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## How to Get Beneath the Surface in Focus Groups

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## What's the problem?

It should come as no surprise that you can't always believe what you hear in focus groups, or anywhere else. Some people still believe that any moderator who can put participants at ease will get them to talk "openly," creating the "right atmosphere" where the truth will come pouring out. This attitude has all too often led to findings which are clear-cut, simple, unambiguous and wrong. Are the things people are saying when pressed in focus groups really what moves them? How do you sort out the ambiguity, vagueness, omissions, contradictions, biases and irrelevancies of groups? Surely some of the most important motivators cannot easily be put into words: they are feelings, attitudes, values and beliefs that people may not be consciously aware of. How do you get beneath the surface to these hidden motivators? How do you eventually come out with the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth? I have agonized over these issues for 26 years in thousands of groups. I still agonize over them in each and every project I undertake. Some people think that it's easy to verify the truth. They run several groups. If people keep repeating what they found in previous groups, their findings are confirmed. This is the height of gullibility. Maybe all they are getting are the same old lies over and over again! They confuse confirmation with consistency. It is not always easy to tell if people are giving it to you straight, and it is not always possible for people to get in touch easily with their motivations. You have to have some means of allowing them to express what might not be at the level of conscious awareness and of checking out what they tell you.

## Why it's usually counterproductive to ask "Why" and other "motivational" questions

People are always asked in focus groups "Why do you use, or why did you buy" a particular product. Or "What are your satisfactions and dissatisfactions with ...?" The answers you get back are often plausible, even convincing. This is particularly true of business executives, engineers, and physicians, who tend to make conscious, deliberative, rational decisions which they can explain with great clarity. Surely, if you ask a physician why he/she prescribes Valium, he can tell you. He'll tell you that it works better than the other tranquilizers, it has muscle relaxing properties, there is a little "rush" that reassures the patient that it is working, and that patient compliance (taking the drug as directed) is high. But maybe these are the reasons he originally switched to the brand 25 years ago. How are you going to separate the reasons from the rationalizations? Physicians are not going to be too eager to tell you that they are fearful of changing to a new drug, they are worried about their patients going to another doctor if they don't prescribe what the patient wants, that they feel acutely uncomfortable about counseling the patient and instead take the easier course of writing a prescription, that old prescribing habits are hard to break, or that the whole area of psychoactive drugs scares them so much that they don't dare do anything different from what the overwhelming majority of other physicians are doing, even if they know it isn't right in a particular case. Physicians will tell you these things, but only under the right conditions. And there are many techniques for making it easier for them to tell you. On the consumer level, drinkers of a particular kind of imported beer are not likely to tell you straight out that they drink it because it helps them overcome feelings of masculine self doubt by letting them feel more like a real man. I'm not only talking about the area of deep, dark, mysterious and embarrassing motivations. Those are relatively easy. How about the times when people simply don't know what they think about a product category, or don't care enough to have thought about it. You ask why they bought a product and all you get is a bunch of cliches. "Why did you buy that product?" "I like it." Probes elicit blank stares as their eyes glaze over. The way we usually get beneath the surface is to use "probes." But how do you know that the probes are not eliciting rationalizations, rather than the real reasons? How about categories in which people habitually lie to themselves? The automobile industry is a prime example. People don't buy cars for the reasons they say they bought them. "Why did you buy your Chevy" will get you a string of self justification that will make your head spin.

## Why the truth is so elusive.

OK, I think I've made the point that people are less than forthcoming and that it is easy to get taken in. Here, in a nutshell, are the reasons:

- People often do not understand why they are doing the things they are doing, and therefore can't tell you. Their motivations are unconscious.
- Sometimes people are in touch with their reasons and their feelings, but they can't express them. They don't have the language, or language is inappropriate. Maybe they just have a visual image or a feeling they can't express.
- Even when they *do* understand why they are doing things, they often *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. The truth is often imbedded in irrelevancy.
- It is more important for most people to preserve their view of themselves than tell you why they are doing what they are doing.
- Often people *don't care* to examine their motivations, or don't care about your product enough to have given it any thought, or don't care enough to feel any emotions about it.
- 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.

When I was a psychotherapist, I came to appreciate how it can take *highly motivated* patients *years* to dig out and to acknowledge important issues that are dominating their lives, issues that are sometimes *obvious* to everyone else. It is usually even harder to dig out in a focus group, in a couple of hours, things which are less evident, in a less motivated respondent, who isn't even the client. Clearly, we need to find ways to help people get in touch with deeper motivations, help them find ways to express this material, motivate them to do so and find ways to interpret what comes out. We need to get beneath the surface.

