

USING THE FOCUS GROUP IN MARKETING RESEARCH

Annotation. The article is devoted to the use of focus groups in marketing research. The term "focus group" is defined. The process of using, strengths and weaknesses of this technique under various conditions are considered.

Анотація. Розглянуто використання фокус-груп у маркетинговому дослідженні. Визначено поняття "фокус-група". Розглянуто процес використання, актуальність даної техніки, сильні та слабкі сторони за умов використання.

Аннотация. Рассмотрено использование фокус-групп в маркетинговом исследовании. Определено понятие "фокус-группа". Рассмотрен процесс использования, актуальность данной техники, сильные и слабые стороны при различных условиях использования.

Keywords: focus group, research, market, interview, data, business.

The business world is fiercely competitive. Companies conduct market research to learn how consumers view their company and products so that they can make the necessary changes to retain customers and attract new ones.

Many researchers worked in the sphere of marketing. Krueger R. A., M. Casey, Goldman A. E., Morgan D. L., Merton R. K. brought new ideas for marketing research and for the focus group technique.

So, the goal of the article is to show actuality and importance of marketing research, especially using the focus group technique.

Focus groups are essentially group discussions that rely heavily on the interaction between group members and the relationship between the researcher and the respondents. Focus groups have been a dominant form of qualitative data collection in market research for more than 30 years.

In a room in the Students Union, a group of students discusses their experiences as students at the University. They are talking about what they like and dislike at the University and how this compares to their expectations before arriving. They are brainstorming words that come to mind when thinking about the University and are working in pairs to classify their experiences. This is an example of a focus group in action.

Reliable market research data depends on numerous factors, not least well-chosen respondents, well-designed questionnaires and good quality interviews. Arguably, most importantly of all, the market researcher must choose a data collection methodology through which the target audience is comfortably communicating. We will discover when and how focus group research technique should be used [1].

Marketing research is the systematic and objective search for, and analysis of information relevant to the identification and solution of any problem in the field of marketing. The focus group is a research technique used to collect data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher. It comprises a small number of carefully selected people who are recruited to a group discussion based on their common experience.

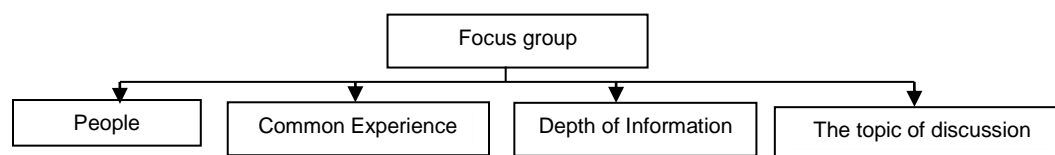


Fig. Focus group structure

Focus groups typically comprise five to ten people. The group needs to be small enough to allow everyone the opportunity to share insights, and yet large enough to provide group interaction and diversity of experience. Larger groups can inhibit discussion due to lack of opportunity and smaller groups can result in a smaller pool of ideas. Participants have a degree of homogeneity, and this is important to the researcher. This similarity is the basis for recruitment, and indeed, specific requirements may be necessary for attendance at the group. It is crucial to identify who can give you the information you need.

In general, focus groups are a research method that delivers qualitative data that is rich in depth and not numerical in nature. Data tends to be in words, pictures, symbols etc. The group provides the forum for discussion, and the group moderator, i.e. the researcher guiding the group, uses their skills to assist the group members to engage in discussion, thus flushing out ideas, attitudes, and experiences. The focus group is more than a group interview. The key element is the group process, the interaction between the group members.

The questions in a focus group discussion are carefully designed to elicit the views of the respondents. A discussion guide is prepared prior to the group and the group moderator uses this as the vehicle for discussion. Careful design of the guide ensures a logical flow of conversation around the topic area, and ensures a clear focus for the discussion.

The topic guide is reflective of how groups operate, commencing with introductory questions to help the group to

form. This serves to get people talking and feeling comfortable enough to proffer their opinions and experiences. Questions then progress to yield more information, and there should be no pressure on the group members to alter their views, rather, attention is centered on understanding the comments and thought processes as the issues are discussed [2].

Therefore, focus groups deliver qualitative depth information, where exploration and identification of attitudes, behaviors and processes are the chief research objectives. They are best used where "why?", "what?", and "how?" questions require the answers. They can be used in three ways in the research design:

Stand-alone method: where the focus groups are the sole data collection method and they serve as the principal source of data;

Supplementary to a survey: where they are used to enhance an alternative primary data collection i.e. before a survey to identify the issues, or after a survey to expand and illuminate particular issues;

As part of a multi method design: where studies use several sources of data collection and no method determines the use of the others.

The type of design will depend on the objectives of the research. When focus groups are used as the sole source of data, the objectives center on identification, exploration, and illumination, whereas, when these objectives are coupled with quantification, a multi method design will be the preferred option.

Group discussions are especially useful techniques for researching new products, testing new concepts or determining "what would happen if..." They work because of the interaction between the group members. Individuals are not under pressure to give spontaneous answers. They can digest the points raised by other members and, as they consider the implications of issues raised, and ideas may be sparked off which would remain untapped in a personal interview.

Typical market research situations when focus groups are used are:

to unravel complex processes from the basics e.g. a complicated buying process;

to identify customer needs i.e. where there is a complex interaction of factors influencing motives;

to identify working practices e.g. how a particular product is used;

to test new products i.e. where something needs showing to people;

to explore a concept with stimulus aids;

to explore and identify issues of satisfaction for customers, staff or suppliers;

to explore perceptions of brand and service elements associated with the brand.

For the researcher, the decision about whether to carry out focus group discussions or individual interviews is based on several factors. Focus groups are not always practical, and within the business community, it has to be accepted that geography often precludes the bringing together of a focus group. For this reason depth interviews are and will remain the most widely used qualitative research technique.

In general, focus groups are NOT the preferred option where:

measurement of size and distribution is required;

the sample base is widespread and small;

there is the need to protect the respondent from possible bias introduced by others;

the topic area is sensitive e.g. requiring disclosure of production techniques or identification of customers;

respondents require preparation to answer knowledgeably.

Focus groups take their roots in the social sciences and have been adopted by market researchers as a valuable interface between businesses and their customers. Focus group research has been used in the industry for more than 30 years and there is a wealth of published literature on the relative merits of the methodology and its contribution to business practice. Until some idea of frequency can be gained from focus groups, in essence, focus groups do not seek to measure; they uncover issues, unravel processes and test reactions and perceptions. They can be used stand alone, and they can augment and complement other methodologies. When choosing this data collection methodology, the purpose of the study needs to be considered carefully.

Human beings are programmed as social beings; we perform in groups for much of our day-to-day interactions. The focus group uses this feature as a tool to collect data about people's experiences. Focus group interviewing is about observing and listening. The focus group is a powerful tool and the learnings are great in a short space of time. The group experience is key; it is about creating the right environment to enable people to freely express their views, using the right tools to get them to open up and to listen to and make sense of their views [3].

Focus groups have made a huge contribution to the business world. They can be criticized for their subjectivity, for the small sample sizes and the purposive sampling methods that are used. However, we should remember that each research design has its flaws and the objective of the research is crucial in determining the methods, which are used to collect data. Quantitative methodologies have their strengths in standardization, reliability, and measurement, usually through surveys with larger sample sizes; nevertheless, the qualitative focus group design has its strength in the richness of the data, the ability to understand and explore perceptions, behaviors and motivations. It is not the type of research that seeks to control and predict, rather it will provide understanding and insight, and it is this very feature that gives the focus group its unique position as a research methodology [4].

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