries. The extra effort at this stage will weigh heavily on the usefulness of the focus group learning. The preliminaries consist of three steps: developing the plan, getting buy-in to the plan, and selecting the group moderator. This section of the Planning Guide describes each of these steps.

⇨ Developing the Plan

This step serves to answer three very basic questions:

> "Why is the focus group research being conducted?"
> "What learning do I expect to get out of it?"
> "What action(s) will I take on the basis of this learning?"

Ideally, the person who is responsible for the research prepares this plan as a written document, covering each of the following points:

- Background: All of the pertinent facts that have led to the decision to conduct the groups.
- Objectives: The purpose of the groups and a listing of all of the important information to be derived from the research.
- Action Standards: One or more "if/then" statements that describe what action will be taken on the learning. ("If we learn *this*, then we do *that*.")
- Respondent Profiles: Describe the people you want to make up your focus group panel. Where do they live? What qualifies them to be included? What characteristics should they have in common? Who should be excluded?
- Budget: What will this research cost? What are you willing to spend to obtain the desired learning?
- Timetable: When must the research be completed? And, when do you want to act on the learning?

The Preliminaries (Ready…) – Continued

⇨ Getting Buy-In to the Plan

If people other than you are expected to act on the learning derived from the groups, then circulate your research plan to allow these people to provide their input. It is important to get complete buy-in to both the objectives and the action standards before the groups are implemented. In doing so, you are more likely to encounter eager and enthusiastic allies in the execution of strategies and tactics implicated in the focus group learning. And, the broader participation in the planning phase should result in an overall more insightful study. Many of these same people from whom you seek buy-in on the research plan might also be invited later to attend the groups. The first-hand experience provides a perspective and empathy that the most skillfully written report could fail to create.

⇨ Selecting and Briefing the Moderator

This is one of the most important steps in the whole process. The moderator is the greatest single influence on the quality of information that is extracted from focus group research. Here are a few suggestions to take into account when making your selection:

- Look for experience, but beware of the "guru's". You will probably encounter a wide range of styles among the moderator candidates you talk to. This is to be expected, as there are many effective ways to conduct focus groups. Style differences are not as important as results. Check references to learn how satisfied previous clients were with the moderator's contribution to the actionability of the learning.
- Interview the candidate(s). Look for a pleasant personality and excellent communications skills. If you don't feel comfortable, the focus group respondents probably won't either.
- Look for a marketer who has good conceptual and analytical skills. A person with these skills can provide valuable insight to interpretation of the learning from the groups.
- Obtain from the candidates a detailed proposal that clarifies the executional responsibilities they will assume, the type of report you'll receive and an estimate of the costs involved. Beware of the "bargain". This is not the place to pinch the proverbial pennies!

After your selection is made, it is vitally important to invest a couple of hours in the background briefing of the moderator. To provide you with good service, the moderator must have a good grasp of the issues and the marketing environment surrounding them. If there are products or services involved, the moderator should know and experience them. And, finally, the moderator must have a clear understanding of your learning activities.

The Logistics (Ready, Aim…)

Now that you've committed your plan to writing and have selected your moderator, you're ready to address the logistical aspects of the groups. The major logistical considerations include: defining the parameters of the groups, selecting the research facilities, and preparing the discussion guide.

⇨ Defining the Parameters

This step answers the "who, what, when, where, and how (many)" questions, as follows:

- "How many groups?" There's no pat answer to this one. The situation, the value of the learning and the budget will all have a bearing on your decision. As a rule, single groups are not advisable. Two or three groups on the same issue(s) will yield much richer insight and direction.
- "When will the groups take place?" This relates back to the timetable you prepared in step one. And, it takes into account the number of groups, whether different cities are involved, whether seasonality is an important consideration, the employment status of the respondents, the budget, and so on. Very late evening groups tend to be among the most difficult. Fatigue is likely to affect everyone – the respondents, the moderator and the client observers. If you can accomplish the desired learning in daytime and early evening hours, cut yourself a break.
- "How many respondents?" A traditional range is from 8 to 12, with 10 being a usual target. With fewer than 8 or more than 12, group dynamics are at risk.
- "What respondent profiles?" Participants are screened on the criteria you designate. It's important to develop the recruiting specs with care to ensure that the learning is relevant to your situation and needs. The MarketLink *Respondent Screening Specs* form that is included in the Planning Guide should be helpful to you in creating these specifications. Remember, the tighter the screen, the more costly it is to find and enroll the participants.
- "What will be used as stimuli?" This is an important specification, and your moderator should be very helpful in planning and developing these materials. Stimuli can take many forms including pictures, products, packages or words. And, they can be in finished, polished form or in the crudest, prototypical form. No matter – as long as the level of finish is consistent from group to group. It would be very unusual (and probably ineffective) to conduct a focus group without the aid of some form of stimuli to generate quality discussion on a subject. Be creative in your choice of stimulus and be willing to experiment with different materials from one group to the next.

The Logistics (Ready, Aim …) – Continued

⇨ Selecting the Facilities

Your moderator will typically make these arrangements for you. But, regardless of who has the responsibility, there are several important considerations to make in the selection process. Being aware of them will help you to protect your research investment.

- Reputation: Good focus group facilities are like good restaurants – the word gets around. Make sure the facility you use enjoys a good reputation.
- Location: Is the facility conveniently accessible for the respondents? It should be. If it can also be conveniently located to major highways or airports, all the better for you.
- Creature Comforts: A one-way mirror is a must. Equally important is a well-ventilated viewing room of ample size to accommodate the planned number of observers. Of course, the discussion room itself should allow up to 13 people (12 maximum respondents and the moderator) to be seated comfortably and in full view of one another. If food preparation is involved in the focus group discussion, adequate kitchen facilities should be provided. Finally, check to see what level of control you have over the physical environment within the discussion room. Examples include: shape of table, lighting, sun and shade, sound/noise reduction, temperature control, ventilation and odor elimination.
- Integrity: If the facility is involved in the recruitment of respondents (and most are), its track record should be scrutinized. Faithful adherence to your screening specifications is critical. Related to "reputation" mentioned earlier, a facility's integrity in the area of recruiting is something that's probably known "on the street." Make sure your moderator seeks out this information.

A copy of the MarketLink *Facility Selection Planner* is available on request. It provides a framework for comparing one facility to another.

The Logistics (Ready, Aim…) – Continued

⇨ Preparing the Discussion Guide

This is usually a collaborative effort between you and the moderator. The guide is an outline of the issues you want to discuss in the groups, and as such, it should grow naturally out of the learning objectives included in the research plan from step one. In addition to assuring that all of the necessary material is covered, the guide also serves as a practical way to allocate discussion time throughout the group. These are a few other helpful tips in creating a good Discussion Guide:

- Put it in outline form and use bullet points to convey the main idea.
- Construct probing questions, and be careful not to *lead* the participants to a response. How you phrase the questions makes all the difference.
- Build your outline with flexibility in mind. Write it in pencil. What's important is the learning you come away with, not the course you follow to obtain it. Group dynamics are such that very often interesting, related and relevant issues surface which allow you to get into a subject in a way that deviates from your guide. It's important to decide in advance with your moderator how much latitude will be allowed.
- Pre-test, if possible. This is especially important if you are only planning to conduct 2 or 3 group discussions. Rather than use your first group to work the bugs out of the discussion guide, assemble an ad hoc group using other company personnel, business associates or friends. This pre-test allows you to fine-tune the content and length of the guide.

Implementation (Ready, Aim, Fire!)

You've planned well, and it's time to conduct the groups. Your expectations should be high. More than likely, you're going to have a very successful focus group experience. And, of course, this is the point of the real payoff for your planning efforts. Your payoff will be even greater if you conduct the groups creatively and avoid a few common pitfalls.

