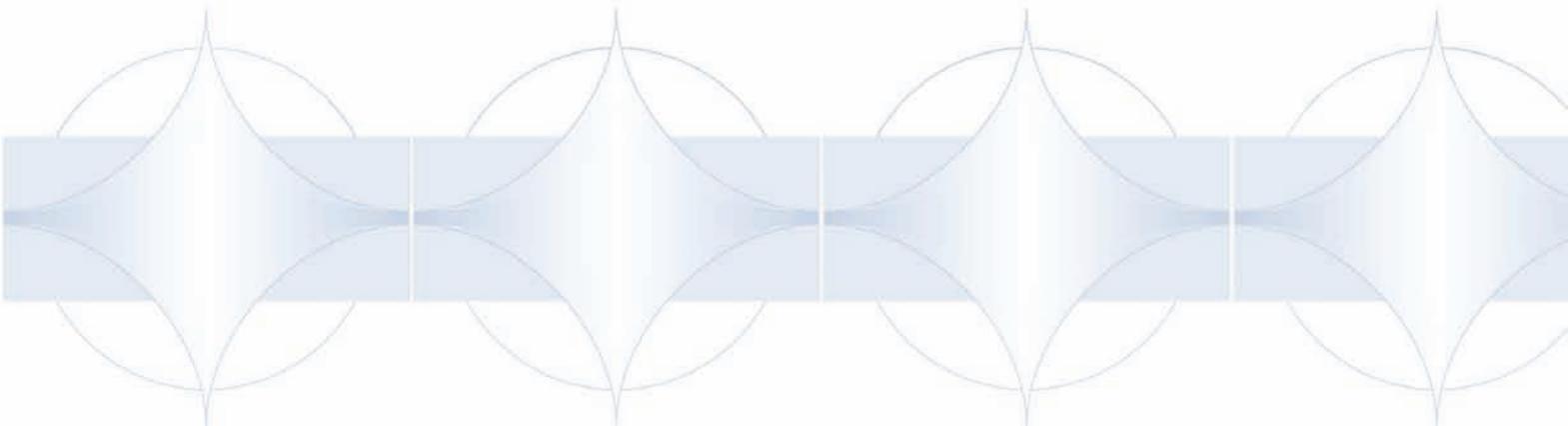


# White Paper: The Use of Focus Groups in Research

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Focus group interviews have become the research method of choice for many marketing, legal, and political professionals. In comparison with other methods, such as nationally representative surveys, single focus-group interviews can be very cost-effective and often provide insights about people that are of considerable depth. For example, in addition to providing information about the appeal of new products or ideas, focus groups can provide information about language use and about nonverbal behavior and may often include colorful anecdotes from interview participants.

The undeniable popularity of the focus-group methodology appears to have resulted in a practice of using the method almost indiscriminately, regardless of whether it is appropriate to address a given research question. Moreover, many companies often rely on focus groups as their only method of inquiry, ignoring methods more appropriate for answering the research question at hand. These practices suggest that, perhaps, some confusion about the overall method, its potential pitfalls, and when best to use it is fairly widespread.

In the following pages, we discuss several key considerations for companies conducting focus-group research and provide some words of caution. We then suggest ways in which companies can decide whether focus groups are appropriate for the research task at hand. The overall goal of this paper is to stimulate practitioners to become more selective in the use of the method.

## **PROCEDURAL CONSIDERATIONS AND WORDS OF CAUTION**

Focus groups are semistructured interviews. A group moderator usually meets face-to-face with a fairly small group of people and leads a group discussion of one or more circumscribed topics. Although no specific format for focus groups exists, most focus-group sessions have similar preparation. A researcher chooses the topic for the session and prepares a catalog of questions for a moderator to use during the session. Following the content preparation, the researcher recruits participants for the session. The recruitment may follow a number of criteria. For example, if a political analyst is interested in interviewing undecided voters about their opinions of the candidates for an upcoming presidential election, he or she would do well to select participants who are registered to vote and undecided. He or she may also want to set certain demographic criteria for inclusion in the group, such as geographic location, age, or income.

