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Market researchers test drive products in focus groups, where honesty is of consuming interest

By Pamela S. Leven

The 18 women sitting in a semi-circle of straight-back chairs in the San Francisco hotel meeting room spent nearly an hour chatting about the virtues and vices of fast food and homemade food. At the prompting of their discussion leader, they bared their feelings about feeding their families -- from pride over occasional, slavishly prepared Sunday dinners to guilt over shoving Big Macs at their kids. They named brand-names of food companies and offered rich who-do-you-trust analyses of each one. They followed their moderator into the topic of packaged stovetop-prepared food, a middle ground between reheated takeout and made-from-scratch meals.

The session was reaching its denouement, and the observers behind a one-way mirror perked up. A major food company, mulling an expansion from its base of salty snacks, wanted to know if consumers would accept its familiar name and logo on different supermarket shelves -- at least enough to try its new line of products. The women in the discussion group had confirmed that they would. Now, a climactic moment: taste tests.

"We had a tuna product," recalls John Bissell, now with management consultant Gundersen Partners in Detroit and then a marketing researcher and packaged-goods expert for the food company. "We brought around a tray of samples of a tuna casserole. Everyone tasted it and gave her opinion. One woman said, 'If I saw that in the street, I'd step over it.'

"The R&D guy next to me gasped."

The food company confined its products to the snack shelf.

Welcome to a focus group

This is bare-knuckles market research, where business takes its best and, occasionally, its worst ideas from conference rooms and laboratories and puts them in front of real people to get in-depth, honest, from-the-gut responses to them. It's the stage where an enterprise struts its stuff before its target market for thumbs-up or thumbs-down critiques or tips for improving the marketability of just about anything –

new or repackaged products from soft drinks to slot machines to scalpels; new or reconfigured services from video gambling on airplanes to senior HMO plans; even new or repackaged politicians.

It's consumer democracy in action, "like voting," says Andrew Greenberg, president of Greenberg Qualitative Research in Berkeley, California. "Everyone, at one point in life, should be in a focus group." Focus-group research is different from quantitative market research, where companies send out mass mailings or legions of surveyors to ask specific questions that recipients, mall shoppers or friendly folks on the phone answer by checking appropriate boxes or picking numbers (1 = low opinion, 10 = high opinion; 1 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree). Computers then slice and dice the thousands of responses any which way to decipher opinions from a number of demographic perspectives.

In a focus group, the objective is to generate qualitative information – the rational and emotional reasons behind those checked boxes or cold numbers. What people have to say about why they do the things they do or buy the things they buy. Why they're loyal to certain brand names while shunning others with proud defiance. All in about two hours and for about $50 "incentive" pay apiece.

The strength of focus groups, Bissell explains, is the open-ended nature of the discussions, which begin with broad subjects and narrow to the real agenda item -- from meal-planning philosophy to how someone feels about tuna casserole. In quantitative research, the questions are fixed throughout the study. In qualitative research, "you can change the questions between groups if you discover you're asking the wrong ones," Bissell says. "If people tell you an idea is lousy, you can ask them how to fix it. They'll tell you – in their own words and, frequently, with passion."

Observes Vince Vaccarelli, director of the Xerox Business Research Group in El Segundo, California: "The group interview is excellent in generating alternatives that planners have not identified. It's true nature is to broaden the repertoire." Too often, he says, researchers ask participants to identify the best – the best ad concept, packaging design, snack-food shape, you name it – from a bunch of losers. Instead, a researcher should use the group's brain-storming capability and rewrite, redesign or reshape the topic of discussion into something completely different, something the corporate planners did not devise. Smart researchers use both quantitative and qualitative surveys in making their recommendations, particularly on big decisions involving big financial investments - the launch, for example, of new products, new packaging and new advertising campaigns.

"You have to back up your groups with quantitative work, checking ideas with a projectable population, to make sure what you heard isn't a fluke. That's a danger of focus groups," says George Dittmann, director of market information planning for Harrah's Entertainment in Memphis.