## Counterfeit solutions

Before we get to specific techniques, I want to talk about our responsibilities and possible abuses. Keep in mind, we have a responsibility to our respondents. We have an implicit contract with them, even though they themselves are not our clients. We have to treat them with respect and get their permission to engage in various exercises. We have to allow them not to participate in a particular exercise, or to refuse to reveal their thoughts and feelings. We have to protect them from ridicule, in fact bolster their self esteem. When I was training to be a psychotherapist, we spent a lot of time examining our motivations for becoming therapists. We were particularly sensitive to the ways in which our becoming therapists might be fulfilling any needs for voyeurism and power. Everyone has some of these tendencies. It takes considerable soul-searching and training to prevent these tendencies from becoming important motivators in the practice of either psychotherapy or marketing research. To the extent that they are, our judgment will be clouded by irrelevant considerations, we will tend to violate people and be less effective at

our jobs. I hope that this does not sound moralistic and self-righteous. I hope you will seriously examine your own motivations before using any of the following techniques, simply in order to be a more effective researcher. Another caution: use these techniques as tools, not as gimmicks. If you're a client, don't require a moderator to use a particular tool just for the sake of entertainment. If you're a moderator, don't use these techniques as stunts to impress clients. When a hammer is used to drive a nail, it's a tool. When you balance it on your nose, it's a prop in a stunt and your research will suffer for it. Also, I don't want to create the impression that the following special techniques should be used in every group. I can go months without using any unusual techniques, then find myself using them in every group of several projects. It depends on the objectives. Don't get locked into one or two techniques. If all you have is a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail. Keep in mind that these techniques are extremely entertaining to clients. It is easy to let the side show take over the big top.

## Techniques for going beneath the surface

Take the following methods as a stimulus for building your own repertoire of techniques for getting beneath the surface. Some will seem way out, or won't fit your style or your kind of research. Rather than rejecting them, ask yourself whether they can be changed into something more suitable for you.

### The focus group technique itself

First of all, let's keep in mind that the focus group technique itself was developed as a way of getting beneath the surface. The open-ended interaction of focus groups leads to stimulation of thoughts and emotions, the revelation of material which is not ordinarily forthcoming in an individual interview, the examination of how people in various roles interact, and the observation of important behavior. So, the first cluster of techniques which will allow us to go beneath the surface are those techniques which simply make for a better regular focus group - techniques which will facilitate interaction, stimulation and revelation.

### Running groups in the first place

Even in the face of their obvious advantages, sometimes focus groups are not used when they should be. So, the first "technique" is to not rule out focus groups prematurely. Let me give you some examples. When I conduct workshops, I often hear during case studies that a particular subject is "too sensitive" to handle in focus groups, so that individual interviews are needed. Rarely is this correct. What is often overlooked is that a sensitive moderator can take a sensitive subject and encourage *group support* to make it easier for people to talk about the subject than if they were being interviewed individually. Another reason for prematurely rejecting focus groups as desirable but unfeasible is the difficulty of getting people into groups because they are difficult to identify, recruit or get to show up. They might be low incidence, geographically dispersed, high level people, or competitors who ordinarily wouldn't come to a focus group. Don't give up. Don't neglect getting to the higher level influencers, or the early adopters, who may be more important than your regular customers. There are a variety of techniques for reaching these people. Here are a few:

#### Invite from specialized lists.

List management has become extremely sophisticated. There is almost always a list of people available if you use your ingenuity. List brokers, specialized recruiting firms, associations, etc. are sources. There are directories of experts for almost every field. Data bank searches also yield the names of experts. You can also invite from warranty cards, redeemed coupons, subscription lists, cancellation lists, and inquiry cards. This is a great way of getting people who have just bought your product.

#### Network to get the right people.

Call people and ask them to refer the people you are after. As long as the purpose is legitimate, physicians will refer patients, nurses and pharmacists (and vice versa), businesses will refer customers, etc.

#### Use ads, radio commercials and flyers

There are many ways around the selection biases introduced by such unorthodox methods. Sometimes the biases are irrelevant, such as for idea generation groups.

#### Run the groups in an alternate mode

### Use telephone focus groups.

Their anonymity and safety open people up or bring together difficult to reach respondents. See my paper "The Shocking Truth About Telephone Focus Groups" for more details.

### Try mini-groups

These can often give you the best of all possible worlds: the stimulation of focus groups, with the ability to probe deeply into the thoughts and feelings of just three or four people.

### Unusual mixes and matches can sometimes break an issue wide open

For certain types of issues, you can mix into the same group: spouses, siblings, physicians and nurses (but usually not ones who work with each other), bosses and employees, parents and children, users and non-users, enthusiasts and rejectors. While it is usually undesirable to have these combinations in the same group because of the defenses they often erect in each others' presence, there are other times when "undesirable combinations" may either serve as foils for each other, or may engage in constructive dialogue which gets you beneath the surface. Some of my best groups have resulted from combining natural enemies. You *can* compare and mix apples and oranges: you get fruit, and fruitful results.

### Have groups react to what was said in other groups

Once you are sure of what you have found in some groups, you can present your findings in other groups, so that you can go on to the next level of depth. Play tape excerpts from one group to another. This is particularly good when there are people who defer to each other, rather than confront each other. For example, people usually won't argue with real, live experts. But if you play tape excerpts, people will tell you exactly what they don't like about what the experts are saying.

## Participant preparation

The following methods of participant preparation can result in groups which reach greater depth.

### Tell them what it's about beforehand

I have never understood why so many groups are conducted without telling people what they will be talking about. In some cases this is desirable, but in most cases it is not. Many decisions are made with conscious deliberation, over time, after talking with other people or in groups. I often want participants to talk over usage patterns or new concepts with other people before they come to the group. Depending upon my objectives, I may want to hear what other respected colleagues said to the participants, or what questions they had, or whether they tried to talk them out of their original reaction. Think about the possibilities of giving participants assignments *before* they come to the group.

