

Dynamic Focus Groups versus Traditional Focus Groups

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[view this page on-line at the above link to see focus group photographs]

Challenge: When you have only an hour or two to ask questions of a focus group, how could you do it better? How could you possibly get any additional insight from this group without keeping them in the room for another hour?

The traditional focus group will consist of 8 to 10 participants that have some common characteristic(s) relating to the subject. A trained moderator will lead a group through a series of questions "focused" on specific aspects of that subject. The information generated by a group will be more valuable because the interactions of the participants produce significantly more data than individual interviews. The participants may be required to take some notes and/or fill out forms, but most of the discussion data is captured by audio and/or video recording. Following the session, the moderator transcribes conversation(s) from the audio/video tapes into documents that become the primary documentation of the sessions.

The dynamic focus group can handle groups of 8 to 20 (or more) participants. The moderator leads the group through the focus questions in a similar way. The participants may be required to take some notes and/or fill out forms. Part of the discussion data is collected by participants using notebook computers as input devices to enter their responses and/or to submit their votes. Part of the data is collected by verbal discussion that is captured by audio and/or video recording. The "electronic" discussion helps surface and clarify issues quickly and makes ensuing verbal discussions more focused and insightful. Following the session, the moderator generates reports of the data captured by computer in paper and/or electronic form that become the primary documentation of the session. The moderator may later transcribe the verbal discussion(s) from the audio/video tapes into reports that become supporting documentation of the sessions. Observers in the viewing room can view the results of the computer-based activities in progress and can receive raw data reports at the session's end. The learning curve for participants using the computers is less than five (minutes).

The "dynamic" focus group differs from the "traditional" focus group in several ways:

Electronic Discussion



There are two distinct phases of the "discussion". In the first phase, participants use notebook computers as "workspace" to input their reactions to a question. All responses to that question are displayed on everybody else's workspace so that no ones input is overlooked or lost. The participants can read the responses of others and think about what is being said. Then the participants react to those responses

by entering supporting or refuting comments or by posing questions. It makes no difference whether participants do these activities sequentially or interactively. This phase is paced to allow all participants time to contribute, regardless of their ability to type.

Verbal Discussion



The second phase of the discussion is a verbal conversation, where participants talk about the information that was entered and is displayed in (or printed from) each participants' workspace. The participants may enter further clarifications, questions or opinions during this discussion, however the primary focus here is the conversation and the reaction to what was previously captured. What participants

learn from each other and contribute to both discussions transforms the information into knowledge.

Equitable Air Time

In a traditional focus group with 10 participants and a 40 minute segment for a specific question, each participant would be entitled to about 4 minutes of discussion time. However, in any given group, there are always two types of participants that moderators need to deal with: those who talk a lot (dominant) and those to let others talk a lot (passive). Even if the air time is distributed equitably, 4 minutes is not a lot of time and the maximum potential air time for the group is still 40 minutes.

In a dynamic focus group with 10 participants, an electronic discussion phase of a question might last for 5 to 15 minutes. Since each participant has access to their own workspace without interruption, the potential for the group is between 50 and 150 minutes of input. In our experience, electronic discussions of between 5 and 12 minutes can foster and stimulate extremely lively and informative verbal conversations of between 10 and 25 minutes.

Group Timing and Size

The typical 10-participant focus group can cover between 4 and 5 focus questions in two to two and one-half hours. When the size of the focus group is greater than 10, it becomes more difficult to go into any depth in the questions. In a dynamic focus group participants can cover the same 4 to 5 questions in less time, or can cover the same 4 to 5 questions in greater detail in the full time, or can respond to between 2 and 4 additional questions in the full time. In a dynamic focus group, the size of the group does not have a significant impact on the timing of the session.

Information Management

In a dynamic focus group, the computer system records and saves all information entered by the participants - in their own words. The audio and/or video recordings and paper questionnaires and notes become supporting sources of information for the session rather than the primary sources. Summarized raw data of the electronic discussion is available in soft or hard copy form immediately at the end of a session.

Question Validation and Expanded Participation

Prior to conducting the focus group sessions, as a way of testing the validity of the focus questions. The questions could be administered in survey form on the internet via a link to our website. The responses could be refined with a selected preview audience until the desired quality of response is attained. After conducting the focus group sessions, as a way of reaching out to a larger segment of the population, the focus questions could be administered, again, in survey form on the internet via a link to our website.

Concerns



It is natural for new customers and prospects, who haven't experienced this before, to express concerns about using computers in focus groups. In over 11 years of moderating focus groups and facilitating workshops with computer support, we have yet to encounter any issue that could not be controlled or managed by the session moderator or facilitator.

Some common concerns and our responses to them include:

CONCERN	WHAT WE LEARNED
Those who cannot type well are at a disadvantage	Sessions are designed to include time for "hunt & peck" typists
Those who do not have computer skills are at a disadvantage	The learning curve for the computers is under 5 minutes
The use of computers distracts people away from the task	The use of computers helps keep participants on task
The use of computers discourages people from talking	Electronic discussions help focus verbal discussions on the real issues
The use of computers will generate too much information	Traditional sessions often do not have time to get enough information

Benefit/Value

Why conduct focus groups, using computers, in this non-traditional way? Please keep in mind that using computers does **not** mean that there is no discussion. It means that there are both "electronic" and verbal discussions. During "electronic" conversations there are some very good things going on that lay a solid foundation for and give direction and focus to subsequent verbal discussions.

FEATURE	BENEFIT	VALUE
Responses can be displayed on everyone's computer	Responses that often go in one ear and out the other are not lost	"Seeing" responses often triggers more critical thinking which, in turn, helps generate more thoughtful responses.
Computers allow everyone to "talk" at once	Participants can respond as little or as much as they want without interrupting each other	Participants don't have to sit on (and possibly forget) a "hot" idea while someone else is talking
Each participant has their own computer	Participants can put things in their own words	Responses are not filtered or translated into someone else's words
Responses captured electronically	All Responses are "remembered"	Electronic comments are immediately available for review in paper or electronic form and don't have to be transcribed from tape later
Responses can be recorded anonymously	Participants do not have to identify themselves as the "author" of or take the "heat" for an unpopular or unexpected response	Anonymity provides political amnesty for creative and/or off-the-wall ideas, and provides a safe environment for controversy and disagreement, so there's less worry about feeling "foolish" or saying something "wrong"
Equal access to discussions	More equitable participation by entire group	Anonymity draws out low-level participants who do not speak out or who speak less, while allowing others to participate at their own level
Parallel (simultaneous) processing	More efficient use of group's time	Groups can generate an incredible number of responses in a very short time

Responses and concepts can be evaluated	Ideas can be shifted to evaluation tools where participants can rate, rank, select and/or prioritize concepts	Evaluation results are immediately available for review in paper or electronic form
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For additional information and to find out how Jordan-Webb can assist you in conducting "Dynamic Focus Groups", contact Paul Collins at (773)-463-2288, pcollins@jordan-webb.net - <http://www.jordan-webb.net>