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Planning and conducting focus group discussions in marketing research

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Abstract

This paper presents the investigation of focus group method, its advantages and application in various kinds of marketing research enabling to collect rich empirical data covering verbal and nonverbal information. The moderator conducts focus group discussions in a relaxed and informal manner with a small group of 6 to 12 respondents. The moderator leads and develops the discussion. The respondents in the focus groups can portray their feelings and behavior – using their language and logic. The value of the technique lies in the unexpected findings that emerge when respondents are allowed to say what they really feel. The theoretical investigation is backed up with an empirical example of marketing research, conducted by means of focus group method.

Key words: qualitative research, focus groups, cyclic model, moderator, moderation.

1. Introduction

Lithuania is currently involved in the process of completing transformation of its economy into a competitive market economy, just like a few other Central and Eastern European countries are. The Lithuanian economic reform has altered the entire economy and developed new conditions and demands for business. One of the most important tasks for the Lithuanian businessmen is to make management decisions, based on marketing research information.

This paper investigates the focus group as a qualitative method of marketing research with the **aim** of disclosing new opportunities in research attitudes, motivations, and expectations. The identification of the aim of the paper has led to the following **objectives** of the study:

- to describe focus groups in detail, with emphasis on planning and organizing focus groups;
- to gain insight into the advantages of a focus group;
- to back up theoretical findings with an empirical example of the service marketing research.

In order to accomplish the given objectives we have chosen the method of focus group as the **object of the research**. Analysis and generalization of scientific literature as well as exploratory marketing research constitute the methodological apparatus of the investigation.

2. Planning Focus Groups

A focus group is an interview conducted by a trained moderator in a non-structured and natural manner with a small group of respondents. The main purpose of focus groups is to gain insights by creating a forum where respondents feel sufficiently relaxed to reflect and portray their feelings and behavior – using their language and logic. The value of the technique lies in the unexpected findings often obtained from a free-flowing group discussion. Focus groups represent the most important qualitative marketing research procedure, being used extensively in new product development, advertising development and image studies.

There are several main stages in planning focus groups, analysed in scientific literature. They are as follows:

- the beginning stage;

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- discussion;
 - data processing, analysis and presentation.
- These procedures can be divided into the following steps:
- a) clarifying marketing research problem(s) and objectives;
 - b) clarifying the role of focus groups in fulfilling those objectives;
 - c) specifying the issues to be developed in the focus groups;
 - d) specifying the types of target respondents to make up groups;
 - e) specifying the location(s) to conduct the focus groups;
 - f) recruiting group members;
 - g) running an experimental group;
 - h) conducting the focus groups;
 - i) analysing data and presenting findings (Malhotra, 2000).

The analysis of focus groups procedures has led to developing a cyclic model for planning and conducting focus groups in marketing research (Fig. 1).

Planning begins with examination of the marketing research problem(s) and objectives. It is vital to ensure that the whole process is founded upon a clear awareness of the gaps in knowledge of marketing decisions-makers. After the problem definition has been given, the objectives of using focus groups should be clarified. There should be a clear understanding of what information can be elicited from using the technique.

The next step is to develop the list of issues, or **topic guide**, that are to be discussed in the focus groups. This list may be a series of specific questions but it is more likely to be a set of broad issues that can be developed into questions or problems as the focus group actually takes place. The specific questions may be helpful to the moderator who feels that a consistent set of points needs to be presented to different groups in order to allow clear comparisons to be made. Specific questions also act as a 'prop' when the discussion is failing. In any case the emphasis should be upon an *evolution and learning process* rather than administering a consistent set of questions.

Types of group members taking part in the discussions are then specified. On the basis of this specification, a questionnaire is prepared to screen potential participants. Typical information obtained from the questionnaire includes product familiarity and knowledge, usage behavior, attitudes toward and participation in focus group, and standard demographic characteristics.

With the types of participants specified, consideration must be made of what would make them relaxed and comfortable.

The moderator plays a vital role in the achieving success of the focus group. Moderator identifies the nature and validity of information in the course of the discussion. Besides, the moderator may play a central role in data analysis and interpretation.

3. Defining the Advantages of Focus Groups

Before you conduct focus groups, you need to consider what you will get for your efforts, whether or not focus groups are right for your project.