⇨ Conduct the Groups Creatively

Focus groups are one of the few forms of research that aren't shackled by strict rules and pat procedures. Be willing to exploit the flexibility afforded by focus groups. Here are a few examples:

- Maintain control of the group discussion. More than likely, your moderator has experience in dealing with a respondent who attempts to dominate discussion or is in some other way disruptive to the group. These situations have to be dealt with as they occur. If the most reasonable, tactful efforts fail to correct the problem within an acceptable time, the disrupting respondent can and should be excused from the group. Discuss these possibilities with your moderator in advance of the groups.

- Modify and evolve the discussion guide prior to second and subsequent groups to reflect new ideas uncovered from the first group. The only caution here is that radical change will preclude your ability to accumulate the learning from multiple groups.

- Remember why you're here. This is the flip side of the go-with-the-flow idea described above. While the focus group is a creative and dynamic process, you should not lose sight of why you are there. There is a core issue for which you need realistic and practical insight. Creativity is not an objective of the group process. Rather it is only a means by which you seek to accomplish the learning you need.

- Create new stimuli during and in between groups. You are limited here only by the nature of the stimuli and the talents and resources of the people around you.

- Insist upon direct access to the content and flow of the group discussion by way of written notes, phone/intercom messages, or hallway discussions. As you are observing the group proceedings, you should expect to have new thoughts, ideas and approaches. It is your right to get these conveyed to the moderator. Of course, you must be sensitive to the need to strike a balance between your right to free speech and productivity of the groups. If interruptions are too frequent, it's a sure sign of problems with your moderator, the group dynamics, the discussion guide, your self - control or a combination of all four.

- Discuss your perceptions of the group discussions at the conclusion of each group, if possible. Be sure to allow at least one free hour between groups for this purpose. And, when all the groups are concluded, allow an opportunity for a de-briefing discussion among all of the observers and the moderator.

Implementation (Ready, Aim, Fire!) – Continued

⇨ Avoid Common Mistakes

For the novice and the seasoned "grouper" alike, there are some common pitfalls to avoid:

- Do NOT react personally to what you hear. If respondents don't like your products or services, they may say so in the most blunt terms. Avoid the temptation to react to this candor in an audible, animated way. (Even the best viewing room soundproofing doesn't adequately muffle moans and groans!)
- Do NOT reach conclusions prematurely. It's probably unavoidable that one comes to the groups with a strong opinion on an issue. After all, in your work, you're supposed to have a point of view on the important issues. But, be careful to avoid looking for those respondent comments that support your bias while conveniently discounting those which don't. Avoid selective listening.
- Do NOT just listen with your ears. Body language usually aids in the interpretation of a respondent's comments. The position of the body, the expression on the face, and the eyes, particularly, may bring an entirely different meaning to the communication.
- Do NOT make focus groups quantitative. Avoid the temptation to derive numbers or statistics from focus groups. "Six out of 10 said this" or "80% of the responses were favorable" are not good examples of focus group learning. Remember that this is a qualitative process, and forget the numbers. Rather, look and listen for the passion in the responses to questions and reactions to stimuli; sense the direction that is elicited on an issue.
- Do NOT accept a shallow report from your moderator. If you've chosen your moderator well, you should expect to receive a report that not only tells you what was discussed, but also what the implications are for your specific business situation. It is your prerogative to discount or reject the moderator's opinions, but don't miss the opportunity to gain this independent (and perhaps more objective) perspective.

IN CONCLUSION…

The fundamental truth that all human behavior is rooted in both rational and emotional reactions to stimuli requires that marketers supplement the hard data from quantitative research with the “soft data” from qualitative methods.

Focus groups, along with one-on-one interviews, are one of the most effective means of gaining insight into the vast array of emotional aspects of consumer behavior. They are to the marketer what “management by walking around” is to the *excellence* companies’ CEO’s.

When you are in need of a focus group resource, MarketLink is ready to assist you.