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ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS

An **online focus group** is one in which respondents communicate via an Internet forum, which clients can observe. Typically, online focus groups allow participants the convenience of being seated at their own computers, while the moderator operates out of his or her office. The online focus group is “virtual” in that it communicates electronically rather than through face-to-face contact. For example, FocusVision Worldwide (www.focusvision.com) has an online focus group system that uses webcams and voice communication to connect the moderator and focus group members in real time, with clients able to observe and send chat messages to the moderator during the discussion if they wish. Online focus groups have the following advantages over traditional focus groups: (1) no physical setup is necessary; (2) transcripts are captured in real time; (3) participants can be in widely separated geographic locations; (4) participants are comfortable in their own home or office environments; and (5) the moderator can exchange private messages with individual participants. Innovative approaches are possible, as some researchers combine online with telephone communications for maximum effectiveness.²⁷ Nonetheless, there are some disadvantages to online focus groups: (1) observation of participants’ body language is not possible; (2) participants cannot physically inspect products or taste food items; and (3) participants can lose interest or become distracted.²⁸

A variation of the online focus group is conducted in a traditional setting, but the client watches online. For example, Focus Pointe Global (www.focuspointeglobal.com), which operates facilities in 18 cities in the United States, offers clients the ability to view focus groups online using streaming video. The focus group is conducted at a traditional focus group facility, where participants are seated with the moderator. This type of online focus group allows several members of the client firm to observe the focus group at their own location. This saves the client firm travel expense and time. While they will not replace traditional focus groups, online focus groups offer a viable alternative research method.²⁹



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Online focus group participants are in relaxed surroundings, but they can become bored or distracted.

Respondents to an online focus group communicate via the Internet, and clients may observe the virtual chat.

OPERATIONAL ASPECTS OF TRADITIONAL FOCUS GROUPS

Before a traditional focus group is conducted, certain operational questions should be addressed. It is important to decide how many people should take part in a focus group, who they should be, how they will be selected and recruited, and where they should meet. General guidelines exist for answering these questions. A discussion of each follows.

How Many People Should Be in a Focus Group? According to standard industry practice, the optimal size of a traditional focus group is 6 to 12 people. A small group (fewer than six participants) is not likely to generate the energy and group dynamics necessary for a truly beneficial focus group session. A small group will often result in awkward silences, forcing the moderator to take an overly active role in the discussion just to keep things going. Similarly, a group with more than a dozen participants may prove too large to be conducive to a natural discussion. As a focus group becomes larger in size, it tends to become fragmented. Those participating may become frustrated by the inevitable digressions and side comments. Conversations may break out among other participants while one is talking. This places the moderator in the role of disciplinarian, where he or she is constantly calling for quiet or order rather than focusing the discussion on the issues at hand.

The optimal size of a focus group is 6 to 12 people.

Unfortunately, it is often difficult to predict the exact number of people who will attend the focus group interview. Ten may agree to participate, but only 4 may show up, or 14 may

be invited in hopes that only 8 will show up, yet all 14 may arrive. When this occurs, the researcher faces a judgment call as to whether or not to send some participants home. There is no guaranteed method to ensure a successful participation ratio. Incentives are helpful, but are not a sure fire way of gaining acceptance. Although 6 to 12 is the ideal focus group size, because of the uncertainty of participation, focus groups with fewer than 6 or more than 12 do sometimes take place.

Ideally, focus group members should be homogeneous in some way.

Who Should Be in the Focus Group? It is generally believed that the best focus groups are composed of participants who share homogeneous characteristics. This requirement is sometimes automatically satisfied by the researcher's need to have particular types of people in the focus group. For instance, the focus group may be comprised of executives who own Android phones, building contractors who specialize in building homes over \$500,000 in value, or salespeople who are experiencing some common customer service difficulty. With consumer products, the focus group's common trait may just be that everyone buys salsa.

The need for similar demographic or other relevant characteristics in focus group members is accentuated by the fact that participants are typically strangers. In most cases, they are not friends or even casual acquaintances, and many people feel intimidated or at least hesitant to voice their opinions and suggestions to a group of strangers. But participants typically feel more comfortable once they realize they have something in common, such as age (they may all be in their early 30s), job situations (they may all be junior executives), family composition (they may all have preschool children), purchase experiences (they may all have bought a new car in the past year), or even leisure pursuits (they may all play tennis). Furthermore, by conducting a group that is as homogeneous as possible with respect to demographics and other characteristics, the researcher is assured that differences in these variables will be less likely to confuse the issue being discussed.

More than one focus group should always be conducted.

