



A little unease can do wonders

| By Jennifer Larsen

snapshot

Sometimes it pays to keep respondents a bit off-kilter during focus groups.

As qualitative market researchers, we are skilled at making participants comfortable in focus groups or interviews but sometimes it helps to do the opposite. When you nudge someone to step out of his/her comfort zone, you often get more in return.

Nearly every participant who comes to research has some preconceived notions of what's going to happen. Who hasn't seen a focus group, even if it's just in parody form à la *Saturday Night Live*, Domino's Pizza, Snickers, etc.? (FYI, I will refuse to moderate focus groups with the Snickers sharks.) The participants enter the room with a plan in mind of exactly what the topic is, what they know and think about the topic and some idea of what they will be asked about it.

However, when the discussion does not follow the expected path, causing the participants to experience a few uncomfortable moments, they are surprised into letting their guard down and thinking a little deeper. And by becoming more engaged in the conversation, they also tend to enjoy it even more.

Take the group on a trip back in time. Does anything bond a group of people more than making it through those awkward high school years together? While we don't have a time machine, we like to recreate a little piece of that. We give participants a homework assignment and then ask them to present it to the class (I mean, group) at the start of the discussion. They have observed themselves in their natural environments and committed to their opinion prior to attending the research but having to do "an oral report" in front of a room full of near-strangers is no easy feat.

But unlike in high school, the group bonds together and helps each other through the discomfort. You can feel this bonding change the tone in the room. The group feels like they are all in it together and they share things with each other that they might not have, had they not bonded through the first few minutes of nervous tension in the group.

Revel in the tangent (at least a little). It also helps to know when a participant needs a little help feeling comfortable. Adult participants expect to do a quick introduction, briefly telling you about themselves – their marital status, their occupation, number of kids, etc. But if you ask them to go on a tangent by elaborating further on one of these points, you can see the surprise on their faces. Sometimes, an irrelevant or even irreverent question can actually melt the discomfort. For example, I once asked someone, "I have to know, how did you decide to be a mortician?" And he laughed disarmingly, said "Long story ..." and then proceeded to tell me. His answer (that he was writing a TV show pilot about a funeral home – we were in L.A., after all) was not immediately relevant to the research and I am sure the clients in the back room were scratching their heads but sometimes an unexpected tangent is just what is called for.

For me, it served two purposes. It helped make the participant feel more comfortable with me, because he got to reveal a little bit about himself and his dreams and it gave me key insights into the person sitting in front of me that I used as a prism through which to view the rest of his feedback.



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