

The latest methodologies are threatening

The focus group may not yet be dead, but it is commonly perceived to be dying. It is in danger of losing its foothold as a valid and highly effective methodological tool. The rise of new and varied methodologies means that the focus group is often assumed to be a poor man's alternative – a conventional and so less interesting option. At the same time, the widely accepted view that the consumer is becoming increasingly marketing savvy, has given these innovative approaches further currency. They are perceived to be the only real way to 'get under the skin' of this more irksome breed of consumer.

THE FOCUS GROUP IS NOT DEAD

*Prepared by:
Emily Reeve*

*Sharp Stick, APG,
Spring 2002 edition*

A false comparison

These views, although certainly widespread, spring from a single, false assumption – that these methodologies and the group discussion are designed to achieve the same objectives. They are not and so should not be compared. Moreover, it is laziness to suggest that because the consumer is more marketing literate so the focus group is less effective. As moderators, we just need to work harder.

What then is the purpose of the focus group?

The focus group reveals needs and motivations...

The focus group is designed to uncover more latent and irrational motivations and needs through discussion, exploration and interaction of different views and the use of projective techniques.

The focus group is not designed to recreate live behaviour. 'Hot housing' is part and parcel of the methodology, not a term of abuse. In the focus group, the moderator's task is to go beyond claimed behaviour, interrogate further and reveal the true motivations behind it.

*...while
observational
approaches
reveal consumer
behaviour*

Many of the new observation based methodologies can provide invaluable insight into actual behaviour. Most commonly, it will be behaviour at the moment of consumer interaction with brand communications. Such observational approaches provide the context in which the consumer operates at that time – the external stimuli which drive the decision making process. Because researchers experience actual behaviour, they can thus distinguish between this and the claimed activity revealed in a group. So these observation based techniques should not be carried out in isolation.

*A combined
methodology is
therefore
optimal*

*The moderating
and analytical
skill of the
researcher is
critical*

Nor is the focus group a jury – it does not seek to find a consensus. The skill of the moderator is in uncovering differing viewpoints, nurturing, exploring and developing these. They must not just tolerate, but celebrate the diversity of the group environment. It is only in the analysis of the group content that the task of separating what was said from what was meant begins. The significant is pulled from the irrelevant and the real needs and motivations are uncovered. The focus group itself is but one part of the process – it is meaningless without the analysis that succeeds it.

*The marketing
savvy consumer
believes universal
truths about
brand
relationships*

A more recent and particularly damaging development stems from the increasing marketing sophistication and literacy of the consumer. This savviness will often be expressed as cynicism within the group environment. However, this cynicism and claimed desire for transparency in brand communications should not be taken at face value. It is more often a sign of the consumer's disillusionment and disappointment that marketing regularly fails to trigger an emotional response. Those moderators who fall into the trap of asking direct questions, of assuming that what is said is what is meant, are missing the point.

Being marketing literate, is essentially about understanding and being fluent in a language. But like any language, once it is mastered it provides the individual with access to a whole new world of literature – a world of emotions. They want then to be surprised, to enjoy suspense, to laugh, to cry – however literate, the individual wants not to know. And they look to brands to provide them with these experiences.

As moderators,

The moderator then, needs to work to help respondents go past this

*we must not
bow to the
consumer*

cynicism rather than collaborating with their desire to keep things entirely rational – that is the easy option.

*The group
dynamic is
key...*

Finally, a word about the group dynamic itself. It is this that lies at the core of the value of the focus group and it is the management of this dynamic which is the key to its success.

As human beings, we are fundamentally social creatures and we live in a society built upon the group dynamic – at work, in the family, peers etc. It is critical that this is retained in the research process.

The focus group may not reproduce actual behaviour, but as a microcosm of the society we inhabit, the group ensures that this social context is present. The need to compare oneself against others is innate, as is the desire to share. The focus group provides the individual respondent with a peer group and thereby ensures that true motivations and needs are uncovered.

The individual depth interview lacks this context and so cannot be a replacement. But it can be a valid tool to establishing the mechanics of a decision making process – to understanding *how* more than why.

*Individualism
and collectivism
are co-
dependent not
competitive...*

Marketers everywhere should keep the critical importance of the social context in mind. The so-called rise of individualism over the last decade cannot be without a collective basis. Increasingly, brand commitment is becoming about membership – a proactive desire to belong – a collective urge. Marketers must not lose sight of this as they pursue *their* ideal of one to one marketing.

*...as are the
past and
progress..*

As researchers, we understand the value of context and heritage in the development of any brand – the need to retain values and learnings from the brand's history in its present and future strategies. So with research methodologies, we should remember that progress is about *improvement* of what is delivered, not just innovation.

