

Client Guide to the Focus Group Market Navigation, 2005

(<http://www.mnav.com/cligd.htm>)

This is an advanced guide to the rationale behind focus groups and how to use them best. It will tell you how focus groups differ psychologically from individual interviews, and how to take advantage of these differences. It will also help you understand the different uses of focus groups and the uses to avoid.

1. Why This Guide is Needed

In the decades that I have been conducting focus groups, they have evolved from "the thing to do when you don't know what to do" - a technique for general exploration and questionnaire design - into a sophisticated collection of tools for an extremely wide variety of purposes. Yet there are still many people in the marketing research community, both clients and practitioners, who have not yet come to appreciate advances in focus group practice. The purpose of this article is to provide an advanced handbook of the latest state of the art, in order to help clients use focus groups more effectively. I'd like to take focus group research out of the realm of mystery and to move it more toward science than art.

This is badly needed. The focus group seems to have cycles of popularity. In the last 30 years, the focus group has gone from a controversial method, to high acceptance in certain industries, then fallen out of favor, and is now enjoying a resurgence that probably makes it the fastest growing research methodology. It is often *abused*, *misused* and *overused* in some of its more common uses. Yet, it is *unused* or *underused* for some of its most valuable applications. There are Fortune 100 companies that do not run focus groups, and others that conduct several a day. Some companies swear at them, others swear by them. These differences are more a matter of approach to research, rather than the applicability of focus group methodology to their particular products and customers. Most of what has been written about the focus group is introductory in nature. Simple introductory articles and books are important, but it is now time to move beyond the nuts and bolts into how to best operate the machinery.

There is a widespread - though mistaken - belief that focus groups are the easiest to understand, execute and interpret of all research methodologies. After all, a focus group is just a bunch of people reacting to a concept or discussing a subject. You don't even have to know exactly what questions to ask. You certainly don't need a tight questionnaire. Any friendly person can get a group of people together, ask questions and the conversation flows. What's to interpret? You just listen to what the participants are saying and generalize them to the population. Granted, very few people would *actually agree* with the statements in this paragraph. But too many *act* as if they do. The truth is that focus groups require a considerable amount of professional discipline in their design, execution and interpretation. Their *flexibility* and *adaptability* is mistaken for *looseness* or *casualness*. It is the superficial and intentional resemblance of focus groups to simple group discussions that often causes them to be mistaken for simple group discussions. A focus group is no more a simple group discussion than a group therapy session is a simple group discussion. Both look superficially like simple group discussions, but they have much more ambitious objectives and require considerably more from the group leader. I've conducted both; focus groups are more

difficult to lead. In focus groups, there are extraordinary pressures to accomplish specific objectives within extreme time constraints. In order to properly conduct focus groups, years of training and experience are needed not only in traditional psychology, but also in the separate fields of sociology, group dynamics and business (including marketing, sales and distribution).

2. The Unique Characteristics of Focus Groups

What's so unique about focus groups? In order to answer this question, let's first look at what happens in an **individual depth interview**, which, like a focus group, also allows for open-ended interaction, but with *only one person*, the interviewer. Then let's see what changes are introduced when we usher other people into the situation.

The Individual Interview

In an individual depth interview, the respondent is relating to **one person**, the interviewer. The clear advantage, in some cases, is that responses are not "contaminated" by other reactions. This lack of contamination is desirable in some situations, since a very skillful interviewer can get the respondent into great depth without distractions, and without having people change or withhold their opinions when they hear what other people have to say. That's the theory. Often, however, the respondent simply runs out of steam. The interviewer is sure there is more, but skillful probing simply fails to elicit it. With each succeeding respondent, the interviewer tries to get into greater depth or breadth, but often the responses are all variations on the same theme. More interviews give *greater statistical reliability* you can be increasingly confident that people will say the same thing but often you don't learn anything more after the first few interviews.

The Group Interview

Now let's introduce seven more people into the situation. One of two things can happen: (1) An inexperienced or unskilled moderator will tend to conduct a *serial group interview*. He/she will conduct several individual interviews, talking with first one, then another of the participants, with everyone in each others' presence. The only difference between this type of interview and an individual interview is that each respondent can hear the answers of the others. What is lacking for it to be a focus group is meaningful interaction. (2) In a *real focus group*, the moderator gets the respondents to interact with *each other* in a way that reveals *additional information*. Let's look at how this happens.