### Screen participants:

There are a large variety of ways to screen for: Past participants Opinion leaders Participators Optimists Creative people Yes, I know that this kind of screening is "unscientific" and "biasing." But we are usually not trying to get a statistically representative sample of the universe. Maybe you are trying to zero in on a particular segment of the marketplace, such as opinion leaders, or you are looking for creative ideas. *One man's bias is another man's sample.*

### Follow-up sessions

What is going to happen to the opinions expressed in your groups? Respondents will go out into the real world and they will discuss your products with others. They will influence and be influenced. They will try your products. They will change their minds. Some of the most fruitful groups I have conducted have been where past participants have been invited back to a follow-up session a few weeks or a few months later. Sometimes they are given an assignment: for instance, "if you like it, try to convince three friends to use the product and try to remember what their objections were and what convinced them." Think beyond the immediate: the focus group does not begin when the participants sit down in the room, nor does it have to end when they leave the facility.

### Apres group techniques.

Give participants the opportunity to express afterthoughts, or material they did not want to bring up in the group. Stick around at the end of groups. People will tell you things privately that are very valuable. I even give them an 800 phone number to call me with further thoughts. Although I have only recently started using the 800 number technique, it has already yielded some breakthrough information. For instance, after some groups with a clients' sales representatives, some sales people called me up to tell me off the record that they had not been telling me the complete truth, they were afraid to use a key piece of promotional material because it contained apparent contradictions, and they were afraid to let anyone know because their actual views would have been considered blasphemy and heresy by the Grand Inquisitors (sales management). If you are writing a report and wonder what a respondent meant by a remark, pick up the phone and call him/her. Ask participants to clarify and expand upon what they said in the group.

## The atmosphere of the group

There are a multitude of things that have a profound effect on the general conditions, mood, and climate of groups. Attention to them will reap great rewards in the quality of material elicited. On the other hand, I have seen many situations where inexperienced moderators ignored these issues, and doomed the group even before it got started.

### Put a lot of creative energy into the topic.

Nothing effects the acceptance rates, the show-up rates and the involvement of the participants as the topic of the group *as stated to the participants*. The idea is to find a truthful topic which is of great interest to the participants, which encompasses the research objectives, but which does not bias the group or tell them more than is appropriate, given the research objectives. I routinely see acceptance rates double and triple as I change the topic and subtopics slightly - and I'm very good at taking an effective first cut. For example, imagine that you were being invited to a focus group. Which group would you like to attend? "Research Methods" or "New Advances in Research Methods," or "How to Conduct Research which is Cheaper, Better and Faster," or "Ways People Have Found for Getting Beneath the Surface Responses." It makes a difference, doesn't it?

### Manage the group's expectations

Write the inviting script yourself, do not leave it up to a field service. Monitor some inviting calls to make sure things are being handled in a professional manner. Make sure the script includes exactly what you want participants to know and expect. Write the confirming letter yourself. Make sure it tells people what to expect and what will be expected of them, without giving away what you want to present in the group. I have a one-page write up which explains to respondents just what market research is, what a market research group discussion is, why it is in their interest to be open and frank, how to get the most out of the session, and some do's and don'ts. Since I started using it, I find respondents are noticeably more relaxed, participative and interactive. (You'll find it in the Appendix to my course "*How to Moderate Telephone Focus Groups*.") Every once in a while, ask a group to stay for a few minutes and give you feedback on the process, particularly anything that struck them as odd or contradictory. You'll hear some interesting remarks.

### The moderator's style as a tool

There are specific, practical things that the moderator can do about his or her style that can have a dramatic effect on the depth of the group. By style of the moderator, I mean the characteristic ways that a moderator interacts with the group, *as perceived by the participants*. This is not always obvious to the moderator, client or even the participants. I strongly urge any moderator who hasn't done so, to join a group dynamics laboratory to get some feedback on how he or she comes across. What's relevant here is that all that counts are the participant's reactions. I have seen vastly different styles produce excellent results. I've seen "scatterbrained" moderators get people to fall all over themselves to spill the beans in order to "straighten out" a moderator they perceived as "not getting it." This is the "playing dumb" tactic which often works for topics in which the moderator is truly over his/her head technically. I've seen it work equally well for mundane subjects like imported beers and for highly technical ones like magnetic resonance imaging. On the other hand, I have seen poor results from moderators who, on the surface, look very professional. I've seen groups where the moderator was highly respected by the respondents, where the interaction was high, and where the moderator and client were completely taken in by an elaborate system of posturing and rationalizations by the respondents. The point here is that there are a wide variety of styles that look bad but work, or that look good but make respondents want to "fake it." Every moderator has many facets to his or her personality. It is important to learn to let these out, in a manner which is appropriate to different types of groups. If you saw me moderate salespersons groups, or children's groups, or consumer groups, you would never believe that I conduct a large number of medical experts groups. On the other hand, if you heard me do

groups with experts, it would be hard for you to believe that I can conduct groups of non-experts. What I want to emphasize is that it is not a matter of putting on an act, since respondents are quick to spot phoniness. Every moderator has an intellectual side, and inquisitive side, a playful side, a stupid side, and many other facets which should be used quite consciously as tools. The moderator should get over his or her need to look a certain way. What matters is what opens up the respondents.

