

# A MarketSearch *Brief*

## The Dynamics of Focus Groups

As the field of market research has grown in sophistication through the years, more specialized research techniques have been developed for specific problems. Traditional telephone and mail surveys are limited to gathering easily quantifiable data in predetermined categories and can provide little in the way of in-depth exploration of issues. Focus groups were developed in response to the need for more qualitative information and have been used in a wide range of applications in nearly every field of market research.

The greatest strength of the well-conducted focus group discussion lies in its ability to uncover surprises. Unlike a telephone interview where questions are read in a rigidly predetermined order and responses are categorized on the spot, the well-prepared focus group moderator goes into the discussion with only a list of topics to be covered and an understanding of the issues most important to the client. The purpose of the discussion is to encourage participants to express their feelings freely and without inhibitions, and, if other related issues or opinions arise, to probe more deeply into those issues in a relaxed, uncontrolled atmosphere.

Such a structure calls for great skill on the part of the moderator, for his or her function is not to act as a lecturer or as a discussion leader, but as a "listener" who gently guides the discussion to the proper areas with leading questions. Any biases or expectations the moderator brings to the group must be concealed to prevent participants from picking up clues on how to respond. The moderator expresses no

opinions, only interest in the opinions of the respondents.

Discussion often turns to topics the moderator expected to cover later, and he or she must be prepared to deal with the issues as they arise naturally and without break in the discussion. In any group, a few will try to dominate the discussion, and a few will be hesitant to express opinions. The moderator must see that everyone's opinion is heard without seeming to be controlling the participants' comments. A moderator must also be prepared for the unexpected answer, often the most valuable kind, and be able to probe beneath the answer to the motivations and emotions behind it.

The questions asked in focus groups are radically different from those asked in quantitative studies. The easily quantifiable "yes/no" question gives way to, "I'm interested in knowing why you feel this way?" The resulting discussion leaves participants feeling, justifiably, that their opinion is important and gives clients a clearer perspective on how their customers feel and why they feel that way. The value of the discussion lies in allowing participants to control which opinions they express and provides an open atmosphere where new, unanticipated information can surface freely.

Like all research tools, findings from this kind of study can be abused. When properly applied, however, focus group studies can be among the most creative of marketing tools, combining flexibility, precision, and strong impact to narrow the gap between clients and their customers.