Open-Ended Group Interaction

In virtually all forms of marketing research, people respond in *isolation*, with no exposure to each other. In contrast, the hallmark of the focus group is *open-ended group interaction*. **Open ended:** Respondents can answer in their own words, rather than being forced to give yes/no, multiple choice or numerical answers. **Interaction:** More importantly, people are able to freely react to *each others'* responses. This open ended group interaction leads to several other elements:

Roles

Each respondent now has eight other people to relate to seven other participants plus the moderator. (A relationship includes all of the expectations, communication, beliefs, evaluations and emotions that people have toward each other.) What happens? Instead of **two** relationships in the interview that of the interviewer to the respondent and that of the respondent to the interviewer we now have $8 \times 9 = 72$, plus all of the subgroup relationships! People cannot handle 72+ relationships at the same time

separately. They have to organize them. What is important is that *the way people handle these relationships reflects what they do in real life and now becomes an important part of the information we are collecting.*

Let me explain: In contrast to the individual interview, in groups people start interacting with each other according to the different **roles** they are most comfortable with. This more closely simulates what they do in the real world, where they rarely act in isolation. They become:

leaders	dominators
innovators	early adopters
late	gadflies
submissives	supporters
explicators	simplifiers
complicators	investigators
questioners	integrators
speculators	distractors
fragmenters	emotionalists
persuaders	adopters
"assistant moderators"	laggards

... and dozens of other roles, usually several at the same time. *Roles are primarily a group phenomenon.* Why is this so important? **It is the interaction between the different types of people, in their various roles, which brings out the most useful information:** A marketer needs to hear where there is consensus among these different types of people, and where there is a diversity of experience and opinion. You want to hear not only opinions, but also *the kinds of people* who hold these opinions, how the opinions are expressed and what values are at the root of them. You also want to hear how these different types of people react to what is said. **For instance:** How does the leader lead? How does the dominator attempt to dominate? How does the distracter distract? What grabs the innovator, what are the defenses of the laggard? What is persuasive and to whom? What segments will first buy the product, even when the other types of people are trying to dissuade him or her? Observing people interacting in these roles allows you to know what they can all agree on, and what differences need to be addressed in your marketing.

Stimulation

As you move from individual interviews to groups, people not only revert to type by interacting in their diverse roles, **they stimulate each other.** By stimulation, I mean more than just interaction. The value of focus groups is not only that people can react to each others' comments (interaction), but in so doing, they potentiate each other (stimulation) the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. *Stimulation* is created by the excitement, group support, challenge, new ideas and other features of the interaction. It can provide strategic advantages that often mean the difference between the success or failure of a product.

There is an almost irresistible pull to say things that they would ordinarily not reveal. They:

- react to each others' comments
- draw each other out
- ask each other questions you didn't think to ask

- build on each others' ideas
- spark new ideas
- jog each others' memories
- modify each others' comments
- fill in incompletions and gaps in knowledge
- nudge each other out of ruts and habitual thinking.
- take opposing positions
- persuade each other
- change their opinions

As a result of stimulation, you get more information from the group than you could possibly get from any amount of questioning of individuals, even in situations where the purchase decision is itself an individual one.

Flexibility

Focus groups, more than any other method, allow for the emergence and pursuit of surprise information. Agendas can be modified from group to group, and even within groups. A good moderator can build upon the ideas and insights of previous groups, getting to a greater depth of understanding.

Putting it all together

In summary, focus groups uniquely expose and accentuate both the similarities and the differences between *distinct types of people*. By seeing how these different types of people interact, you get a completeness of information that can be achieved in no other way. Focus groups spark more new ideas and identify more unexpected information than any other method of marketing research.

3. Given These Characteristics, Focus Groups are Best for:

Exploration: (The "Fishing Expedition")

Often, you are facing a situation where you literally don't know the language to use or the questions to ask. This can be when you are exploring a new market, going to a new population, or entering a new area of technology. When you are exploring new territory, you don't know what you will find. Focus groups allow you the flexibility to "go with the flow" to uncover hidden information. This is why focus groups are so useful in quantitative research design for tightening up the concepts, issues and questions.