## Use informality

While there are always exceptions, I find that a style of extremely informal, relaxed playfulness, coupled with a professional seriousness of purpose (they are not the contradictions that so many people think) works best for most moderators, certainly for me. I find that the worst moderating style is one of formality, especially among inherently formal people like medical experts and bankers. These are exactly the kinds of people who want and need the excuse to loosen up a little and willingly do so if given permission by the example of the moderator. People reveal more when they are relaxed and having a seriously good time, as long as the moderator does not trivialize the proceedings with gratuitous nonsense. The key is the comfort of the moderator; if the moderator is not comfortable running a serious, but informal session, he or she should not try to do so, since it will only come across as ingratiating, forced or phony.

## Use first names

High level groups, such as physicians, famous experts or company presidents, should always be encouraged to participate on a first name basis. Don't start calling them by first names, that's presumptuous. Simply state that we will be keeping things very informal and that you've found that people are usually more comfortable and congenial if they go by first names. So, as they introduce themselves, you'd like them to mention the first name they like to go by. I've done this with presidents of Fortune 100 companies, congressmen, and Nobel Prize winners. If I ever get the chance, I'll do it with heads of state. It makes a dramatic difference in the flavor of the group. People going by last names make pronouncements and speechlets. They "concur with my esteemed colleagues." People going by first names feel free to talk about how they do things which differ from what they have written about in their own books.

## The physical surroundings

I find the physical surroundings in most focus group facilities to be an abomination. The more elegant they are, the more unnatural they look. I've never seen one yet that I wasn't sure made people feel "on stage." They have been designed almost totally for the comfort of the client. Floor to ceiling one-way mirrors, fluorescent lighting, microphones hanging down from the ceiling, conference tables, in malls and office buildings. I feel like the kid in "The Emperor's New Clothes." Doesn't anyone see what's going on? I don't believe for a minute that participants soon forget their surroundings and get into the discussion. So far, I'm not aware of any hard evidence either way, but I believe that it's incumbent upon the people who introduce such unnatural surroundings to show that it has an insignificant effect. I just know that I observe much greater openness in non-mirrored rooms and telephone focus groups.

## Eliminate unnatural physical surroundings!

The ultimate technique for using the physical surroundings to get to greater depth is to eliminate the unnatural physical surroundings entirely: run telephone focus groups where respondents are in their own homes. See my article "The Shocking Truth About Telephone Focus Groups" for more details. When you have to run face to face groups, I personally prefer living room style seating, or informal hotel suites. I'd rather have one or two clients in the room than have the artificiality of the mirrors. The Finns have the right idea: I'm told they hold focus groups of mixed men and women, even physicians, in saunas, naked. Talk about getting them to let it all hang out. If you still insist on running groups the old fashioned way, here are a few suggestions. Meet the participants in the waiting room, kid with them, get to know them, make them feel welcome. When you get into the room, have them help you rearrange the furniture. For instance, have them help you move the table(s) against the walls and sit in a circle. You've then already formed a group, performed a common task, and established an atmosphere of relaxed informality. (The next group can move the tables back.) If the first of two groups is a dinner group, do it the other way around.

## Make it psychologically and physically safe

Anything which effects psychological safety will dramatically effect the depth of the group. Psychological safety is a subtle thing. People must feel reassured and enhanced by their

participation. People will take risks if they feel safe in doing so. And participation is a risk. So people's feelings about themselves must be safeguarded.

### Encourage divergent thought

In your introduction, mention that you need to get as many diverse thoughts as possible. I usually say, "if you find yourself having a totally different set of experiences, or a different opinion than the rest of the group, I need to hear it, since you will be representing a sizable portion of the people out in the real world who just didn't happen to be in the group tonight to support your view. So, I hope you will have the fortitude to speak up. If you don't speak up, I'll be seriously misleading my client, since an important view will not be represented." Notice what the above does. Now, when they speak up, they will think of themselves as bravely representing all the other people in the marketplace, helping the moderator to meet his responsibilities. It also tells them why their opinions are important and that they are courageous for expressing them. Reward the first divergent opinion with a comment like "I knew you all couldn't be agreeing about this. Thanks for sharing that. Let's hear more."

### Make it fun.

Anything that you can do which will make the group fun will tend to increase the feeling of psychological safety.

### Run them on the phone

Again, telephone focus groups are the ultimate in psychological safety. People are in their own natural surroundings and can't even see each other. They cannot see grimaces or other facial expressions indicating disapproval.