Another danger, he notes, is that observers, particularly managers unfamiliar with the research technique, may pick up a phrase or two from one group and run with it because it reinforces their hypotheses. One thing Harrah's learned from focus groups is what it could not learn from focus groups. "Every casino operator wants to know how slot players pick machines," Dittman says. "We've talked to thousands of slot players to get some insight into how and why they 'feel' a machine is hot or pays the most. The truth is, there is no rhyme or reason. So operators just hope they have a mix of the most popular machines and can keep up with the competition."

Getting In Touch With Their Feelings

Getting a group of consumers to talk requires finesse, regardless of whether they're gamblers, office-equipment purchasing managers, beer drinkers or surgeons, say the experts. Being a focus group leader is like being Barbara Walters - to get substantive information you have to know not only what to ask, but how and when.

Discussion leaders never simply toss their idea-meisters' concepts like grenades into a roomful of consumers and watch for fireworks or fizzles. They can't just say "Whaddaya thinka this?" and expect people to offer up their true, true thoughts from their true, true hearts in front of a bunch of strangers. Explains Robert A. Geddes, a focus-group moderator for 25 years and a principal with Unisearch/Partners in Los Angeles and Detroit: "Respondents don't intentionally lie, but they'll present public personas of the consumers they think they ought to be. Most people are loathe to admit they're influenced or manipulated by advertising."

They also bring to groups their egos, personality quirks and communications styles, which frequently fit gender stereotypes, Geddes adds. "We'll show a commercial, then distribute a cartoon with an empty

balloon and ask people to write a blurb indicating the character's feelings about the main message. Men usually write a word or two in cramped little letters. Women write so much they're outside the lines."
So moderators must conduct intricate ritualistic dances with respondents, performances choreographed to entice participants to shed their public inhibitions and join the research conga line to explain their thoughts and feelings about the subject at hand, usually from their never-before-articulated perspectives as consumers.

In testing advertising, moderators must overcome a tremendous order bias against the first in a series. They know that people generally show their independence or contempt by taking potshots at it. "We had an ad that was so bad we used it in the first position as a straw dog to draw the fangs of the groups," Geddes says. "It was a beer commercial aimed at Midwest blue-collar men, but it featured yuppies at a bachelor party, including a guy marrying a woman named Nadine. We'd told the ad agency that no one outside New York is named Nadine.

"This commercial became our litmus test for individual groups. If people liked the commercial, that meant we couldn't trust anything they said."

All the while, moderators must be mindful of their audiences, the researchers who watch, listen and take notes, usually behind the one-way mirrors that have become focus-group trademarks. (Pssst: No one can see you, but everyone knows you're there.)

Bissell never would have told the R&D folks that the food conglomerate's tuna creation was fish food, even though the company's own marketing team thought it was. And he didn't have to - a preponderance of evidence from half a dozen groups – not just one woman's zinger - proved it.

A single group of respondents, however, can inspire a marketing epiphany for an astute researcher. Edward A. Benfield had one in Huntsville, Alabama in 1984 about light beer. Now a Unisearch/Partners principal, Benfield was director of marketing research for Stroh Brewing Company, and he and his future partner Bob Geddes were in Huntsville to find out why people there drank so much Stroh Light. Miller Brewing Co. had revolutionized the former "diet" beer category with its brilliant mid-1970s "Tastes Great, Less Filling" campaign for Miller Lite featuring retired professional athletes. (Working professionals athletes are barred from endorsing alcohol.). Still, sales in that category were floundering because most full-strength beer drinkers considered light beer drinkers to be testosterone light. Brewers and their ad agencies could do little to remove this perception and had come to accept the prevailing industry view that the light category would tap out between 15% and 20% of total beer sales.