Examples of actual research problems are:

- *What are the present satisfactions and dissatisfactions with our product and those of our competition?*
- *Find out for us what are the deepest fears of the anesthesiologist and what words they use to express them.*
- *See how blue collar workers feel about shaving.*
- *See what complaints and dissatisfactions arise when groups of car owners "bitch" about their cars.*
- *Generate a long list of minor improvements which would make our product seem different.*
- *Identify what themes arise these days among hospital administrators spontaneously discussing their jobs.*

Unfortunately, this use of focus groups is often considered a luxury. "We don't have time for that sort of research with our specific pressing problems, and we're in touch with our customers anyway." However, what your customers and prospects are telling each other may not be what they are telling you. Also, dissatisfactions and needs may be deeply buried, requiring skilled probing to uncover.

Investigation: ("Detective Work")

In contrast to exploration, where you are looking for anything of value and don't know specifically what you are looking for, in detective work you know the characteristics of what you are looking for, but you don't know who the "culprit" is. You are looking for the answer to a particular question, an explanation for a particular phenomenon. The answer is already out there, but you have to find it. The use of the investigational focus group is particularly powerful in situations where each person only has a piece of the puzzle. When you put them together, the whole picture emerges. Such situations may involve multiple decision makers, different members of a team, complex professional relationships, or distributor, dealer, salesperson, customer relationships. In contrast to the pre-questionnaire use of the exploratory focus group, investigational focus groups are useful *after* quantitative studies to help explain the anomalies that inevitably turn up.

Examples of actual research problems are: How do the hospital administrators, head of the department, practicing physicians, nurses, therapists, members of certain committees all interact in order to decide to put a particular machine in the hospital, or adopt a particular drug? Our sales curve is going up. Find out if it is made up of satisfied customers or if there are growing dissatisfactions that will make the bottom drop out. Why are our sales not going down when the competition's sales are going up and the market is not expanding? Our competition is saying something that is sabotaging our sales. What are they really saying? Our sales people are not getting the story across. What are they actually saying and doing? Focus groups allow you the flexibility to follow the twists and turns, hunches and clues of an investigation, while creating the psychological environment in which people are open with each other, even though they aren't with you.

Identification of Present Practices

Often, how people are using a product is quite different than they will reveal to an outsider. Or, the details of their usage is difficult, boring or too elementary to talk about to an outsider. However, people will get into the most amazing detail with other people who are in the same shoes, who speak the same language, who they expect to understand them. Too many product managers think they understand how their product is being used (often they used it when they were in the market), and they miss many opportunities to fill shifting needs.

Examples of actual research problems: How is our product being used vs. that of the competitors? Our drug is not being used in an FDA approved manner. How are physicians really using it, and what are the causes of this usage? Discover any new uses of our product which we can use to expand our market. When someone drops our product, usually they are asked for their reasons. But no one will say, "I used it incorrectly, inappropriately and stupidly." They say, "It didn't work." Analyze the usage of ex-users to determine whether there is a problem that is correctable (by changing the product, changing people's expectations, or training people in better use).

Understanding Motivation

Understanding people's motivations is the second most difficult assignment in marketing, in fact in all of psychology. Getting people to change is the first. But in order to get people to change, to buy your product, to give up old ways of doing things, you have to understand their motivations.

Several things make understanding motivation extremely difficult:

- People often do not understand why they are doing the things they are doing, and therefore can't tell you.
- Even when they do understand why they are doing things, they don't want to tell you.
- When they do tell you, they often don't tell you the truth, or the whole truth. Or, they tell you more than the truth.
- It is more important for most people to preserve their view of themselves than tell you why they are doing what they are doing.
- There is rarely a single reason why a given person does something. Any simple, single act of behavior is usually the result of many complex forces from inside and outside the individual.
- The same act of behavior can be motivated by different things in different people. Members of the same group, performing the same task at the same time may have vastly different motivations.
- The same person will do the same thing at different times for different motivations.
- Some motivations, even if you find them out, are often irrelevant to marketing, in that you can do little, if anything, about them. These may involve motivations based upon deep fears, pathology or illegal activities.
- Yet motivations are extremely important for the marketer to understand, particularly those centering around fundamental beliefs, values, tastes and emotions.

