

Behind the Mirror: Practical Tips for Watching Focus Groups

Before the Groups

- Review the purpose and objectives for the groups and the Moderator's Guide. If you have any questions about why things are asked the way they are or think key questions are missing, call the moderator ahead of time to discuss.
- If you are likely to be recognized by any respondents, try to arrive at the facility 30 to 45 minutes ahead of time or after the group starts. This way you avoid bumping into any of the respondents. Whenever you arrive at the facility, please do not tell the hostess what organization you are with. Instead, ask for the moderator by name. That way they will know you are a viewer and not a respondent, and no respondents will hear who the sponsoring client is. Do not wear company logo shirts or drive company-identified vehicles to the groups.

Guide to the Moderator's Guide

- Be patient with the introductions. It may seem unnecessarily long, but it is an important step in making the respondents feel comfortable talking and willing to share their opinions and feelings.
- Realize that the moderator may not go through the guide exactly in the order outlined, but will cover all topic areas by the end of the group.
- Do not send in notes to the group room. During the wrap-up section, the moderator will come to the back room for any last minute clarifying questions you may want to add on to the end of the group.
- Leave the lights off.
- Keep your voices down (especially during quiet parts of the group when respondents are doing a writing task).
- Loud laughter will be heard and make respondents feel self-conscious and inhibit the group.
- Smokers, please do not light up in the viewing room.
- If you are wearing all white, do not sit in the front row by the mirror. The reflection may show through to the respondent room.

Remember, this is a Research Exploration, not a Sales Presentation

Respondents are often misinformed or just plain wrong and it can be difficult to watch the moderator nod her head instead of enlightening them. Remember, we are trying to understand their perceptions and their version of reality. If they are mistaken, we need to know in what ways they are misinformed. This will help you as you develop your communication materials.

Listen ... and Observe

- Listen to the respondents. What do they care about? What do they need? How can you enhance your product, service or message to better meet these people's needs?
- Watch the respondents. What do they look like? Where are they coming from? What excites them? What bores them? What makes them laugh? What makes them angry? What irritates them? How can you enhance your product, service or message to better meet these people's needs?

Make Notes on Key Insights, Surprises and Potential Ideas

As you are listening, make a note of any of the following:

- Key insights - a new way of looking at something
- Surprises - something you didn't expect or assumptions you've had that may not be true
- Paradoxes - contradictions often raise issues that if explored can result in creative solutions
- Potential ideas - any ideas for improvements or any thoughts about a totally different way of approaching it

It helps to write these thoughts down. Often these fleeting a-ha's can be lost if not captured in the moment. After the group is over, share them with the other viewers and the moderator.

After the Groups

- Respondents are promised anonymity as part of participating in the research process. Please do not contact them or follow up with them individually in any way.
- Take back the images of these respondents when you go back to your work. As you make decisions, think about the respondents that represent your target and consider how you think they might react to the results of your decisions.