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Qualitative Research & Focus Group Facilities of the Future

Third Annual Focus Group Moderator/Consultant Directory

Qualitative Research in the Coming Decades

The Rise of the "Young" Researcher

Attendees participate in a qualitative round-table exercise at the CRC.

Qualitative Research in the Coming Decades

By Kevin Hill

Good old focus groups haven't changed much in my 20+ year research career. (I moderated my first focus group at Trotta & Associates in Marina Del Rey, CA in 1987.) Yes, I'm familiar with online groups, MROCs and all the other online qualitative innovations, but right or wrong, the focus group is still the qualitative mainstay worldwide. And for good reason. Few techniques, offline or online, can accomplish all the things a well-conceived, well moderated and well reported group can.

But there are certainly challenges to putting a great group together. Recruiting is always a concern. Not necessarily getting the right group of people, but no matter if the group is full of newbies or, for lack of a better term, "experienced" respondents, it seems like everyone in the group wears a knowing grin that says, "I know what's going on here and I'm ready to play along." This can lend artificiality to groups that often inhibit open discussion. What about the actual discussion during the group? I cannot speak for other moderators, but most discussion guides I write or review have become fairly formulaic. The intent of bringing people together is open discussion and sharing of information and thoughts, not routinized questions and answers more resembling a quant survey. While this doesn't necessarily make the discussion less worthwhile or valuable, there is predictability to the discussion that does seem to inhibit deeper insight discovery. Then there is the reporting. In the last decade I've seen a significant change in reporting requirements. The need for quick turn-around has made the de-briefing and topline the core deliverables of most qualitative. Again not speaking for other moderators, but my focus tends to mirror the clients' specific information needs. While this is certainly important, I often feel the narrowness of this approach can leave other important insights out of the discussion.

So what might the qualitative of the coming decades look like? I'll take a model from the multilevel marketing business that at least in my memory took off back in the 70's with Tupperware parties. The basic concept – a point person inviting friends and acquaintances to a home environment to learn about and purchase products – is still very much in use today with companies like Stella & Dot enlisting a force of independent field sales agents. How might this apply to qualitative research? I envision a similarly deployed force of home-based "moderators" who would recruit, conduct and report on a "topic party." Let's imagine one of these parties.

Jill welcomes the last guest to her home and they make their way to the living room."Everyone, this is Anne," Jill says."Anne is a friend from the gym."

"There is something about experiencing a discussion first hand that cannot be duplicated."

Anne is greeted by a round of "hi's" and "how are you's" and finds a spot on the couch. There are eight women, ranging in age from 28 to 38 and all appear relaxed and comfortable."Okay," Jill says, taking a seat in a side chair."Let me introduce everyone." Jill makes introductions and reveals how she and everyone in the room are connected. A few recognize names and connections and soon a feeling of familiarity descends on the room. Jill continues."I've told you all why you're here," and she goes on to relay the topic of discussion (skin care) and lets them know that ultimately their conversation will help a company come up with a new skin care line. The women are intrigued and re-focus on Jill awaiting direction. Jill stays silent but then finally says, "You're not talking to me. Have fun and just talk to each other." After a few awkward moments of silence, the women turn to one another and the chatting begins. Jill walks around, listening in and making sure the conversation hasn't drifted too far off topic, although she knows even these side conversations lead to valuable insight. As she walks around, she keeps an eye on the microphone in the middle of the coffee table. It is multi-directional and captures conversations from six directions, yielding individual recordings of each conversation. After about 20 minutes, Jill sees conversation wane. She asks everyone to take a break, to refill their drinks and to move to a different spot so they can talk with someone else. After the shuffle and some more conversation, Jill walks around and hands out a product description and package design."Take a look at this and see what you think." And so the night goes on with Jill mingling, listening in, probing, and keeping people on track. Finally, after a few hours, the conversation starts to drift too far from the topic. Jill sits down and gathers everyone's attention."I'm going to start wrapping things up," she says."From what I've heard, it sounded like really interesting conversation." Heads nod and a few sly smiles make Jill wonder where some of the side conversations went. "I'd like to just get a final thought from each of you. It would be great if you could tell me your feelings about facial and skin care and maybe something you heard from someone else that you found interesting." The women answer the only direct question put to them this evening.

But the party doesn't break up right away, and the talk turns to the next day's activities and plans for the weekend. Jill keeps recording knowing this part of the evening is valuable in understanding these women as individuals and learning about their day-to-day lives. The group breaks up and Jill reminds the women to check their email. (As a result of their participation they are able to choose a gift from an online catalog.) After the last guest leaves, Jill shuts off the recording and uploads the digital audio file to her corporate workspace. After the upload, she shares her impressions from the group, and the particular insights she overheard. From her team leader, she knows that there are dozens of these topic parties going on around the country. Further, she's aware that all of the transcripts will be analyzed for word patterns to bubble up primary and secondary themes. A report, written by an analyst at corporate, is to be delivered by the end of the next day. Before closing down, Jill sees that there is a need for a topic party in the next few weeks on menopause. She'll email her local friends and family before work tomorrow to see if they can connect her with anyone who might qualify, or possibly host, the discussion.

What are the benefits of this approach? Quite a few come to mind. First and foremost, the artifice of the facility is removed. While it is our job as moderators to make respondents feel at ease in the environment and comfortable speaking their mind, ultimately a focus group sample is biased toward people open enough to speak their minds in a group. In this method, friends and acquaintances come together in an atmosphere that is already relaxed and comfortable, leading to more natural conversation and authentic insight. Also, the discussion is not question and response oriented. The conversation is respondent generated and so would likely better reflect what the participants find interesting and important about the category, not what the moderator's guide imposes on them. This is especially important when trying to explore gaps in existing product and service categories. Personality and lifestyle insights would be self-generated in context with the category, not superficially generated with questions like, "Tell me a little about yourself." Another key difference is that respondents talk to each other

and not the moderator. This means there is very little respondent downtime; for the bulk of time, a respondent is either talking or actively listening – it's a real conversation. This would generate a greater abundance of discussion data to be analyzed. This is where technology enablement is important. The recording equipment and analysis tools work hand-in-hand to allow data mining techniques to be employed. This ensures that the discussion and conversation is accurately reflected in the report, as opposed to just the moderator and clients' top of mind impressions and insights. Some important benefits, but what do you give up employing this approach? Most of all – control. As marketers have learned from social media, brands can only control a small portion of the overall conversation. And while MROCs also take advantage of user generated content, there is no comparison to the depth and detail that can be acquired from a live conversation. The other loss of control is in the viewing experience. I believe part of the reason online qualitative will never replace traditional facility-based discussion is the live viewing experience. There is something about experiencing

a discussion first hand that cannot be duplicated. This certainly includes the end of day debrief and the ability to modify the discussion guide and/or stimuli.

Of course this approach would not necessarily be applicable to every qualitative project – no approach does that. But used to glean insights on category, product, usage or a new product idea, the approach has merit. Certainly there are other considerations – set-up, training, cost, quality control and more – but I think it's worthwhile to consider methods that help us get back to the original intent of qualitative research: to tap into the insights inherent in natural conversation. Nothing is going to replace the in-person focus group, but thinking about ways to inject less structure, more conversation and more depth of analysis always seems worth considering.

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