Consider focus groups when there is a gap between people. The gap can exist between those who make decisions and those who must implement them, or between those who provide services or products and their customers. Due to interaction within them, focus groups provide a window into how other think and talk.

Sponsors often choose focus groups because this method provides immediate and vivid feedback on how others respond to their ideas. The advantages that focus groups provide for bridging such gaps help explain their popularity in such diverse applications as showing manufactures how consumers respond to their products, helping survey researchers find appropriate questionnaire items for the following research.

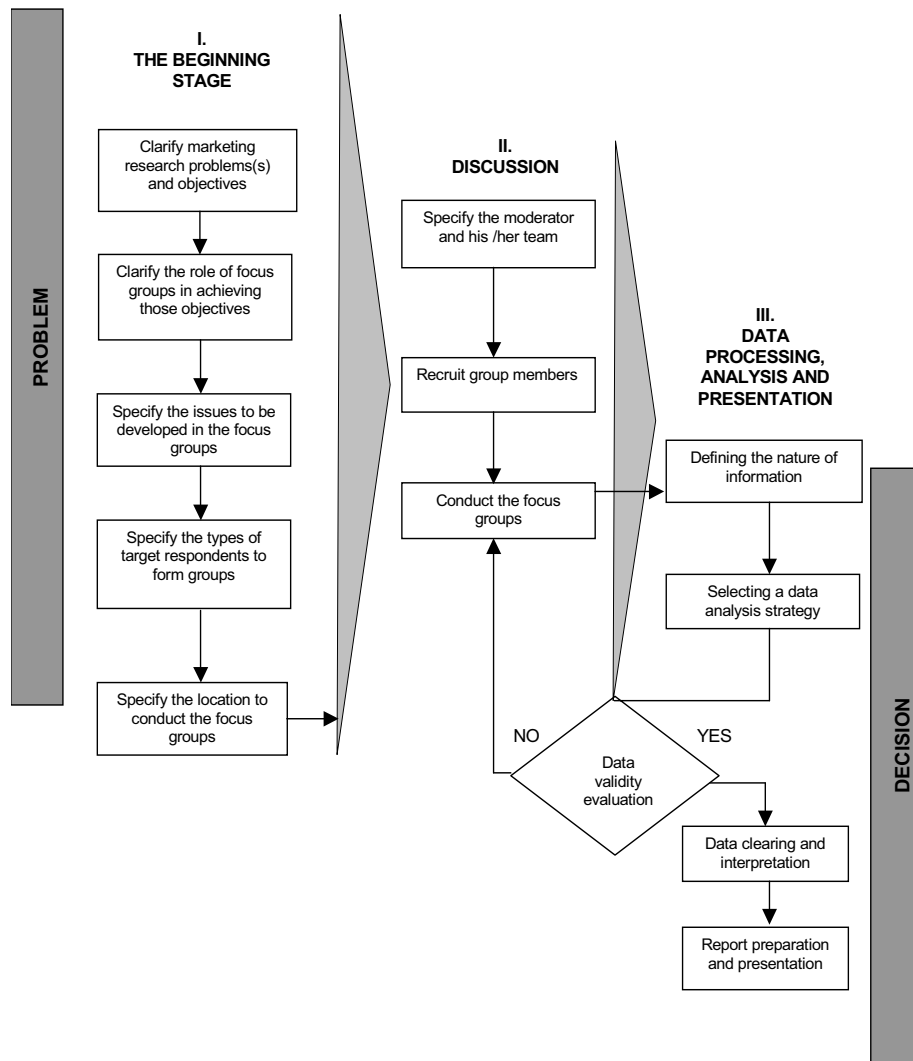


Fig. 1. Cyclic model for planning and conducting focus groups in marketing research

Consider focus groups when investigating complex behavior and motivations. Interaction among the participants in focus groups often consists of their efforts to understand one another. The participants are curious to know how other people handle the situations that are similar to the ones they confront. They want to know why people like to do the things they do. The conversations in focus groups can thus be a gold mine of information about the ways people behave and the motivations that underlie these behavior styles. Of course, the goal of understanding complex behavior may require more than one way of finding out something about that behavior, and focus groups can be combined with other methods for this purpose.

Consider focus groups when you want to understand diversity. Different people experience some topics or issues differently, and focus groups can help you understand the variety of others' experiences.