The best way to find out about motivation is by inferring the causes of behavior from people's thoughts and actions. The worst way, often, is to ask them, "Why did you do it?" The best way to get into people's thoughts and actions is to have them talk, in an atmosphere of psychological safety, about what they do not why they do it and how they feel about what they do. When enough descriptions about enough behavior are put together, patterns begin to emerge. The people you are trying to understand are often unaware of these patterns. You then test these patterns against other, similar people to adjust your message. The best laboratory for this is the focus group. People get caught up in the spirit of the group, particularly when they discover people who are simpatico. These other people quickly cease to be strangers, yet they aren't friends, family or co-workers. They begin to pour out information, opinions and feelings that they would not ordinarily share with most other people. The focus group is the only setting available to the marketer for finding out deep motivations which can then be used to fulfill people's deepest needs. Provided, of course, that the moderator is a superb psychologist (academic training is unimportant, competence comes from many sources).

Examples of actual research problems are:

- *Why do people buy our product?*
- *Why do people take so long to adopt our product?*
- *What are people's unfulfilled desires and needs?*
- *What are people's real concerns as distinct from all the concerns that we can imagine.*

- *We make a claim. People buy our product. Are they buying the product in response to our promise, despite our promise, or for some other reasons?*
- *What will motivate someone to read our ad, read our other promotional material, listen to our salespeople?*
- *How can we get people to try our product?*

New Idea Generation

This is the most valuable and least used use of the focus group. In most marketing research assignments, you are trying to find something that is, rather than create something that isn't. In new idea generation, you are trying to discover or create new ideas: products, services, themes, explanations, thoughts, images, and metaphors. Some people believe that this is best left up to the "creative types." I believe that new idea generation is not only within the bounds of marketing research, but at the very heart of it. I do not believe that the primary mission of marketing research is to find out what is going on in the marketplace and stop there. Finding out about the present situation is not the end point, it is the beginning. What can be *done about* the present situation is much more important. I not only want to find out what *is*, but what *can be*. It is artificial and dangerous to separate fact finding from creativity. They *are* different processes, but they interact so strongly that they should not be separated. In a group, someone expresses a desire, someone else reacts with a wish, someone else suggests a way to do it, someone else modifies it to be more practical, the whole group yells, "Yeah, that's it!" That's marketing research at it's best.

Examples of actual research problems are: Develop new features for our next product. Develop advertising themes which will create a high degree of interest in our products. Find a new positioning for our product which will increase our market share. Generate new product ideas. We have pharmaceutical products. We can't easily modify our drugs, and new drugs are discovered in the laboratory, not the focus group. Find us ways to get the physician interested in our drug, new educational material which will be well received, new delivery systems.

Sometimes seemingly trivial changes can make a dramatic difference: discovering the hidden benefit of a tablet instead of a capsule made one drug a market leader; discovering the need for a book on a subject which was neglected, then producing it, made a drug's sales take off.

Communication Refinement

From a marketing perspective, what you *actually* say is not as important as what people *think* you say, and what people think of what they think you said. In other words, communication has more to do with what is *received* and *accepted* than what is actually *meant*. There is a "Murphy's Law" of communication which says that if there is any possible way for people to misunderstand you, they will and in the most damaging possible way. It is crucially important to understand how your communication is received. This is usually attempted by various recall measures. However, this is a very primitive method. In the real world, people think about what you are selling, and talk it over with other people. A much better way is to show people ads, promotional material, or even give them a sales presentation in a series of focus groups. You can get a much deeper idea of exactly what ideas are getting across and how people are reacting to them.

Examples of actual research problems: What is the best way to explain our concept? What are our ads, promotional material, salespeople actually communicating? Why do so many people think our tablet is supposed to be dissolved in water when it is

supposed to be swallowed whole? (In this case, the salespeople were demonstrating dispersion in the stomach by dissolving the tablet in water). Why are the Japanese offended by our ad showing an octopus using our deodorant under his arms? (Because the Japanese view the appendages of the octopus as legs!)

Persuasion Design Laboratories

Focus groups provide an extraordinary way for you to hear people as they are actually deliberating about a purchase. You can provide them with promotional material, even invite a salesperson to give a presentation, then have the group discuss what they are persuaded by and what they reject. As they bring up objections and points in support of your product, you can introduce other materials for further reaction. As you go through a series of groups, you can refine the persuasion strategy by finding out the best order in which to present material, what is needed as proof of claims, what answers to objections actually work (or undercut the objections before they even come up), and what actually closes a sale.

