

The following article appeared in

**Total Communication Measurement**, October, 2000

Melcrum Publishing, London

## Focus groups or survey?

You decide which approach will give you the answers you need

This month's column is a quiz. I'll set up some scenarios, you choose which research approach you think is best. At the end, I'll defend why I think my own answers are right!

1. You've never done any audience research on communication before. You want to find out what types of information your audience wants to know about and how they want to receive it. You should conduct:
  - a. Focus groups first, then a survey
  - b. A survey first, then focus groups
2. Your CEO receives an anonymous letter from an employee saying that managers in his location are requiring employees to sign attendance sheets for safety meetings that were never conducted. He wants you to fix this if it is true. You should:
  - a. Conduct focus groups in representative locations around the company, keeping managers and employees in separate sessions
  - b. Add questions to an upcoming survey about employees' access to different types of meetings
3. Your CEO insists that the employee publication should be discontinued and replaced with an electronic newsletter available only on the intranet. You're concerned that many of your employees might not have online access, but you need ammunition to disagree with the CEO's idea. You should:
  - a. Conduct focus groups with each different major employee subgroup to probe their current and potential future usage of electronic communication
  - b. Conduct a survey with enough employees to be able to get statistically reliable results by subgroup
4. You're planning a multi-year communication campaign and want to track changes due to your efforts. Periodically throughout this time period, you should:
  - a. Conduct focus groups with the same group of people
  - b. Conduct a series of random-sample surveys
5. You've just taken over an employee publication. You hate the design because it gets in the way of the content, but the design firm refuses to change their approach, saying this is cutting edge and reflects the brand image. You can't fire the designers because your boss likes them. To convince the designers to change, you should:
  - a. Conduct focus groups in which readers talk about their likes and dislikes about the content and format of a sample of the publication you bring to the sessions

- b. Conduct a survey focused on the publication's content and design
6. You've heard salespeople complaining that they're not getting the information they need. You only have enough budget to conduct either focus groups or a survey to identify the problem areas and develop possible solutions. You should:
- a. Conduct focus groups
  - b. Conduct a survey with a lot of write-in questions

My suggested answers and why:

**1a.** If you don't first discover what the right content areas and channels for communication are, you won't be able to list them on the survey. If they're not on the survey, your audience won't be able to tell you about them, and you'll draw incomplete conclusions from the numbers you do get.

**2b.** You'll be able to identify all the locations where access to a variety of meetings is too low so it can be measurably improved everywhere. Plus, focus group participants in locations where safety meetings are not being conducted may experience retaliation from their management after the report is presented.

**3b.** When you need ammunition to disagree with senior leaders, you need statistically reliable numbers. Then management's decision will be based on the quantifiable downside of how many people will no longer have physical access to the important information they need. Plus, you could also find out how often people with access currently visit the intranet or might visit it if the publication were available only online. Just be careful not to conduct this survey only online!

**4b.** Tracking over time or across demographic groups must be done quantitatively. Focus groups are too subjective with too many variables that could color the impression of whether change is occurring or not. By the way, conducting qualitative research with the same group of people over a period of time can be very misleading. They no longer are representative of your entire audience because they are overly sensitized to communication issues.

**5a.** The technical terminology we use about layout and design don't necessarily mean the same things to your readers. Also, on a survey they'll just be responding to what they recall of the publication in question, which they might not have seen in a while. In a focus group, you can walk them through page by page, and in their own words they can tell you what techniques make it hard for them to read stories and which ones make them dive in.

**6a.** If you're not clear on the issues or possible solutions, focus groups will help you flesh them out better. It is very hard to learn enough from write-in responses, which tend to be maddeningly incomplete. You'll hear the pain of the negative feelings, but not enough on possible solutions. Also, I find that write-in responses tend to be mostly negative even on a topic that is rated very positively elsewhere on a quantitative question in the survey.