Several issues can arise during or after a focus group that may cloud a practitioner's ability to draw valid conclusions about a topic. The cautions that follow warrant consideration.

### **Caution 1: Interpret Focus Groups at the Group Level**

Many practitioners report anecdotes and enlightening snippets of information from individual focus-group members. Others focus strictly on the overall group opinion about an issue, concluding, for example, that a certain political policy has little merit among a group of undecided voters who match a certain demographic profile. The first level of reporting is at the level of the individual member. The second level of reporting is at the level of the group. The variability of levels at which practitioners summarize focus-group results suggests that some practitioners may be confused about the appropriate level at which to report focus-group findings best.

Even though individual comments from particularly colorful individuals within a group can provide some insights or motivate discussion, it is typically impossible for members of a focus group to fail to be influenced by the other members in the group. Because of this cross-influence between members, conceptualization of focus-group results is best at the group level.

Take as key evidence a famous study in social psychology that tested the emergence of group norms and their effects on opinions using people's perceptions. The 1936 experiment by Muzafer Sherif (see *The Psychology of Social Norms*) first seated individual participants in a dark room. At the opposite wall from where they were seated, the experimenter had installed a small, stationary point of light to create a phenomenon: the autokinetic effect. This effect is a perceptual illusion in which a stationary point of light in an otherwise dark room appears to move considerably from side to side. Individually tested participants across the sample reported a distance range of 2 to 6 inches for the movement of the light. Later, Sherif tested the autokinetic effect on small groups of the same participants. Even though the light appeared to move a wider distance across the tested individuals, when participants came up with a group answer, the distance estimates showed significant compromises from the initial individual assessments. For example, an individual who initially thought the light moved 6 inches in the individual condition ended up incorporating the information from other group members into his or her perception,

finally concluding in the group setting that the light moved only about 4 inches. Remarkably, the group norm persisted even when participants had individual testing again at a later time.

## **Key Summary Points 1**

The formation of group norms is nearly inevitable in group settings in which practitioners collect opinions. The main level of interpretation of focus-group data is the group. Practitioners therefore need to interpret individual comments from focus-group members with caution, because individuals are likely to be influenced by the group during the interview.

### **Caution 2: Screening by Demographics Alone Can Limit Sharing and Distort Focus-Group Norms**

As we mention briefly above, many practitioners use selection criteria, such as demographics or prior product use, to assemble focus groups. What goals may such preselection serve? Most marketers today appear to have some appreciation for the diversity of their customer base. Furthermore, they seem to understand that recruiting an overly diverse group of participants for a focus-group session may have adverse effects on information quality as a result of poor information sharing within the group. For example, imagine an extremely diverse focus-group setting in which participants range in age from 18 to 65 years and come from various ethnic backgrounds and in which half the members are men. It does not seem surprising that members of this focus group might feel uncomfortable to share opinions with the moderator and—more important—with the group. Most humans have an innate desire to connect with other people. Much of any initial attempt to connect with others goes to establishing common ground through the expression of mutually valued opinions (see Baumeister, R. F., and M. R. Leary, “The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation,” *Psychological Bulletin* 117 (1995): 497–529). The way in which most humans gauge the appropriateness of sharing an opinion in groups is to analyze how similar the members of the group are to themselves. If they perceive themselves to be overly different from other group members, participants might censor their opinions because they do not know if the group would accept their opinions if they shared the opinions (see Glynn, C. J., A. F. Hayes, and J. Shanahan, “Perceived support for one’s opinions and willingness to speak out: A meta-analysis of survey studies on the ‘spiral of silence,’” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (1997): 452–63).

Even though the goal behind prescreening may be clear in the practitioner’s mind, does screening by demographics alone foster the perception of similarity among the group members and therefore information sharing? The answer is yes and no. When people first scan a room to form an impression of a group, they may rely on superficial similarities between themselves and the group members to judge similarity. But as the interview progresses, psychological (why people think, feel, and act a certain way) differences are likely to emerge that will increase the perception that the group members are actually quite different from each other. Focus-group members whom practitioners assembled on the basis of demographic criteria alone may still—as a consequence of psychological differences—become hesitant to share their true feelings about an issue.

