

Seven Ways Focus Groups Can Fail

By Linda Dini Jenkins and Sharon Machrone

In this era of open and interactive communication, it seems like focus groups are more popular than ever. If our experience is any indicator of current trends, professional service organizations are eager to use focus groups to elicit information from both clients and employees alike.

They want to cover a wide range of topics, including:

- *General climate assessments* ("How are we doing and what could we be doing better?")
- *Benefits and work-life balance issues* ("Are we staying competitive and are our employees happy and productive?")
- *Recruiting effectiveness* ("Are we attracting the best candidates and, if not, how we can retool our efforts?")
- *Service and process feedback* ("How can we work smarter?")
- *Board roles and responsibilities* — especially in light of Sarbanes-Oxley regulations ("Do we have the right people to do the job and the right procedures in place to avoid conflicts and miscommunication?")

Why the popularity? Many professionals perceive focus groups as relatively easy to design and a cost-effective way to generate good information. And they can be. But in recent conversations, we've detected some serious missteps in decisions about and delivery of focus groups. Hopefully, you can avoid these common errors in your quest for excellent qualitative research results.

1 **Running A Focus Group Is The Only Way.**

It's a great instinct, but are you sure a focus group is really what you need? Are one-on-one interviews more appropriate for your topic? Will what you want to know be elicited just as well by a survey (a quantitative research tool)?

If a group discussion is what you're after — a guided conversation that encourages feelings and opinions — and not just yes/no or multiple-choice answers, then you're on the right track with a focus group.

And remember: always schedule more than one focus group on your topic. This reduces possible moderator bias and contamination from “too quiet” or “too vocal” participants, and provides a better chance at reliability.

2 We Can Do This — I've Seen A Million Of 'Em.

Sitting “behind the mirror” or being a participant in a group is not the same as being responsible for the masterful introduction and facilitation of a group. When company employees moderate focus groups, one of two things usually happens: either participants don't tell the whole truth or the group devolves into a gripe session.

Professional moderators can help avoid both scenarios. Furthermore, hiring a research professional who is not aligned to the results of the research is the only safe way to go, especially if the group is experiencing change. He or she can provide an invaluable service in helping to design the questions to be asked and can provide a “safe” environment so your participants will provide the honest feedback you need.

3 Let's Throw In A Few Questions About The Kitchen Sink...

Make no mistake: once word gets out that you're planning a focus group, you're likely to get requests from disparate departments to “just throw in a question or two” about something completely unrelated to the topic at hand. Avoid the temptation. Stay focused, or you run the risk of contaminating your results and looking scattered.

4 This Group Has Very Strong Opinions...Let's Not Ask Them.

You're biasing your results already. While you obviously can't be as impartial as a professional facility manager who screens for participants all day long, you can at least give your participants the benefit of the doubt.

In company settings, we've seen groups come together well by using a random selection from the payroll list — providing all groups are represented.

You may, for some groups, want to exclude managing partners. Or you may want to speak only to managing partners or clients. That's fine — but don't knowingly exclude people because of what you think you know about them. You're looking for real results here, not just getting back what you want to hear.

5 Why Not Tomorrow? We Know What We Want To Ask.

This could be a disaster. A good focus group requires careful planning. You'll want to engage a team to discuss the kinds of issues/questions to focus on and prepare an orderly list for your moderator. In the best of all possible worlds, your moderator should be leading this process.

You're used to talking to other people, so it's tempting to think, "How hard can this be?" But, to get the best data, you need to be crystal clear about your direction and have a well-thought-out road map. After all, if you don't know where you're going, how will you know when you get there?

6 Thanks, But We Don't Want To Talk About That...

On the other hand, even the best road map can be set aside when the scenery gets too good to pass up. Don't be afraid to let things move in another direction. Sometimes when participants are interacting, the conversation can go in new and exciting directions that you never anticipated, yielding data that is valuable beyond your wildest dreams.

When this happens, you've broken through and discovered what's really important to your group — which is often very different from what's important to you.

Just be sure that you have a moderator who can change direction with the group, bring it back when the detour is over, and know how to analyze the full range of responses so you can make effective use of them.

7 The Groups Are Done. Now Let's Go Implement Something.

In fact, your completed groups are just the beginning. Your moderator should provide an extensive analysis of the findings based on his or her observations, recordings, and note-taking during the groups. You should expect top-line results a few days after the last group, and a full report within two weeks after that.

Before you do anything, wait for results. And in the case of employee groups, be sure to communicate the overall results with your employees. If they feel like they've made a contribution and are kept in the loop, you'll be building their trust and enthusiasm for the next time!

Focus On The Process

In corporate settings, focus groups are a fine way to gain insights about some of the key issues that affect companies today. But sometimes, they're only one part of the process of learning.

When a company first begins to look at top-level issues — organizational structure, recruiting and compensation strategies, cultural evolution, global project management — focus groups may be only one element of your overall assessment strategy.

It's often good to conduct one-on-one interviews with a few key senior managers before you start, so you get a comprehensive picture of the issues at hand. This kind of feedback can be vital in structuring questions for your groups.

And there's nothing wrong with doing an old-fashioned paper-and-pencil survey every year or two to gauge employees' opinions on your progress. After all, if they don't think you're doing what you say you are, you've got a problem.

Linda Dini Jenkins and **Sharon Machrone** are partners in [Riverside Communications](#), a consultancy that helps companies and non-profit organizations ask the right questions for marketing, product direction, and satisfaction assessments and analyses. They are both certified focus group directors and can be reached via their website, www.riverwords.com.

Inspired to agree, disagree, or otherwise comment? We hope you will! Write a letter to RainToday.com [here](#). Selected letters may be posted on the site.

RainToday