"What we learned in Huntsville was earth-shattering," Benfield says. "We got them talking about who drinks what beer. They told us that guys who drink regular beer are stupid, overweight, blowhard, insensitive jerks. That indicated – and we confirmed it over the next year or two – that light beer drinkers had begun to feel superior. To us, the beer world had turned 180 degrees."
Benfield went back to Stroh and recommended increased advertising support for Stroh Light and the creation of new light versions of other Stroh brands. The future was light, he correctly proclaimed. In 1997, premium regular beer sales accounted for 25.4% of total sales; light beer represented 28.7%.

The Product Is Politics

Focus groups work for presidential candidates as well as for products. Then-Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton used focus groups early in his 1992 presidential campaign. When Clinton was getting battered in New Hampshire as a draft-dodger and an adulterer, Stanley Greenberg of Greenberg Quinlan Research in Washington, DC, best known as Clinton's pollster, held nightly focus groups. His team watched people watch the news, then talked to them to understand their standards of judgment about the candidates. "We found that people respected Clinton for showing self-confidence and answering the hard questions when he was surrounded by packs of screaming reporters. They liked the way he leaned into reporters and took on the issues directly," Greenberg says.

The practical consequences: "We didn't take the back door into hotels; we barreled right in the front doors. We didn't avoid the issues."

So entrenched are focus groups in politics that the term has evolved from a noun to a verb. A California gubernatorial candidate recently was overheard to say, "These new ads will knock your socks off. We focus-grouped them last night and the results were stunning."

With such widespread use, focus groups have become ensconced in our popular culture to the point of becoming prime-time television fodder. In a "Murphy Brown" episode, Candace Bergen's character charged from the observation room and grabbed the throat of a too-critical focus-group respondent. Truth is as strange as fiction: Xerox's Vaccarelli actually experienced that moderator's nightmare. An irate product planner once burst into his focus-group room from behind the looking glass to not-to-subtly correct the "misimpressions" of a Xerox customer who insisted the planner's concept was unfeasible. "At that point, I announced we were changing to a confrontational format to get everyone in the same room and all the issues on the table," Vaccarelli says. "I became more marriage counselor than moderator. They loved it. We formalized the group and called it a Customer Advisory Council."

Shrink-Rapt Science

Focus group research had an ignominious start when it first emerged in the early 1950s as an esoteric offshoot of psychotherapy, modified to plumb the depths of consumers' subconscious.

"The original name was 'guided group discussion,' explains Paul Scipione, a professor of marketing at Montclair State University in Montclair, N.J. "But that didn't have pizzazz. People started calling the methodology 'focus groups' because you focus on recruiting specific kinds of people and in discussions you gradually focus on a particular item or experience."

Business marketing researchers were enamored of the "scientific" numbers and statistics generated by pollsters, notably George Gallup, from the 1930s through the post-World War II period – to the disadvantage of "motivational researchers" who emerged from the "squishy" science of psychology, Scipione says. Early motivational researchers even cloaked themselves in science by wearing white lab coats and conducting groups in a laboratory-like setting with observers behind the one-way mirrors. The focus-group industry embraced mirrored facilities, Scipione says, because users – then and now -- like its voyeuristic aspects.

Some moderators were – and still are – trained in the neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) techniques of group therapists. Theoretically, everyone has a primary method for processing information: auditory ("I hear what you mean."), visual (I see what you mean";) or kinesthetic ("I get it."). Moderators, striving for maximum communication, begin groups by asking simple questions and paying attention to people's answers and movements. Also according to theory, auditory people will move their eyes side to side, visual people will roll their eyes up, and kinesthetic people will roll their eyes down. At the extreme, NLPers try to observe changes in respondents' breathing, pupil dilation and skin tone for clues that someone is thinking and wants to talk. They mirror respondents' body postures to establish rapport. To get respondents to elaborate points while maintaining objectivity, they repeat someone's key words instead of demanding "What do you mean?"