Examples of actual research problems: tell us which of our ads, sales and promotional materials are working, which are not, and which ones need to be developed. Circa 1971: Automated Teller Machines (ATM's) which in those days were called Cash Machines are sure to cause many objections. Empirically develop and test ways to undercut and/or answer the objections. Our competition is using scientific studies in an inaccurate and unethical way to bolster their position, when in fact the studies show the opposite of what they are claiming. If physicians understood the complex data, they would be outraged, and our competition's tactics would backfire. Find out how to accomplish this. This is the hardest type of group to conduct, since it requires on the part of the moderator a research orientation, an experimental disposition, a creative attitude and a high degree of persuasive skill, all at the same time. For many people, these skills are incompatible.

Strategic Positioning

The flexibility and creative stimulation of focus groups makes them superb both for developing positionings for products, as well as testing and refining positionings which have already been developed.

Examples of actual research problems are: where do I fit into the rest of the products in my category? How can I redefine my product to get greater market share? How do I describe my totally unique product?

Concept Development

New concepts are not born fully grown. They must be nurtured and pruned. The focus group is the most fertile ground for growing and modifying new concepts.

Word of mouth research

Word of mouth is the most powerful force in the marketplace. In many industries and with many products it is more powerful than advertising, salespeople and promotional materials *put together*. In fact, it is of overriding importance in virtually any field where it is difficult, risky or expensive to try a product. It is notoriously important in fields like medicine (among physicians), automobiles, entertainment (movies, TV and books), consumer products, agricultural products and industrial products. Yet, marketers and marketing researchers neglect word of mouth to an appalling degree, probably because they don't think that they can do anything to research it reliably, or ultimately do anything about it. There is an amazing amount of indifference to word of mouth, and resignation toward it. Yet, I know of no other research that is easier.

Again, the focus group is the answer. Here again, the unique characteristics of the focus group (open ended interaction, stimulation, emergence of roles and flexibility) make it superb for researching word of mouth and even for learning how to influence it. All you have to do is to put several people who are *using* your or your competitor's product together in a group with *interested non users*. The non-users are asked to find out about the product from the users. This requires very little moderating skill, especially in the first session or two. In fact, the least moderating the better. You want to sit back and listen. You can even "leave" such groups for a while, and observe from behind the one way mirror with your clients. However, while you don't need to be a good moderator for such sessions, you had better be a superb listener and analyst. You have to listen for what is behind the questions and concerns, what is credible and persuasive, and what motivates people to try, buy and praise the product to others. You need to figure out what is fundamental, and what is superficial. So much information is generated from such research that you end up with an embarrassment of riches which will take a great deal of analytical and marketing skill to sort out.

Examples of actual research problems are: who influences the purchase decision, and how? What are our customers saying about our product and our competitors' products? What are recent triers telling their friends? What are our dissatisfied ex-customers saying? What concepts and words are people using to describe our product? What would most strongly influence word of mouth to turn in our favor?

4. What Focus Groups Should Generally not be Used for:

Quantitative Information

If the opinion, attitude, belief, etc. is there, focus groups will generally dig it out. However, focus groups are notoriously unreliable for telling you the exact *percentage* of people who have a particular belief, hold an opinion, etc. The participants in focus groups are often *representative* of the population, but they are not necessarily a *statistically representative sample* of the population in question: often their numbers are too small, or they don't have the same proportions of subgroups as the general population. On the other hand, who cares? For instance, most of the time, you shouldn't care if 10% or 40% of the market has a particular objection. The sheer logic or emotional strength of the objection makes it imperative that you correct the underlying problem.

Discovering complex relationships that can only be uncovered by sophisticated statistical techniques.

There are many quantitative techniques, such as perceptual mapping, which can pinpoint complex relationships in a very precise way. From these, you can see hidden opportunities that focus groups will tend to miss. However, whatever is discovered had better be tested and refined with real people, which usually means focus groups.

Projecting the extent of future actions.

