

## Focus Groups in Place of Surveys?

There are instances where focus groups, which are normally easier and less costly to conduct than traditional sample surveys, offer the prospect for equal, if not better, information. Knowing when to use focus groups can lead to a higher quality project.

**M**uch of what we do in our work is driven by the need for information. Whether it concerns knowing customer preferences, how to best implement a new program or initiative or the pros and cons of competing policy alternatives, having access to information improves the odds of making better decisions. The way we acquire information can take on many forms, including the use of surveys, a **quantitative** approach, and focus groups, the survey's **qualitative** cousin. While the survey tends to be the more popular choice of the two, focus groups are, in many circumstances, the better alternative.

With a fair amount of frequency, organizations setting out to conduct a survey include the disclaimer that "we only want to do a short, informal survey." This can be interpreted to mean that at any cost they do not want to bother respondents with too many questions. But what it can also mean is that all that's needed is just basic information - information that might be better collected through a less structured process than a survey. When data of a more general nature is required, focus groups can make a lot of sense.

Related to this notion of "wanting to keep things simple" is the question of how the data will be used. Most surveys poll a sample of the population so that inferences can be made about the larger group of interest. In these cases a survey is appropriate. However, when there is not a compelling need to be able to project the results to the broader population, focus groups can often provide sufficient information that allows key decisions to be made. Sometimes a research project is more about collecting the range of perceptions and thoughts surrounding an issue than it is about knowing precisely how specific segments of the population feel.

Another advantage in opting for a focus group over a survey is that a qualitative research approach can permit more depth and detail to be applied to the study topic. Surveys can be somewhat limiting by their nature of asking precise and exacting questions. Focus groups, by their nature, thrive on open dialog and the

free exchange of ideas, thoughts and perceptions. Projects whose objective is to explore the width and breadth of a topic will frequently benefit from the use of qualitative research.

Surveys also carry the potential burden of extended time requirements to ensure, among other things, that a sound questionnaire has been developed, a good probability sample has been selected and sufficient fieldtime is allocated to yield a high response rate. Focus groups, conversely, can be planned, organized, implemented, and reported in considerably less time than a traditional survey. This does not suggest that focus groups can be haphazardly assembled. Still, the duration of the overall project is much shorter than the time necessary to undertake a survey.

Issues relating to budgets and costs tend to find their way into the discussion when considering a new project, including research. A potential drawback of surveys is that they can be expensive depending on the type and size of the sample used and the method of data collection. Focus groups, on the other hand, can be carried out with a minimum of expense.

One additional benefit worth noting about focus groups is that they are normally less demanding to develop and manage than surveys. When conducted properly, surveys require strict adherence to established principles of sampling, question design and analysis. Because focus groups are less formal and the information collected is normally based on generalized perceptions, the skills needed to carry out focus groups are easier and quicker to master than those needed for sample surveys.

Focus groups are not a substitute for surveys when precise measures from a probability sample are required. They simply do not involve the participation of enough people to make their findings reliable. But if greater insight is what is needed for a particular topic of interest, assembling a few focus groups might be the better route to take! 

## From the Field...

A summary of recent survey findings from across the country.



One-half of all U.S. adults say they have registered as an organ donor, but only one in four has informed their family of their wish to be a donor. The ability to save someone's life is regarded as the most important reason to be an organ donor.

Source: Harris Interactive



Disorganization is the greatest frustration for workers attending business meetings. Included are meetings that are unstructured and those that do not closely follow an agenda. Tardiness (starting late and late arrivals) and cell phone interruptions also rank high as major annoyances.

Source: Opinion Research USA



For the second consecutive year Miami ranks as the top U.S. city for road rage. New York, Boston, Los Angeles, and Washington, D.C. follow Miami. Portland, Oregon is viewed as the most courteous city, followed by Pittsburgh, Seattle/Tacoma, St. Louis, and Dallas/Ft. Worth.

Source: Auto Vantage



Seven in ten online consumers shop multiple web sites before making an online purchase. Forty-two percent compare prices via a price comparison engine.

Free shipping is the most important enticement offered by online businesses to bring customers back to the web site.

Source: DoubleClick Performics



Thirty-three percent of adults nationwide say higher gas prices have not had much impact on their financial situation.

Source: Gallup Poll