### Make the participants feel good about themselves.

Why should they tell you things that are not socially acceptable and might make them look foolish or ignorant? They will do so if it is enough fun, or it is serving a higher purpose. For instance, you can have them tell you the worst thing that ever happened in a particular situation, or when they felt most silly or helpless. Some will start, find out that it is sometimes fun to laugh at oneself, and they will all try to top each other. I have found that I can get even physicians to tell me what they don't know by playing a game with them. I explain that as a psychologist, I have been asked to help a company develop informational materials. I further explain that physicians have been complaining to me for years that the materials developed for them are usually off the mark and not very useful. The only way I can develop the right kind of materials is to find out what they know and what they don't know and need to find out. So I will be asking them a series of questions, or presenting some ideas to them, and they will probably want to ask me questions. The game is this: I will answer the questions (or have an on-line expert answer the questions) if they will first tell me what they *think* the answer is and what they would *like* the answer to be. They have to be willing to reveal their areas of uncertainty, or even misconceptions, in order for me to find the gaps in their knowledge which are worth filling in. There is no sense teaching them what they already know. The logic of the above is so compelling that physicians are willing to openly discuss their areas of uncertainty. With high level specialists or experts, I add, "Nobody knows everything: as the island of knowledge increases, so does the shoreline of ignorance."

### Make it a group

It's not really a group until the participants start talking to each other. Encourage interaction. When that fails, insist on it.

## Encouraging interaction

You can insure interaction by asking people to talk to each other, not just to you. Ask, as your first question, something which requires interaction, such as "I'd like you all to figure out among yourselves what is the most effective course of action in the following circumstance." Or, "Figure out among yourselves three reasonable ways to proceed in these conditions, and the pros and cons of each. I'll sit back and listen for awhile." If you are doing a "go around," letting each of them speak individually at the beginning, which I call serial interview mode, explicitly tell them that you now need to switch to group discussion mode, in which they will talk with each other more than with you. After asking the first question, sit back and make it clear that you expect them to interact. Refuse to respond substantively to the first few questions, or you will be reinforcing the pattern: participant 1, moderator, participant 2, moderator, etc. If there is a long silence after a participant speaks, and you feel you must step in, say "I'm just sitting back to give you room to

talk among yourselves." On two occasions, I had groups where the participants would only talk with me despite many attempts to get them to talk with each other. Both groups were on the phone. I told them I had to leave the room, and I would be back in about five minutes. I asked them to figure something out and be ready to summarize it when I returned. Since they couldn't break apart into side conversations on the phone, they started talking with each other. When I returned, they were able to continue as a group.

## Cooperation

A common task, such as physicians preparing as a group a diagnostic and treatment plan, or homemakers preparing advice for a newlywed, will quickly produce a working, interactive group.

## Eyes closed exercise

One thing that can instantly engender trust and the feeling that they have all been through something together is an "eyes closed exercise." I will more fully describe several in the projective techniques section of this article, but what I mean is asking them to close their eyes and imagine the last time they used the product, or encountered a certain type of situation. The very act of closing their eyes in front of each other and then sharing an experience with each other will go very far in getting them to share private thoughts.

## Asking the right questions, in the right way

Of course, questions are our stock in trade. It takes a high degree of skill to ask non-directive questions. The moderator must maintain an attitude of great interest without reinforcing any particular viewpoint. There is nothing like training in clinical psychology to teach a person to maintain an interested but non-judgmental attitude. A poker face won't do it. You need to have genuine reactions which are coming from interest in the person, rather than judging the person. In projective techniques courses, you learn to sit with a person for hours without leading them down predetermined paths. You show people ink blots, ambiguous drawings and other stimuli and ask them to tell you what they see. The Rorschach Test didn't teach me much about human nature, but it sure did teach me how to ask questions. In that test, you show people a succession of 10 cards with inkblots on them. The person is requested to tell you what he sees, which you dutifully write down without comment. You then cycle back and ask them "Do you remember what you saw?" "What about it looks like an X?" You quickly learn that very minor inflections make people pull back, or get them into self-justification. If you slip and ask "Why?" instead of "What about it..." you quickly learn that "Why?" makes people defensive. You see that if you say, "That's good," they shut down, presumably because when you don't say it again, you are implying "That's bad." You then cycle back again and see if you can get them to see common and unusual things that they didn't see previously (this is called "testing the limits"). These techniques are useful in focus groups, especially testing the limits. At the end of the session, it is often useful to present different opinions to see if people will reconsider their positions. You can often verify whether material is persuasive this way. You can also tell how strongly held are the positions. The most important thing to realize is that a question, or a probe, is nothing more than a *stimulus to elicit further output from the respondent*. When asked a question, respondents think not only of the answer, but of why you are asking the question, and why in that particular way. They also think of how you will view their answer, and modify it accordingly. When seen in this light, more possibilities open up. Some of the best "questions" aren't questions at all.

## Non-directive probes for use in focus groups

[Notice how few are questions]

- ◆ Give me a [picture, description] of...
- ◆ I'd like you all to [discuss, decide]...
- ◆ Tell me what goes on when you ...
- ◆ Describe what it's like to ...
- ◆ Tell me about ... Tell me more about that...
- ◆ Somebody sum this all up ...
- ◆ Let's see [pause] I'm having trouble figuring out how I should word this to my client...
- ◆ Give me an example.
- ◆ Explain to me ...
- ◆ Let me pose a problem ...
- ◆ I'm wondering what would you do if..
- ◆ What I'd like to hear about is how you are dealing with ...
- ◆ Ask each other to find out ...
- ◆ I don't think I'm getting it all. Here's what I've got so far, tell me what I am missing or not getting correctly ...