Take the example of opinions about a current topic: whether the U.S. Congress should place polar bears on the endangered-species list because of global warming. One argument in favor of this legislation is that global warming will erode the natural habitat of polar bears at some point, and hence the bears should have protection (even though their population is not currently showing decline). An argument against placing polar bears on the endangered-species list is that our forecasts about the effects of global warming on polar-bear habitats are insufficiently accurate. Placing the bears on the endangered-species list would unduly limit exploration in areas that polar bears naturally inhabit.

Imagine that a political analyst was interested in posing this question to a focus group of undecided voters. To maximize the informational impact of the focus group, the political analyst decided to employ a fine-grained demographic screen, interviewing only female, registered, undecided voters from the Midwest region of the United States, ages 29 to 39 and with a minimum household income of \$50 000 per year.

On the surface, the women whom the analyst recruited to participate in this focus group have much in common. They share residency in a clearly defined geographic region, they are of the same sex, they are within a similar age cohort, and none are apparently economically distressed. On the basis of these surface similarities, one would expect a clear average norm to emerge that could inform strategy about the polar-bear issue. However, the political analyst failed to take into account that despite their demographic similarities, most of the women in the group differ psychologically. Some of the women are careful information seekers and able to weigh long lists of pro and con arguments about complex issues. Other women in the group seek approval from valued members of social groups that they belong to and often don't make up their minds about an issue until they believe that they know how their peers think. Still others become very emotional and enthusiastic about certain topics but care little about detailed information and quickly lose interest in any given issue.

Unaware of these differences, the political analyst erroneously concluded that the group norm among undecided voters matching the demographic characteristics of the focus group was that further information was necessary to determine if polar bears indeed needed protection by Congress—a noncommittal view on the issue. The actual group discussion was dominated by two women who seemed to have read a number of newspaper articles about global warming and species extinction. Both women outlined in considerable detail the pros and cons of putting polar bears on the list. The emotional, enthusiastic women in the group initially supported putting the bears on the list, but after listening to the informed women, the emotional women just conceded that the topic was too complicated and further research was necessary. The status-conscious members of the group contributed very little and just occasionally nodded to the moderator of the group. The moderator therefore concluded that they were in agreement with the outspoken, informed women. In reality, the women were simply being polite; they never shared their view that the whole issue of global warming was an untested, biased topic promoted by the liberal media.

On a more abstract level, the political analyst failed to consider that undecided voters might show indecision for different reasons. The informed newspaper readers in the group are undecided because they are unable to sort through the many pro and con arguments associated with the political candidates for office and with many of the actual issues on the table. The emotional, enthusiastic, but unfocused members of the group are simply disengaged from the election cycle altogether but are still planning to vote. Finally, the status-oriented members of the group are often swing voters waiting for a clear signal from their social reference group before they act.

What this hypothetical example strongly suggests is that practitioners ought to consider using a psychological screener to select focus-group members. One particularly effective screener is the VALS™ framework. In the polar-bear example above, the direction of the norm was noncommittal. Hidden in the group were three VALS types, for which three focus groups would have been necessary to elicit a true read of how the women felt about polar bears. The information seekers (Thinkers) would have been truly undecided about polar bears. The emotional, but unfocused group (Experiencers) would have been enthusiastic supporters of the bears' protection, without the extended discussion promoted by Thinkers in the hypothetical group. The status-oriented group (Achievers) would have been strongly against wasting congressional time even to discuss this topic. These Achiever women have received many cues from their surroundings that global warming is a low-priority issue in comparison with economic ones, for example. Remarkably, these differences would have emerged in VALS groups despite the group members' demographic similarities.

