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QUALITATIVE ● *Worth the effort*

## Interactive exercises better engage groups

By HOLLY M. O'NEILL

Marketers know they must develop focus group recruiting screeners and discussion guides with keen attention to the principles of marketing science. But focus groups aren't just about marketing science. By injecting creativity into the moderating process, researchers can uncover additional perceptions and emotions, and increase consumer learning.

While skilled focus group moderators must be experts at interpreting consumer behavior and understanding group dynamics, they must also lead active discussions. Using only structured dialogue, respondents often have difficulty expressing the sum total of their opinions and feelings. One effective way to stimulate lively discussions is to augment questioning and probing techniques with dynamic interactive exercises.

Interactive exercises can elicit in-depth feedback well above and beyond pat answers, not only revealing respondents' attitudes more deeply, but also better engaging their thinking and concentration. Interactive exercises can also uncover issues and opinions that respondents may not otherwise be able to fully verbalize, or of which they might be unaware.

Nearly all focus groups can benefit from at least one interactive exercise. Depending on the research objectives, some focus groups can include more. Exercises can be designed for respondents to work individually, the group to work as a whole or the group to split into teams.

Exercises must be relevant to the topic and to the respondent base, so some degree of customization is necessary. Researchers should determine the exercise parameters with

research objectives in mind.

Among the myriad of exercise models that lend themselves well to focus group research, the following are three effective interactive focus group exercises:

### Product sort

A product sort exercise is especially useful in consumer packaged goods research to better understand product segmentation and the purchase decision hierarchy. This activity presents respondents with a representative sample of products from within the study category and asks them to work together as a team to sort the products into groups that make sense to them. Respondents are encouraged to create as many product groups as they see fit and asked to give each group a name that describes why those items have been placed together.

The visual stimulation, combined with the physical activity of moving products, generates more thorough thinking. Additionally, the active discussion among respondents provides key insights into the segmentation process, and researchers get a better understanding of what consumers consider while reviewing products in a specific category.

### Storytelling

Storytelling is especially useful for gathering and understanding attitudes and imagery cues. The moderator describes a setting or situation and then asks respondents to tell a story related to the scenario. For example, if a research goal is to better understand the perceived image of a specific brand, the moderator could say: "Let's pretend you're in the

supermarket. The woman next to you has Brand X in her cart. Tell me about that woman. What else does she have in her cart? How is she dressed? Where does she live? What does her house look like—inside and outside? What kind of car does she drive?"

The process of creating a story around a brand—in this example revealing perceived personality cues—encourages respondents to think about the brand in a different way, and to express images and biases of which they might not be consciously aware.

### Sticker allocation

In this qual-quant technique, respondents are provided with a short list of choices, such as product concepts or flavors, and asked to allocate 10 stickers—or purchase tokens—according to their preferences. This methodology provides a ranking and weighting, and it's fun. The results are not statistically significant, but these directional results and the ensuing discussion provide insightful data about consumer preferences.

**Exercises must be relevant to the topic and respondent base so some customizing is necessary.**

Interactive exercises increase learning and keep respondents interested and on topic. They are a bit more work to prepare and tabulate the results, but the richness of emotions, perceptions and biases that the exercises uncover are worth the extra effort. ■

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