- ◆ *So, it sounds like you're saying ...*
- ◆ *That's helpful. Now let's hear some different thoughts ...*
- ◆ *How might someone do that?*
- ◆ *I'd like you to word it as an "I wish" or a "How to." [Thanks to George Prince at Synectics]*
- ◆ *How important is that concern?*
- ◆ *So, the message you want me to get from that story is ...*
- ◆ *I can't seem to read the groups' reaction to that. Help me out.*
- ◆ *Let's hear a different perspective on this.*
- ◆ *Say more.*
- ◆ *Keep talking.*
- ◆ *Don't stop.*
- ◆ *Just say anything that comes to mind.*
- ◆ *Boy, that got quite a rise out of everyone. What is everyone reacting to?*
- ◆ *Can someone turn that [wish, dream, request] into a reality? Does anyone know how to do it?*
- ◆ *Let's see, e haven't heard from ...*
- ◆ *Before we move on, let's hear any burning thoughts that you have to get out.*
- ◆ *Let's turn this complaint into a problem ... How can we solve it?*
- ◆ *[I see in your face ... I hear in your voice] something important, but I don't know what it is*
- ◆ *...*
- ◆ *You seem to have a lot of excitement and energy around that. Talk to me from the excitement.*
- ◆ *What's bothering you?*
- ◆ *Who can build on this last idea?*
- ◆ *What am I not asking?*
- ◆ *How come the energy level of the group just went down?*
- ◆ *Think about a situation in which you ----- . Tell me about it.*

It is a real art to be able to steer people down a particular line of inquiry without influencing the content of their answers. Running a successful focus group without asking any questions at all would be the equivalent of pitching a no-hitter.

### Avoid closed-ended Questions

A closed-ended question can be answered with a "Yes" or a "No." For instance, "Do you like this idea?" instead of "Tell me your reactions" (which isn't even a question) or "What about this idea do you like, if anything?" Banish closed-ended questions from your repertoire, unless your intent is to shut down the discussion. For instance, "Does anyone have anything more to say on this before we move on?" will usually be greeted with dead silence, allowing you the perfect opportunity to move on.

### Group Dynamics

Group dynamics is not, as most people in qualitative research think, how much people talk to each other in groups (that is interaction). Group dynamics refers to a vast field which studies how people's behavior changes as a result of being a member of a group. The group dynamics people have hundreds of techniques for getting people to disclose more in groups. It is well worth studying their writings and attending their workshops, particularly those of the National Training Laboratories. [I am writing a separate article on the practical use of Group Dynamics in focus groups, so I'll hold my thoughts for there.](#)

### Non-verbal behavior

Non-verbal behavior includes all of the gestures, postures, vocalizations and physical cues that we use to get information. It is *all* behavior which is not verbal. It may come to you visually or aurally. What is most important is to not take interpretations too literally. A gesture does not have a meaning in and of itself, people have meanings. So, the classic arms folded across the chest usually signifies rejection, but might signify many other things. Non verbal behavior presents clues which need to be corroborated. It is particularly important to investigate non-verbals which seem to contradict verbalizations. Train yourself to spot congruence and contradiction. Also, you can tell a great deal from how people relate to the product. When feasible, let them handle the product. Their actions will speak louder than their words. [Thanks to Hy Mariampolski for helping me clarify this and the next area.]

### Paralinguistics

Paralinguistics is the study of how people use their voices and language to convey meaning. Pay

attention to how people use voice and language. This includes: choice of vocabulary, comfort with expressing themselves, sudden inarticulateness, speed of speaking, hesitations, fluency, emotional level, degree of energy, etc. People often say more in one inflection than in tons of words. Follow up with probes like, "I hear you agreeing, but not with much enthusiasm. Where are you?"

### Pay attention to what the people aren't saying

This is probably the hardest skill of a moderator: spotting what people aren't saying, looking for omissions and what they would be saying if the situation were different. The only suggestion I can offer for this is to repeatedly ask yourself, during and after the group, "What aren't they saying?" Once in a while, this is even a fruitful question to ask openly in the group, or in the post session client meeting. It helps to have a broad base of experience with which to compare what a given group is saying with what similar types of groups usually tell you.

## Projective Techniques

Again, let me warn you: these are not parlor games. They are serious ways of helping people get in touch with and reveal things that they cannot directly access or communicate. These techniques are to be used judiciously.

### Explanation

The idea behind projective techniques is very simple: People tend to complete the incomplete. When confronted with an ambiguous situation, they try to complete it out of their assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, experience, values, etc. They will fill in the blanks by "projecting" their thoughts and feelings onto the stimulus. For instance, if you show respondents an ambiguous picture, where it is unclear exactly what the people in the picture are doing, and ask the respondents to imagine that the picture is about people who have something to do with a product, the participants will start filling in the blanks from their own past experience. If asked to make up a story, they will construct a tale which reveals assumptions, perceptions and attitudes about the product. Their story is not *in* the picture, after all. It is their projection *onto* the picture. The practical value of presenting ambiguous or incomplete situations is that if you want to understand why people do something, such as buy a product, they don't have to remember or be articulate enough to tell you. All you have to do is get them to recreate their purchase, or their use of the product, and presto, it's all there in front of you. You do this by getting them to imagine the product vividly, in a variety of ways, and give them various alternative verbal and non-verbal means of expressing themselves. *Every projective technique* presents people with an ambiguous or incomplete situation (stimulus) and lets people "project" their own interpretation onto it, usually encouraging reactions which are both verbal and non-verbal. This mode of expression also tends to bypass the tendency that people have of censoring what they say for social acceptability. It tends to shut off evaluation and get us more genuine responses. Let's look at some of these techniques.