The classic strategy for encountering diversity through focus groups creates groups that maximize similarity of the participants within groups while emphasizing differences between groups. The fact that each group is homogeneous increases the participants' comfort in talking with similar others. The fact that separate groups consist of different types of participants lets you assess how similar or different various categories of participants are. Focus groups are thus espe-

cially useful for determining whether one set of programs will really fit all needs. Many public service agencies must fulfill the same broad mission for diverse cultural and linguistic groups. Are the things that work for one category of clients quite literally alien to other categories of clients? Focus groups with different types of clients are an obvious way to investigate this issue. This use of focus groups also points at the possibility of understanding dimensions of diversity that go beyond ethnicity and language. Whenever you want to understand the experiences and preferences of different categories of people, comparing what they have to say in focus groups can provide valuable insights. One of the most common reasons why a topic is not appropriate is that the participants have too little involvement in it. The participants may have some involvement with the topic but not at the level the researchers are seeking.

Avoid focus groups when a project requires statistical data. Undoubtedly, the most dangerous statistical misuse of focus groups comes from attempts to generalize their results to larger populations. The samples in focus groups are almost always too small and too unrepresentative to generate meaningful numbers. Focus groups emphasize depth and insight; hence, they do not employ the rigorous sampling procedures that are necessary to produce useful numerical results.

Avoid focus groups when the topic is not appropriate for the participants. Problems invariably arise when researchers fixate on their own interests without considering whether the participants will really be able to discuss the chosen topic. Focus groups work best when a limited number of compatible people have the opportunity to discuss their shared interests within an open environment, while guided by a skillful moderator.

4. An Illustrative Example of the Focus Group Method

An application of the proposed method is illustrated with the example that anticipates responses to the new client information service of telecommunication company (ISM, 2002d).

Goals and Purposes. A private agency decided to conduct focus groups as part of its making major changes in client information services. By using focus groups they planned to hear from the company's clients' proposals with the aim to improve service delivery using Internet connection.

Project Size. This project used a total of three focus groups that were held in the capital of Lithuania, considering, that there is a slight difference between the telecommunication clients in the city and in the smaller districts. The research was conducted over a 3-week period.

Research Participants. There were three categories of participants: the company's pre-paid clients, who had already tried the client information service on the Internet, the post-paid clients, and the consumers of other telecommunication company. The groups consisted of approximately seven participants. The company supplied a list of potential participants that were regular clients, so it was easy to recruit respondents for the first two groups. The last group was the most difficult to recruit.

Data Collection. In the initial groups, the goal was to hear about the broadest possible range of functions and suggestions that they would experience as a result of the planned changes in client information system. The groups began their work with discussing different ways of using the company's services by each participant. In the core set of questions, the moderator walked the participants through the process of getting service and explained the changes in a step-by-step manner; at each step, the groups discussed how those changes could be important to them and offered their suggestions.

Analysis and Reporting. The research team began with a systematic, question-by-question, analysis of the video-recorded discussions in the groups. The team summarized the key functions that clients anticipated as well as their suggestions for dealing with new service. The written report was presented to the telecommunication company.

This empirical research project demonstrates a wider range of uses for focus groups. Sometimes it may be the only proper technique to explore consumers' attitudes not only towards cheese and chips or beer (ISM, 2000, 2001), but especially researching services (ISM, 2002b), new ideas and motivations.

The companies that have experienced focus group method in their emerging markets research appreciate that the main advantage of focus groups is that they often can be executed more quickly than many other research techniques. Findings from groups tend to be easier to understand and have a compelling immediacy and excitement. These features increase the popularity of focus groups and growing application by Lithuanian commercial (ISM, 2002a) and even state government companies (ISM, 2002c).

5. Conclusions

The use of the focus group method allows us to activate powers of creative discussions, quickly and at low outlay collect rich empirical data, covering verbal and non-verbal information, obtain more detail information.

Focus group method is often used to examine attitudes, feelings, and motivations.

Qualitative research, particularly focus groups, continues to grow in marketing research for several reasons: the research usually takes less time; it is an excellent means to understand the in-depth motivation and feelings of consumers; it can improve the efficiency of quantitative research; it is convenient not only for product, but for service research as well.

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