Many moderators, however, would step over these methods if they saw them in the street. To get people in group situations to speak up, they have to quickly establish a rapport to make respondents comfortable; they must have the marketing savvy to recognize when to ask respondents for elaboration or to challenge their points; they must be willing and able to jettison the prepared discussion guide if the questions are wrong – and possibly admit it to group members.

Insists Geddes: "People won't open up to a poker-faced moderator." Unisearch/Partners also eschews mirrored facilities and theories about visible observers' "contaminating" respondent freedom of speech; the company puts everyone in the same room and encourages observers to speak directly to respondents – a heresy to traditionalists.

Andrew Greenberg was more interested in the psychological aspects of the business when he first got into it 14 years ago. Now, as a moderator, "it's about me being myself – and covering the issues at hand." To encourage spontaneity, authenticity, creativity and comfort, he built his own facility with living rooms for the mirrored interviewing rooms instead of the standard conference-room set-up; respondents can sprawl on couches if they like.

Greenberg also takes his research into the field. For a study on jeans, he met a group of 14- to 21-year-olds at a mall, bought them jeans and distributed diaries. Two weeks later, they all met at a respondent's home and yakked for two hours about how the fit of jeans factored into their lives.
Increasingly, focus groups are focusing outside the mirrored rooms. One California researcher hypnotizes respondents and has them emerge from their meditative states enough to describe their consumer experiences. Others go online, using Internet chat-rooms. They type questions and wait for invited guests

to peck-peck-peck their answers. Critics say both these methods prevent moderators from reading important facial cues and hearing the forcefulness of people's comments. Each also lacks the synergism that helps focus groups succeed, often producing extraordinary ideas.

"When you have people face to face," says Montclair State's Scipione, "sometimes weird things happen." Online interviewing is neither qualitative nor quantitative, he notes. "Online is a medium."
But some people are simply un-interviewable.

Stroh researchers Benfield and Geddes were in Euclid, Ohio, a heavy-industry suburb of Cleveland, to talk with Type A beer drinkers – guys who chug a case or more a week. "Only these guys were triple Type A," Benfield recalls. "One guy mentioned he'd been in a bar fight. We asked for a show of hands of guys who'd been in bar fights. All but two of about 20. We... asked that one guy what his fight was about. Next thing we knew, they were all talking about their fights and comparing all their scars."

Benfield's conclusions about the biggest per-capita beer consumers? "It's clearly impossible to find out why they drink so much beer because they're unsociable and they can't articulate. But they had a huge amount of fun with us that night."

Sidebar: Who Are These People?

Focus group participants are furnished by professionals known as "recruiters" or "suppliers." The primary asset of these thousands of recruiting companies throughout the nation is their local database of names, addresses, phone numbers and demographic information. Betty Fox at Fox Research in Los Angeles has built a database of about 20,000 households, most with the researcher-desired average 2.8 people. When Fox gets a request, she sorts her massive list for candidates who fit the required specifications. For each household member, she knows the members' sex, marital status, age, income, race, ethnicity and profession.

Sometimes Fox works with client-supplied lists of known customers in the area. Other times, she uses random-digit dialing. "We just open the phone book and make calls to numbers with prefixes in specific geographic areas."

The recruiting business has definitely gotten tougher in the last few years, Fox observes. "Clients are asking for tighter specifications in their requests for people," she explains. "I'm getting fewer orders for, oh, a homemaker between 24 and 49 who cooks dinner at home at least twice a week."
Recently, for example, she has looked for people who have: gardened for at least five years, shopped in an independent nursery in the previous month and spent at least $25.

Telemarketers posing as legitimate survey researchers -- those people who call at dinnertime to sell home-security devices -- have added to recruiters' problems. Some people just bang down the phone when they hear a stranger on the other end, Fox says.

"The challenge is to explain in the first few seconds that we're conducting a study and not selling anything. You use an engaging voice and speak at a reasonable pace because you have no idea if someone responds well on the phone or needs to be urged on."

Fortunately, she adds, "more and more people know about focus groups and they're delighted if they can be in one."

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