It should come as no news that people do not always do what they say they will do, especially if they say it in front of their peers. For instance, people said that they would not buy the Taurus automobile, when it was first tested in focus groups. They called it a "jelly bean." Much to the credit of the Ford executives, they interpreted these verbalizations as meaning that people needed much more exposure to and education about the so-called aero look, and the whole new approach to automobile manufacture. On the other hand, almost everyone said they would buy the Edsel. You *can* project future behavior from focus groups, but not on the basis of statistics, or of the uninterpreted verbalizations of the participants and certainly not numerically. You

do it based on past experiences of thousands of groups of people praising or criticizing different products. After a while, you learn to know which responses will translate into behavior and which are merely polite praise or momentary enthusiasm.

5. Some Tips on Managing a Focus Group Project

Be clear on the primary research purpose

A clear statement of purpose is the single most important step in project planning. It sets the direction for all that follows. Even when the purpose is general exploration, or you don't know what the problem is, it is possible to be crystal clear about what you're not clear about. Identify the problem, the symptoms of which are... Explore ways to... Identify the problems and clarify the opportunities... A good moderator will help you get clear on what you are not clear about.

Get several different qualitative marketing research consultants to tell you how they would approach your problem.

See who grasps the problem best, who helps you clarify your goals, who simplifies rather than complicates, who brings more to the discussion, and who understands your problem from a marketing perspective (rather than as an intellectual exercise). Pay more attention to their process than their content. The best qualitative research consultant may not know a lot about your product. It is more important to have a consultant who appreciates your problems, and has the right process for problem solving than one who is an expert on your particular product.

Do not let a kid, or an amateur, moderate your important groups.

I recognize that brain surgeons, psychotherapists, airline pilots, knife throwers, and qualitative researchers have to start somewhere. The internship, apprenticeship and mentor systems were invented to train such high-risk professionals. It does not matter what background a moderator has come from; I know of superb moderators who were shepherds, intelligence agents, philosophers, anthropologists, actors. I was even told of a hooker who later became a superb moderator. Whatever their background, make sure that you are using moderators who have had many years experience. And make sure they are not just moderators. They should have a deep understanding of both psychology and business, particularly what it takes to launch a product.

Do not pick a moderator for "entertainment value"

If you really care about your product and your company, focus groups can be among the most entertaining performances you can watch. They often have humor, drama, conflict, excitement and even mystery and magic. It is enjoyable to be observing something from which you are learning. But keep in mind that focus groups are serious research, and the moderator's job is to work very hard to get you your answers, not provide entertainment. If a group energy runs down, the moderator has to figure out why: whether it means anything about the product, for instance, or if people are just tired. Sometimes, silence has to be tolerated by the moderator in order to bring out deeper thoughts and feelings. This is very difficult to do when the moderator feels that the client is probably bored and will not hire him again. All groups cannot be, and should not be, upbeat, high energy and exciting. Some of my most valuable groups have been with patients afflicted with a particular disease. These groups are not conducted as often as they should be, probably because they are extremely painful to observe, let alone moderate. I guess, like Greek tragedies, they are entertaining to some, but they are sure not upbeat.

List out, indicating priorities, what questions you want answered, not what you want asked.

Don't worry about how the moderator will get the answers, or what questions will be asked, just be clear about what answers you want, and their priorities. I have conducted focus groups without asking a single question, yet I was very active as the moderator. Some of the best probes are not questions at all: Tell me about... Give me a picture of... Compare with each other how you... I'm going to start a story that I want you to complete... It is also very important to give the moderator a clear idea of priorities.

Do not demand that the moderator follow the guide.

After all, the guide is just a guide. What is important is that the questions get answered in the discussion process, whether or not they are actually asked. The moderator may jump all over the place: there is the *logical* order of the guide, but there is also chronological and psychological order. These latter may impose a different progression which the moderator may not be able to anticipate.

Do not demand that the moderator interpret the findings after each session.

It is impossible and undesirable to avoid thinking about what went on in a group, but try to avoid jumping to conclusions. Hold your thoughts as hypotheses, rather than firm conclusions. Communicate these *as hypotheses, hunches, guesses or speculations* to the moderator, so that you can see if you agree, and so that they can be checked out in the subsequent groups of the project. Avoid putting the moderator on the spot for instant findings (rather than hypotheses) during the project, since it is necessary to observe patterns from group to group in order to corroborate findings. Even immediately after the last group, the moderator has to switch gears from an information gathering mode to an analyzing mode, and go back over the information in conditions conducive to insightful thought. Anything less is asking someone to shoot his mouth off.