How Many Focus Groups Should Be Conducted? The answer to how many focus groups should be conducted is always "more than one." Because each focus group tends to have its own personality, findings should never be based on the results of a single focus group. Technically speaking, the rule is to hold as many focus groups as it takes to reach a saturation point in terms of gaining new information. In reality however, focus groups take a great deal of planning, and it is hard for marketing researchers to know in advance exactly how many they will need to conduct. Generally speaking, three to four focus groups are conducted for small projects, and nine to twelve may be conducted for large projects. For example, if Kraft Cracker Barrel Cheese is testing ideas for a new advertising campaign via focus groups, its brand team might conduct a total of nine focus groups: three each involving heavy users, light users, and nonusers of Cracker Barrel cheese in the cities of Boston, Chicago, and San Diego.

Selection of focus group members is determined by the purpose of the focus group.

How Should Focus Group Participants Be Recruited and Selected? As you can guess, the selection of focus group participants is determined largely by the purpose of the focus group. For instance, if the purpose is to generate new ideas on GPS system improvements, the participants must be consumers who own a GPS system. If the focus group is intended to elicit building contractors' reactions to a new type of central air-conditioning unit, it will be necessary to recruit building contractors. It is not unusual for companies to provide customer lists, or for focus group recruiters to work from secured lists of potential participants. For instance, with building contractors, the list might come from the local Angie's List or a building contractor trade association membership roster. In any case, it is necessary to initially contact prospective participants by telephone to qualify them and then to solicit their cooperation in the focus group. Occasionally, a focus group company may recruit by requesting shoppers in a mall to participate, but this approach is rare.

As we noted earlier, "no-shows" are a problem with focus groups, and researchers have at least two strategies to entice prospective participants. Incentives are used to encourage

recruits to participate in focus groups. These incentives range from monetary compensation for the participant's time to free products or gift certificates. Many focus group companies use callbacks, email, or text messages during the day immediately prior to the focus group to remind prospective participants they have agreed to take part. If one prospective participant indicates that some conflict has arisen and he or she cannot be there, it is then possible to recruit a replacement. Neither approach works perfectly, and anticipating how many participants will show up is always a concern. Some focus group companies have a policy of overrecruiting, and others have lists of people they can rely on to participate provided that they fit the qualifications.

Where Should a Focus Group Meet? Since the focus group discussion will generally last 90 minutes to two hours, it is important that the setting for the group be comfortable and conducive to discussion. Ideally, focus groups are conducted in large rooms that are set up in a format suitable to the research objective. In cases in which face-to-face interaction is important, a round table format is ideal. Other formats may be more suitable for tasting foods or beverages, or for viewing video content. An overarching consideration is that the moderator must have good eye contact with every participant.³⁴

Focus groups are held in a variety of settings. Some possibilities include an advertising company's conference room, a moderator's home, a respondent's home, the client's office, hotels, and meeting rooms at churches. Aside from a seating arrangement in which participants can all see one another, a second critical requirement is that the space be quiet enough to permit a clear audio recording of the sessions. Marketing research firms with facilities similar to those we described at the beginning of this section offer ideal settings for focus groups, since they are specifically set up for focused discussions and have recording equipment at the ready and one-way mirrors through which teams can observe focus groups in progress.

When Should the Moderator Become Involved in the Research Project? Moderators should not be viewed as robots to be hired at the last minute to run focus groups. The focus group's success depends on the participants' involvement in the discussion and their understanding of what is being asked of them. Productive involvement is largely a result of the moderator's effectiveness, which in turn depends on his or her understanding of the purpose and objectives of the interview. Unless the moderator understands what information the researcher is after and why, he or she will not be able to phrase questions effectively. It is good practice to have the moderator contribute to the development of the project's goals, in order to facilitate their guidance of the discussion topics. By aiding in the formation of the topics (questions), the moderator will become familiar with them and will be better prepared to conduct the group.

It is important when formulating questions that they be organized into a logical sequence, and that the moderator follow this sequence to the extent possible. The moderator's introductory remarks are influential, because they set the tone for the session. All subsequent questions should be prefaced with a clear explanation of how the participants should respond; for example, that they should say how they really feel, rather than how they think they should feel. This allows the moderator to establish a rapport with participants and lay the groundwork for the interview's structure.

How Are Focus Group Results Used? As we noted earlier, focus groups report some of the more subtle and obscure features of the relationships among consumers and products, advertising, and sales efforts. They furnish qualitative data on matters such as consumer language, emotional and behavioral reactions to advertising, lifestyle, relationships, the product category and specific brand, and unconscious consumer motivations relative to product design, packaging, promotion, and any other facet of the marketing program under study. However, focus group results are qualitative and not perfectly representative of the general population.

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To learn how NOT to conduct focus groups, go to www.youtube.com and search for "The #1 Focus Group Moderator in the World."

