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Reporting focus group findings

Tips for taking notes and presenting results to management

Most communicators take notes from interviews or meetings either in blank documents on their laptops or longhand on blank pads of paper. Using this approach for 10 focus groups could easily result in about 200 pages of notes. If you choose to record focus groups and have them transcribed, this number can easily double.

The problem with these approaches to taking focus group notes becomes painfully apparent when you begin writing a report. Finding the range of responses you heard on each question begins to feel somewhat like an archaeological dig. You know the valuable treasure is in there somewhere, but finding it takes a lot of time and trouble. This problem is compounded because focus group participants don't limit their comments on a question to the first time you ask it. They often refer back to a topic later in the discussion, or else they answer a question early on that you had planned to ask later in the discussion.

What often happens is that focus group facilitators give up on actually analyzing their notes and write a report based on their overall impressions of all the focus groups, only referring back to their notes to highlight some really great direct quotes. Unfortunately, this gives greater weight to what was said in the most recent sessions. Also, if a number of different facilitators conducted the sessions, the report writer will unavoidably give greater weight to what he or she heard than what little can be gleaned from other people's rambling notes. This entire approach results in a report filled mostly by narrative, without the reader's being able to see a clear picture of the findings.

A new way of taking notes

The trick to making analysis easier is to change the way you take notes.

Once you finalize the questions you will be asking, prepare focus group discussion guides. At minimum, put each major question at the top of a page, print out enough copies for each session, and staple or comb-bind each discussion guide. Identify on the cover of each booklet:
- The type of participants in the group (hourly employees, supervisors, sales reps, current customers, etc.).
- The date and time of the session.
- The number of participants.
- The names of the facilitator and note-taker.

The first two pieces of information could be entered into the footer of each discussion guide in advance.

When you take notes, make sure any comments related to a question in your guide are recorded on the page with that question on it. This may mean flipping back and forth among your pages several times during a focus group, but it is definitely worth the trouble to be able to *find* all comments on a particular question on a single page.

When it's time to write your report, turn all your discussion guides to the same page and refresh your memory on each group's responses to a question. You'll be able to say definitively whether most, some or nearly none of the sessions felt a particular way about the issue. If you've entered identifying information about each group into the footer of each page, you could organize your booklets in sequence so you could see if similar types of groups shared the same opinion or varied from other groups.

A further refinement of this technique is to prepare blank grids in which to record different responses to the same question in a focus group. You can then indicate next to each response whether many people agreed with a comment (for example, using a filled-in bullet like this●) or only a few (using a hollow bullet like this ❍). These are sometimes called "Harvey balls," although I have no idea why.

You can then illustrate visually the strength of response among different groups having similar and different responses to the same question. The illustration below shows a sample report slide consolidated from a number of focus groups with each of the identified job levels. It also shows the responses in descending order of priority.

I can nearly guarantee that senior management will find more value in a single page like this than a page filled with words alone.

Sample Report of Findings

If you could improve just one thing about communication here, what would it be?	Employ-ees	Super-visors	Local Manage-ment
Train managers and employees on communication skills	●	○	●
Improve communication between shifts	●	○	
Have management interact more with employees	●		○
Conduct more effective meetings		●	
Conduct more regular meetings	○		