The emergence of a clear norm in VALS focus groups is further facilitated by the ease with which psychologically similar people typically discuss issues. As we mention earlier, people fundamentally look to connect with similar others. Screening for psychological similarity means that individual members of focus groups will generally feel more at ease in sharing opinions with the group, because the other group members will likely hold values and attitudes similar to theirs. The insights generated by using a VALS focus group are therefore more effective for marketing strategy, because they are more valid with respect to the direction of the opinion that the target group truly endorses.

## **Key Summary Points 2**

People are more likely to share opinions in groups if they perceive themselves to be similar to the other group members. Screening by demographics alone may foster perceptions of similarity at the beginning of the interview only. Psychological differences that emerge during the interview may limit information sharing or distort the group norm. A psychological prescreener for focus-group research, such as the VALS framework, is useful to counteract the potential negative effects on data quality of overly different psychological profiles among focus-group members.

### Caution 3: Do Not Necessarily Trust What People Report in Focus Groups

Even though the primary level of analysis of focus groups is the group, the basic building block of a group norm is the individual. Can we generally trust what individuals report about their inner states (opinions, feelings, memories, and the like) during the interview?

It is probably a fair assessment that the average consumer holds poorly defined opinions about any given topic of interest to a marketer. This lack of definition of any particular attitude is hardly surprising given the onslaught of products and information that consumers are bombarded with on a daily basis. Most consumers simply do not have the motivation to process information about all products and topics in a way that allows for strong opinion definition. Thus, except for subject-matter expert opinions or strongly motivational opinions, such as those involving a beloved brand or important social values, most opinions that a marketer will try to gauge using focus groups will have poor definition within any average member of the group. This lack of defined opinion is particularly pronounced in many focus groups, because marketers frequently use the focus-group method to gauge reactions to new products or concepts that people typically have little to no prior familiarity with.

Given this situation, what factors might determine what participants in focus groups actually say to a moderator and their fellow group members about a topic? One answer, related to the cross-influence between focus-group members, involves *anchoring*. When people are unsure about an answer to a question, they may rely on anchors—standards—to guide their reasoning, even if the anchors are arbitrary. In focus-group interviews, natural leaders within the group may serve as anchors. Some people are simply more outspoken than others in small-group settings. In situations in which prior opinions about an object are ill-defined, the overall group reaction may skew toward the first, persuasive reaction voiced by a single group member.

The undue anchoring influence that natural leaders of the group may have on the course of the focus-group interview and on the overall group reaction to a topic is clearly problematic. One problem involves the validity of information generated from the group. If a particularly outspoken member of a group can skew the group reaction, two groups composed of similar individuals might generate completely opposite reactions to a new product, for example. Outcomes depend entirely on the nature of the reaction voiced by the group leader. A well-trained moderator can sometimes try to redirect the group away from an initial leader opinion by asking targeted follow-up questions in which the group considers reactions or scenarios alternative to the initially presented anchor opinion. But often, when people form an opinion based on an anchor, the influence of the anchor will persist during the discussion and the other group members may revise their view only slightly, even after moderator intervention. This persistence of anchors on judgment has had documentation in hundreds of contexts (see Kruglanski, A. W., and D. Sleeth-Keppler “The principles of social judgment,” in A. W. Kruglanski and E. T. Higgins (eds.), *Social Psychology: Handbook of Basic Principles*, 2nd edition (2007): 116–37, for more information).

Another perspective on opinion expression in focus groups is even bleaker than the notion that people will be victims of anchoring. Beginning with research in the late 1970s in