What Other Benefits Do Focus Groups Offer? The focus group approach is firmly entrenched in the marketing research world as a mainstay technique. Because they are of reasonable total cost when compared with large-scale quantitative surveys, adaptable to managers' concerns, and capable of yielding immediate results, focus groups are an appealing qualitative research method. Moreover, face-to-face focus groups are becoming common worldwide, and online focus groups are boosting the popularity of focus groups with new capabilities.³⁵ They are a unique research method because they permit marketing managers to see and hear the market. Sometimes managers become so engrossed in their everyday problems and crises that it is refreshing for them to see their customers in person. It is common for marketing managers to come away from a focus group observation stimulated and energized to respond to the market's desires.

ADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

The four major advantages of focus groups are that (1) they generate fresh ideas; (2) they allow clients to observe participants; (3) they may be directed at understanding a wide variety of issues, such as reactions to a new food product, brand logo, or television ad; and (4) they allow fairly easy access to special respondent groups such as lawyers or doctors, where it would otherwise be very difficult to find a representative sample of these groups.

DISADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

There are three major disadvantages to focus groups: (1) They do not constitute representative samples; therefore, caution must be exercised in generalizing findings; (2) success is greatly dependent on the ability of the moderator; and (3) it is sometimes difficult to interpret the results of focus groups (the moderator's report is based on a subjective evaluation of participants' statements and interactions).

WHEN SHOULD FOCUS GROUPS BE USED?

When the research objective is to explore or describe rather than predict, focus groups may be a good choice of research method. For example, they work well when a company wants to know "how to speak" to its market. What language and terms do its customers use? What are some new ideas for an ad campaign? Will a new service we are developing appeal to customers, and how can we improve it? How can we better package our product?³⁰ In all these cases, focus groups can describe the terms customers use: their reactions and ideas for ads; the reasons why service, product, or package features are (or are not) appealing; and suggestions for improving the company's delivery of benefits. Refer to the section entitled "Some Objectives of Focus Groups" for elaboration on the subject of when focus groups are particularly useful.

WHEN SHOULD FOCUS GROUPS NOT BE USED?

Because focus groups are made up of a small number of persons who are not representative of the larger population, care must be exercised in using them. If the research objective is about prediction, focus groups should not be used. For example, if we show 12 people in a focus group a new product prototype and 6 say they will buy it, it is not defensible to predict that 50% of the general population will buy it.

SOME OBJECTIVES OF FOCUS GROUPS

There are four main objectives of focus groups: (1) to generate ideas; (2) to understand consumer vocabulary; (3) to reveal consumer needs, motives, perceptions, and attitudes about products or services; and (4) to understand findings from quantitative studies.

Focus groups *generate ideas* for managers to consider. Krispy Kreme has conducted focus groups to help design new product choices and stores. If managers consistently hear that their customers prefer Krispy Kreme doughnuts but go elsewhere for gourmet coffee, this gives

management ideas for changing their product mix to include gourmet coffee. Parents talking about the difficulties of strapping children in car seats give designers of these products ideas. Consumers discussing the difficulties of moving furniture inspire innovations in furniture designed for portability.

To *understand consumer vocabulary* entails using a focus group to stay abreast of the words and phrases consumers use when describing products in order to improve communications about those products or services. Such information may help with advertising copy design or the preparation of an instruction pamphlet. This knowledge refines research problem definitions and also helps structure questions for use in later quantitative research.

The third objective—to *reveal consumer needs, motives, perceptions, and attitudes* about products or services—involves using a focus group to refresh the marketing team's understanding of what customers really feel or think about a product or service. Alternatively, managers may need early customer reactions to changes being considered in products or services.³¹ Focus groups are commonly used during the exploratory phase of research.³² This application is useful in generating objectives to be addressed by subsequent research.

Finally, to *understand findings from quantitative studies* requires using focus groups to better comprehend data gathered from other surveys. Sometimes a focus group can reveal why the findings came out a particular way. For example, a bank image survey showed that a particular branch consistently received lower scores on "employee friendliness." Focus group research revealed that this perception was linked to several frontline employees who were so concerned with efficiency that they came across as unfriendly. The bank revised its training program to remedy the problem.

Warner-Lambert is one company that has successfully used focus groups to accomplish all four of these objectives. Its consumer health products group, which markets over-the-counter health and beauty products as well as nonprescription drugs, uses focus groups extensively.³³ In fact, Warner-Lambert uses a combination of qualitative research techniques to gain background information, to reveal needs and attitudes related to health and beauty products, and to stimulate brainstorming for new ideas. Focus groups have been useful in understanding basic shifts in consumer lifestyles, values, and purchase patterns.

