

QUALITATIVE ● *Screen tests*

## Find best participants through use of pre-groups

By NINO DeNICOLA

For well more than half a century of use (and abuse) focus groups have served the marketing field as the workhorse of qualitative research. In recent years, advances in technology such as video streaming, content analytical software and on-the-spot electronic earmarking of key data points have made it possible to conduct focus group projects both more quickly and more economically, and not only in person but also by telephone and online. Still, while the mechanics have changed, the purposes to which focus groups are put by and large have remained the same—exploring customers' attitudes and behavior and/or obtaining their reactions and suggestions regarding various marketing concepts or implementations.

An extremely specialized extension of that last application—eliciting suggestions from customers—often takes the form of brainstorming sessions, wherein consumers are encouraged to directly invent and build upon new product, service, packaging or communications ideas. Strictly speaking, at their formalized best, such sessions should not even be thought of, or evaluated, as focus groups. In any event, for various reasons ranging from the vagaries of supposedly cherry-picked respondents through insufficiently disciplined procedures to

the inherent difficulties of promoting constructive creativity from a cold start, these consumer ideation sessions frequently fall short of expectations.

Beyond nuts and bolts improvements in the ground rules and stimuli for consumer ideation, it can be uniquely useful to conduct a pre-group focus group expressly designed to identify the most promising participants—the best of the best; introduce prospective candidates to the subject matter and get them thinking about it in advance; and introduce prospective participants to each other, with an eye to spotting any particularly positive or negative interpersonal vibes that could serve, respectively, to either foster or impede the work of the creative session to come.

Thus, in conjunction with a specialized written screener administered conventionally, the introductory group, in effect, is itself a screening instrument geared to identifying and recruiting uncommonly outgoing, articulate and imaginative individuals—creative consumers—who are likely to be excellent contributors to the enterprise.

The procedure can be outlined as follows: At the end of the telephone screening (which is administered to a greater number of candidates than will be needed later for the creative workshop), respondents are invited to attend a brief pre-group. They are advised that several participants in that pilot session will be

selected for the main, morning-long creative session to be held the following day; and also that representatives from the company sponsoring the research will be included in the main group in order to work in partnership with consumers. All are then given a homework assignment—a workbook consisting of various questions and exercises geared to stimulating both direct and logical (left brain) as well as indirect and metaphorical (right brain) thinking about the subject matter. They are instructed to bring in their completed workbooks to the pre-group.

The screening group typically lasts no more than an hour. Consisting of both discussion and exercises, it has the dual purpose of consolidating and refining various content issues, on the one hand, and promoting an environment of comfortable and collegial participant interaction (essentially, team-building), on the other. Based on the moderator's and client observers' first-hand impressions of the group process, as well as a review of participants' completed workbooks, the desired number of individuals are selected for inclusion in the next day's ideation session. Usually that begins with a meet and greet breakfast, where the selected consumer participants, who already know and are comfortable with one another from the pre-group, meet the marketing representatives who are going to work with them in the creative

session (and who at this point have gone through some *de facto* team-building themselves).

In sum, it appears that the focus group—that tried-and-true methodology of qualitative research—continues to be relevant, at least in part due to its remarkable adaptability not only to new technologies but also to new marketing applications. It is only fairly recently, after all, that companies have sought to engage cus-

tomers more closely and directly in the development of marketing strategies—including actual task-sharing in concert with them. Without in the least compromising the basic qualitative research values for which they are chosen in the first place, focus groups can be adjusted to importantly support this specialized application, by helping to identify the best consumer contributors and by helping to zero in more quickly and accurately on the most produc-

tive lines of inquiry, discussion and ideation. ■

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