psychology, dozens of studies have demonstrated that when uncertain, people fabricate information. Fabrications may include the overall opinions and reasons that people give for choices. One study by David Sleeth-Keppler and Ronald Friedman (Kruglanski, A. W., J. Y. Shah, A. Fishbach, R. S. Friedman, W. Y. Chun, and D. Sleeth-Keppler, “A Theory of Goal Systems,” in Mark Zanna (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (2002): 331–78) illustrates this phenomenon well. Under the guise of a product-evaluation study, the researchers invited students at the University of Maryland to examine four pairs of athletic socks (A, B, C, and D) and pick the highest-quality pair from the array. Unbeknownst to the participants, all four pairs of athletic socks were exactly identical. Before the selection task, Sleeth-Keppler and Friedman placed half the participants under time pressure, asking them to finish the evaluation quickly. They told the other half to take their time. The researchers predicted that the participants under time pressure would overwhelmingly chose the last pair in the array (choice D) to be of the highest quality. They predicted that the other participants, not under time pressure, would show no systematic choice pattern (equal choice percentage across the four identical pairs). The idea was that under time pressure, the last sock pair would be the choice because its quality was identical to that of the other pairs, and choosing it allowed participants to finish the task in the fastest possible time (after examining each pair in order). When not under time pressure, the participants had the luxury to revisit and reevaluate all the pairs. Thus, the researchers expected no particular choice pattern. Sleeth-Keppler and Friedman found this pattern of results. Under time pressure, participants overwhelmingly chose sock pair D, and no particular trend emerged in the no-time-pressure situation.

After the selection task, all the participants filled out a confidential rating form to explain their choice. Fully 100% of participants justified their choice by referring to the superior quality of the chosen socks. They mentioned the thickness, stitching, and softness of the chosen option, to name a few attributes. None of the participants in the time-pressure condition mentioned that their choice was influenced by the time requirements. None of the participants even noticed that the socks they chose were identical to all the other ones in the array!

### **Key Summary Points 3**

When people who are uncertain about a product or issue think about that product or issue, they may feel strongly influenced by other people. The influence of outspoken people in a focus group is difficult to undo, even after moderator intervention.

People often have very little conscious awareness of the factors that influence their choices and opinions. In many situations, people justify their choices and opinions by fabricating reasons in real time, with no apparent awareness of the fabrication.

### **Caution 4: Focus-Group Findings Do Not Generalize to Populations**

The U.S. presidential-election year 2008 was the year of polls. To try to predict the outcome of this election, people relied more than ever before on polls and polling services—including various aggregate polling services, such as [www.pollyvote.com](http://www.pollyvote.com) , [www.realclearpolitics.com](http://www.realclearpolitics.com) ,

and [www.fivethirtyeight.com](http://www.fivethirtyeight.com) . Various network and cable channels also relied on information from focus-group “opinion trackers” during the major televised presidential and vice presidential debates as a feature of their election coverage. Specifically, during the debates, a panel of undecided voters on several channels provided real-time opinions about the comments of the candidates for office.

Most people were probably attracted to the polling information before the election, because the information provided a frequently updated image of how the population of likely voters felt about the presidential candidates. Similarly, real-time focus-group data during the debates provided responses from undecided voters that viewers of the debate could incorporate into their own perception of the debate. But do people know that the opinion-tracker methodology using focus groups on TV does not generalize to the population of undecided voters, whereas appropriately conducted polls of undecided voters do?

The extensive overuse of focus groups across a number of domains of inquiry suggests that even practitioners who rely on focus groups to gather information might be confused about the generality of focus-group data with respect to their population of customers, for example. The paragraphs below clarify the issue of how general or specific the information from focus-group interviews actually is.

The result of properly conducted opinion polls that use established representative sampling and bias controls reflects, within a certain margin of error, the opinions of the population that sampled respondents came from. The same is not true of opinions from focus-group sessions, even though investigators frequently make sweeping statements about the opinions of large groups of people based on focus-group findings.

Focus-group data are qualitative in nature, whereas nationally representative opinion polls are quantitative. Quantitative research has to uphold certain assumptions about data quality that do not apply to focus groups. For example, in a nationally representative survey, every member of the population technically has an equal chance of inclusion in the poll (for example, receiving a phone call to participate). Even though lengthy technical discussions surround this assumption, no such assumption governs the selection of members for focus groups. Even when a group is demographically (or psychographically) prescreened, practitioners sample members of focus groups on the basis of convenience variables, such as availability, proximity to the interview location, or simply interest in participating. This fact alone should disallow investigators’ making general statements about populations on the basis of focus-group findings.