6-4 Ethnographic Research

Ethnographic research, an approach borrowed from anthropology, is defined as a detailed, descriptive study of a group and its behavior, characteristics, and culture.³⁶ *Ethno* refers to people, and *graphy* refers to a field of study. Ethnographic research is used in marketing to gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of consumers and their behavior by studying the behavior in situ over prolonged periods. Ethnography is particularly effective for studying trends, personal habits, lifestyle factors, and the effect of social and cultural context on consumption. Ethnography uses several different types of research, including immersion, participant observation, and informal and ongoing in-depth interviewing. Ethnographers pay close attention to the words, metaphors, symbols, and stories people use to explain their lives and communicate with one another.³⁷

Marketers increasingly use ethnography to study consumer behaviors, including how people act when buying cars or in restaurants, or how people change when they become parents.³⁸ Kellogg's regularly uses ethnographic techniques to study breakfast and snacking behavior, particularly in developing nations such as South Africa, India, and Mexico. According to Mike Mickunas, vice president of global insights and planning at Kellogg's, the company gets its top leaders involved in these ethnographic studies. Mickunas states, "It's something when your CEO comes into your business meeting in Mumbai and is looking at a portfolio plan and can ask questions based on his direct experience of sitting across the table from a mom over breakfast."³⁹ Many marketing research companies and client-side marketing research departments regularly hire employees trained in ethnography. Some marketing

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Shopalongs are a type of research in which a researcher accompanies a shopper (with permission) on a shopping trip and observes and records the shopper's activities.

Marketing Research on YouTube™ Learn about ethnographic research by going to www.youtube.com and searching for "Sports Fan Ethnography."

Mobile ethnography is a type of marketing research in which respondents document their own experiences through their mobile phones.

Netnography is the name for the ethnographic study of online activities.

research companies, such as Context-Based Research Group and Housecalls, Inc., specialize in ethnography.

One popular form of ethnographic research is called the *shopalong*. Just as it sounds, **shopalongs** are a type of research in which a researcher accompanies a shopper (with permission) on a shopping trip and observes and records the shopper's activities. The researcher generally audiotapes, videotapes, or takes photos of the shopper as he or she shops. The participant is often interviewed prior to or after conducting the shopping activity.

Here are other examples of ethnographic marketing research provided by the Qualitative Research Consultants Association:⁴⁰

- Observing parents at home making dinner for the household
- Observing what men eat for breakfast and why
- Walking with seniors and listening to them discuss their hopes, fears, worries, health, and family/friends
- Watching people use a product they were given a few days ago to find out how it fits into their routine (test product or a competitive product)
- Observing the "before and after" of someone taking a medication, and how it makes or does not make a difference in that person's life

MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY

A type of ethnography that has emerged as smartphone ownership has risen is *mobile ethnography*. **Mobile ethnography** is a type of marketing research in which respondents document their own experiences through their mobile phones. Mobile ethnography is sometimes called mobile qualitative, or simply mobile qual. With mobile ethnography, researchers recruit respondents to record their own activities and emotions, using their phones to take photos and videos accompanied by audio explanations. For example, respondents might be asked to document their own participation in milestone events such as celebrations or funerals, or in more mundane activities such as making breakfast or taking the dog for a walk. Mobile ethnography can be especially useful for documenting private behavior, such as waking up in the morning or administering medical treatments. A company called Pay Your Selfie pays respondents to upload photos or videos of themselves engaged in prescribed tasks. For example, Crest commissioned a study of people brushing their teeth. Crest learned that there is a notable uptake in tooth brushing between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m., presumably in preparation for happy hour. Such information can be helpful for optimizing the timing of social media posts.⁴¹

The advantage of mobile ethnography is that it can uncover authentic behavior and feelings that a researcher might miss, with respondents viewed as the experts in their own lives. A limitation is that respondents are often not aware of their own habitual or unconscious behavior as they interact with products and services. As a result, they might miss important insights that a trained researcher would notice. This has led some researchers to say that, while mobile methods are valuable, they cannot legitimately be called ethnography.⁴² A number of mobile apps—some free and some for a price—have been developed that provide tools to assist with mobile ethnography, including MyServiceFellow, QualBoard, Field Notes, and MyInsights. Marketing Research Insight 6.2 provides some examples of how mobile ethnography is used.

NETNOGRAPHY

Netnography (InterNET plus ethNOGRAPHY) is the name for the ethnographic study of online activities. Coined by Robert Kozinets, netnography is used to examine the online interactions of individuals and communities on the Internet, as well as the relationships between people and electronics.⁴³ Netnography can be applied to the study of user-generated content on social media (see Chapter 5). Netnographic studies have been used to examine how