### Drawing

Let's start with the ultimate ambiguous stimulus, a blank sheet of paper. You can ask people to draw a product, or the kind of people they think would buy the product, or the setting in which the product would be found. Immediately tell them that nothing above a kindergarten level is expected [Thanks to Ann Scheib for this suggestion]. They then show (or describe in the case of telephone groups) their drawings and describe them. Ask the other participants to suggest embellishments. A wonderful variation that was demonstrated by Irv Merson at a Qualitative Research Consultants Association Convention is to have people make a montage. They are given a pile of magazines, scissors, paper and glue sticks and are asked to make a montage using the photos, drawings and words they find in the magazines. For instance, we were asked to make a montage which expresses what it means to be a moderator. To our surprise, all of our montages showed among other things, pictures dominated by clocks. None of us had realized how totally dominated by time deadlines we were until we all started discussing our montages.

### Guided Fantasies or Visualizations

Perhaps even more ambiguous than a blank sheet of paper is an imaginary projection screen. The participants are asked to close their eyes and "imagine on a screen a scene in which [you fill in here anything which will put the person into the situation you want]." The participants then share and compare their experiences. If I were working for a political candidate, instead of taking a bunch of notoriously unpredictable polls, I would take people on guided fantasies to discussions among their friends, to the voting place, into the voting booth and have them see themselves pull a lever, have them change their minds a few times, then finally open the booth and see how they feel. I'd then have them discuss in depth what they experienced. I'll bet a lot more useful

information would come out than the usual practice of tallying answers to the question, "If the election were held today, who would you vote for and why?" There are an almost infinite variety of guided fantasies. You can bring people back to ancient times, or to the next century. You can have a mentor appear and deliver a message. You can make the person into a less experienced student and experience the mistakes he would make. You can have the ideal product appear through a haze. The guided fantasy is a much safer and realistic way for people to experience their feelings about the product, and a much safer way to express them. A fantasy is neither right nor wrong, appropriate nor inappropriate. No one can argue with it. All they can do is present an alternative fantasy. Guided fantasies, like most projective techniques, can be a little more difficult to interpret, however. The moderator and the client must not take the imagery too literally. People are expressing attitudes in a metaphorical way. The meaning of these metaphors and images must be checked out carefully, just like anything else in focus groups. They will often form patterns and themes. These can be verified in a variety of ways. For instance, ask the participants what they were most surprised about. Participants will often say things like, "I never realized how strongly I feel about X until I went through the exercise." or "I always thought this feature of the product was a petty annoyance. I never realized how angry I am about X." If someone is not sure what something in a guided fantasy means, use the Gestalt technique of having them experience themselves as that thing and talk to the group. For instance, if they were to see the product in the form of an animal, and can't tell you what about the animal reminds them of the product, have them imagine that they are the animal and ask them to talk to you from that place. Often they will get in touch with the association. Another technique is to say to the group, "I seem to be picking up a theme here, but I don't want to put words in your mouths. Let me describe what I seem to be hearing, and add to it or change it to make it more accurate." Then listen for the emotional tone of the agreement or disagreement. For instance, if they just agree with me intellectually, without any enthusiasm behind it, I usually don't take my interpretation too seriously.

### Word Association and Sentence Completion

Say, "I'm going to say a word, and I want you to write down the first word that comes to mind (word association)." Or, "I am going to start a sentence and I want you to finish it."

Examples:

- ◆ *The most annoying thing about this product is ...*
- ◆ *The only thing that would get me to change my mind is ...*
- ◆ *I'd tell the president of this company...*
- ◆ *The only kind of person crazy enough to use this product would be...*
- ◆ *I'd convince people to switch by saying*
- ◆ *The best thing about this product is ...*
- ◆ *What will get people to really buy this product is the realization that ...*

### Family of Brands

I am indebted to Suzanne Heineke for this technique. Give people a piece of paper which has several different products listed, with room for people to write next to each. Ask them to imagine that these different brands are a family of any kind. They can be past, present or future, and not necessarily from the same biological family. They might be a team or group that works together. Have them describe the roles that each brand assumes in the family and its characteristics. For instance, in a group of credit cards, American Express Platinum might be seen as a pharaoh, with Visa and Master Card as slaves. You would want to find out how the pharaoh is experienced and what different kinds of slaves the other two cards are. If you just had asked people why they got the Amex Platinum Card, you might get an elaborate system of rationalizations. This kind of an exercise would lead very naturally into a guided fantasy or into role playing.

### Role Playing

This is where people are asked to play the different products, or kinds of people who would use the products, or anything else that is relevant, even parts of the product. For instance, you might have each person play a different credit card, and talk with each other about the relative merits of the products. Psychodrama has elevated this kind of approach into a high art, with hundreds of techniques, which can take years of training. It's worth taking Psychodrama workshops and learning to adapt some of their techniques to qualitative research.