Next, quantitative methods define and control response parameters, whereas qualitative methods generally do not. For example, in an opinion poll, one person at a time provides answers to a predefined set of questions selecting—in each case—one option from a set of possible responses. The subsequently aggregated responses form a statistical average.

In focus groups, individuals form opinions in a group, contributing to a group norm, not to a statistically meaningful aggregate opinion. He or she may speak or not, may answer some questions but not others, may give a long or a short answer, may stray from the topic and provide an unsolicited anecdote, and so forth. In other words, no attempt is usual in focus groups to

define and control the response parameters. Some focus-group investigators may later code interview transcripts for certain pieces of information and assign numerical values for certain pieces of information. This analysis, although quantitative in the sense that it involves numbers, is not representative of the population at large.

The simple fact that focus-group data describe only the group itself at the particular time at which the interview took place is sometimes lost on members of the general public. Perhaps more disturbing, this fact also appears lost on a number of marketers, political analysts, and legal consultants. The danger here is not simply that results from a focus group may be overstated in terms of the preferences of a larger customer base. Perhaps a worse outcome is the wasted millions of dollars in design, production, and marketing efforts that are ultimately based on incomplete or misleading information.

#### **Key Summary Points 4**

Focus groups yield qualitative data that, because of lack of control in sampling and responding, are not generalizable to populations.

## **FOCUS GROUPS: RECOMMENDATIONS**

Given the informational properties of focus groups and the potential pitfalls associated with them, we do not recommend focus groups as a stand-alone source of information for business strategy or any other purpose. Rather, incorporating focus groups, at various stages, into larger, multimethod research efforts produces reliable results. Whether and when to use focus groups depend on careful consideration of the goals of the research effort.

A first general guideline: Focus groups can provide valuable insights at the beginning or end of a larger research process. For example, a political researcher whose charge is to find out how Americans feel about climate change may decide first to conduct a focus group to gain information about the various ways in which people talk about climate change. After careful analysis of the interview transcript, the researcher may use the information from the focus group to write items (questions) for a nationally representative survey. Similarly, after conducting a nationally representative survey of a topic, a researcher may want to dig deeper into a topic and interview members of a certain society segment to gain further insights into the statistical findings that the survey obtained. This focus-group effort may inform later strategies about how the survey information serves or translates into actionable deliverables.

A second general guideline: researchers should decide if focus groups are the best avenue—in comparison with other available methods—for gathering insights about a problem. Take for example, a company that is planning to launch a new cell phone. The director of research is to conduct an out-of-box usability study to record first impressions of the product and how easy or difficult it is to use. Would a focus group, in which people simultaneously unpack and interact with the phone and give opinions, be the best choice or method? The answer is probably no, because other people in the group may unduly influence reactions or may make participants nervous, resulting in self-censorship. Another problem may be that people fabricate opinions about the cell phone. The director would be best off in conducting a behavioral-usability study, in which the focus is on nonverbal variables, such as facial expression, length of time necessary to interact with various features of the phone, and a host of other variables more appropriate for usability studies.

A third guideline: Try to choose a method that best reflects the primary way in which the information will serve and the setting in which it will apply. A focus group would be appropriate, for example, if the information will serve to generate ideas—a task that focus groups may be good at. Similarly, if the application of the information is to another small group, focus groups would be appropriate. As an example, it may be prudent to use a local focus group in a mock jury trial before selecting an appropriate legal defense. Such a simple application-driven consideration can help a company or entity decide quite efficiently which method is best and avoid costly mistakes.

Key summary points: Three general considerations should guide the decision whether a focus group would be appropriate for investigating a topic: placement within the research context, method comparisons given the research questions, matching of the data source to the intended application.

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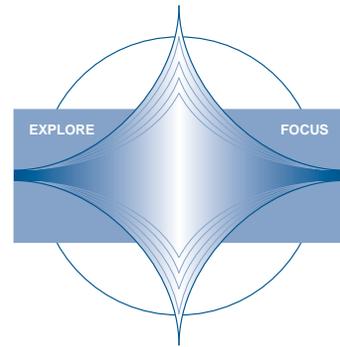
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