### "What's My Line"

This is the mystery challenger portion of the old "What's My Line" TV program. Bernadette Tracy invented this one and it's been widely copied. She has the respondents imagine that the mystery challenger signs in with only his/her last name (which is the product name). The

respondents are asked to imagine the person: man or woman, how old, what does he/she look like, how tall, weight, what style of dress, what does he/she do for a living, etc. They are asked to visualize the person clearly and are then asked what kind of a personality he/she has, what type of job? Does he/she have many friends (popularity of the product), why does the person have these friends, what could he/she do to get more (marketing strategy)? What self improvement courses could the person take? How could the person change his/her style of dress (modify packaging)? What are his/her children like, parents, spouse, who else in family (product modifications)?

### **Gestalt techniques**

Gestalt Psychology has a large variety of techniques designed to get people to experience, rather than talk about, situations. Many of these techniques are readily adaptable to qualitative research. It's well worth taking some Gestalt workshops to experience this methodology firsthand. Their most well-known technique, originated by Fritz Perls, is the "hot-seat" technique. One person is made the center of attention and is asked what they are experiencing right now, and where in their body they are experiencing it. They may be asked to talk from that place, and whether this is coming from a particular person in the past. They may be asked to "put the person on the chair," that is, imagine that the person is sitting opposite them on another chair. They are asked to talk to the person. After a while, they are asked to sit on the other chair and become the other person talking back to the original person. The person switches back and forth, becoming himself and then the other person alternately. This can be done between a person and a product, situation or even an image, emotion or thought. It takes great skill to know how to frame the experiment and when to have people switch, but it is a very powerful technique. The Gestalt people are very careful not to interpret what they see without having the person experience it for themselves. If they see a gesture, they will tend to ask people to exaggerate it, then talk from it, as if they were the gesture itself. When someone chuckles in a group, or makes any other signal which is not completely congruent with what he or she is saying, I'll often say something like, "What's the chuckle? I want the chuckle to talk to me. Chuckle, what are you trying to tell me?" Some people think I have left the planet, but most know exactly what I mean and will go along with my question, allowing me to tap into previously unavailable information.

### **Talking from different parts of themselves**

You might say that you want to talk to the adventurous part of them, the one that likes to take risks. Ask them to ask their more critical part, the part that protects them from foolhardy impulses, to go away for a while, but not too far, since you will later want to talk to that part of them. Now, you can discuss the more way-out and speculative aspects of a new product idea. Or with medical experts, I sometimes say I want to talk with the clinician in them who has to treat patients tomorrow, as distinct from the scientist in them who has to wait for more data before coming to a conclusion.

### **Age regression**

You might ask people to imagine that they are using the product at the beginning of their career, or as a child.

### **Product Transformation**

This is a very old technique, but which still works well. Have them imagine that the product has been transformed into something else and have them describe it: For instance, have them describe the products as cars, animals, books, ships, department stores, plants, buildings, movies, sports, mythological creatures, science fiction, computers, or anything else which will be evocative for the type of people you are talking with.

### **Product obituary**

Again, this is an old one from the workshops of the '60's. Have them assume that the product died and have them, as a group, write the obituary.

### **Personality profiles or other pen-and-pencil tests**

There are a wide variety of self-administered personality profiles available. The MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory) is the granddaddy of them all, but it is too extensive and too clinical for use in marketing research. Some simpler ones are available which can be helpful in pre-screening for certain types of participants, or for being able to segment the different types of people who might use a product, for instance. I'm currently experimenting with

several which look very promising for helping in the development of marketing strategy and promotional themes.

### Sorting techniques

Foremost among these techniques are the various types of perceptual mapping approaches. While these are usually quantitative techniques, simpler versions can be excellent discussion starters and group tasks. People can be asked to sort words, pictures, brands, etc. into either previously structured categories, or into as many of few piles as they want. The instructions can be as simple as, "Put the things that go together, together."

### Diary keeping

Having people keep track, on paper, of their practices, thoughts, feelings over time. They can then be brought together in focus groups to discuss their practices.

### Polling techniques

There are a large variety of polling, or vote taking, techniques for focus groups. While these techniques are misleading when viewed as ways of projecting numbers onto the general population, they are nevertheless valuable for getting people to commit to positions which they will then discuss later. There are devices which let people turn a dial in order to record their reactions. People can be asked to fill out rating forms, write down their reactions, or even fill out ballots. In my telephone focus groups, I can electronically poll the participants by having them use the buttons on their telephones.

### Changing formats

You can run user/non-user groups where they are given the assignment of convincing each other to use or drop a particular product. You can set up a debate format, or have them become a marketing team in a company, or give them other group tasks.

### In conclusion

I hope that this article has encouraged you to approach what you are told in focus groups with some degree of skepticism, but also encouraged you to explore methods which will help you get to greater depth.

### - Not the end -

I will be adding more techniques to this list, and hope that readers will contribute their favorites. Contributions will be credited. Comments on these techniques, and suggestions for improvement, will be greatly appreciated.

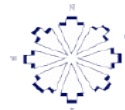
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