

1

LISTENING 101



The Value of Focus Groups

Millions say the apple fell but Newton was the one to ask why.

Bernard Baruch

In the 1950s, so the story goes, the food technologists and home economists at Betty Crocker thought they had a winner on their hands with a one-step cake mix. Just add liquid and allakazaam . . . cake batter. This was during the Eisenhower years when convenience foods and make-my-life-easier appliances were the rallying cry. The folks at Betty Crocker thought they couldn't miss. Women who bought the product and baked the cake felt otherwise.

What went wrong? To find out, I'll bet some pioneer market researchers consulted housewives. (Remember this was the 1950s. A few years later, housewives became "homemakers" because "wives" in "houses" were becoming outmoded. That, of course, begat stay-at-home-moms with a pride agenda all their own for the truly labor-intensive aspects of raising a family and maintaining a

2 Beyond Listening

home that extend far beyond the simpler sobriquet, *housewife*. Such attitudinal changes feed the demand for my brand of qualitative research.)

The focus group leaders probably queried and questioned housewives who had used cake mixes until they finally understood where they had failed. The problem: The cake mix was a little too simple. The consumer felt no sense of accomplishment, no involvement with the product. It made her feel useless, especially if somewhere her aproned mom was still whipping up cakes from scratch.

Undaunted, the brain trust at Betty Crocker went back to work. They reformulated the mix so that along with water, the user would have to add an egg. The true accomplishment for those early marketers, however, was in ferreting out how housewives felt about using a boxed mix to make cake batter. The real answer was an insight: Put pride back in the cake-baking process.

The tale may be apocryphal, but it has been told and retold to market researchers to demonstrate a point: *If you want to know what the consumer thinks . . . ask. Then listen. And then ask again to see if you've got it right. And before you give it to them, ask and listen again.* It's why we conduct focus groups.

The focus group is an invisible part of the marketing machinery. Betty Crocker aside, it's virtually impossible to follow the breadcrumbs from a series of focus groups to a successful (or unsuccessful) marketing effort. Consumers seldom give you the solution. They do help you pinpoint the problem. My hunch is that no homemaker told Betty Crocker to put the egg in. I suspect she merely expressed a reluctance to use the mix without quite knowing why. The real problem had nothing to do with the product's intrinsic value, but instead represented the emotional connection that links a product to its user.

If you want to understand the whys and wherefores of product use . . . or discontinued product use . . . or occasional product use . . . or your brand . . . or your competitor's brand . . . focus groups are where you get the picture. They are the maternity wards and rehab clinics for brands. (Apologies to my good friend and client, futurist Faith Popcorn for borrowing her metaphor. She was the first to think of her company, Brain Reserve, as the stop-in clinic—not the full-service hospital—for Fortune 500 clients worried about a specific aspect of their business.) As a market researcher to many of those same Fortune 500 companies, my focus groups are the wellness centers where the true skill is in the diagnosis. Faith and consultants like Jack Trout are the practitioners; qualitative marketing researchers like me are the diagnosticians.

Focus groups are the ideal place to begin understanding what products mean to consumers in their deep psyches rather than their deep pockets. Dismiss the notion of someone out in a suburban mall, clipboard in hand, asking every passerby if he or she likes Pepsi better than Coke. I want to know why. Strike the idea of a screening room full of people voting to alter the end of *Fatal Attraction* so Glenn Close gets her comeuppance. I want to understand how either ending makes the audience feel.

Which do you prefer, or what do you like better are questions best handled in surveys. They fall under *quantitative* research that tells you which one, how many, how often, and by whom. But focus groups are a *qualitative* research technique that lets you dig past the measurements. If you want to know how many jelly beans are in the jar, or how many are red, yellow, orange, or pink, then quantitative is your game. If you wonder how each jelly bean tastes, or how the colors may or may not relate to flavor, then qualitative is what you need.

4 Beyond Listening

Qualitative research (mainly focus groups) is where a story unfolds, a hypothesis develops, and an explanation emerges. Its value rests in the ability to allow a client to understand totally a brand preference, a purchase decision, the lack of interest in a well-advertised product, or why Glenn Close needs to get hers in the end.

Of course, someone might have concluded “fuggedaboutit,” the cake mix won’t sell. A savvy marketer instead listened to users, developed some insights, and wondered what Betty Crocker could do to counteract an apparent sense of inadequacy. Hence, the egg.

For the past three decades, I’ve been listening to consumers talk about room deodorizers, potato chips, credit cards, furniture polish, cars, washing machines, bubble gum, ATMs, newspapers, breath mints, and practically any other product you can think of (never cake mixes, by the way). And, I’m constantly surprised by what they have to say. Not necessarily because the conclusions are unanticipated but because so much learning can take place when you reach beyond hard, cold figures and talk eyeball to eyeball with consumers. These are the real people who make choices about what products to buy, use them in individual ways, and become emotionally attached to the brands they prefer. It’s simply a matter of full throttle and focused listening.

Why Conduct a Focus Group?

Most of us operate on automatic pilot when we drive a car. We don’t stop to think about putting the key in the ignition, starting the car, or turning the steering wheel. We do it almost without thought, by habit. From going to the supermarket to reading a newspaper, we don’t analyze our motivations, we simply act.

Focus groups take the “automatic” out of buying patterns and put them on manual override for a while to help you understand what’s going on in your customers’ psyches. By delving into the consumers’ consciousness you can unearth the underlying reasons for their actions and form reasoned impressions about what’s really going on.

A simple survey will only identify which brand of aspirin, ibuprofen (most consumers just call it all “Advil”), or acetaminophen (and they call all this “Tylenol”) consumers buy. What you won’t find out is what goes through any consumer’s mind when he’s in a drug store standing in front of that shelf. You could set up a video camera and tape him at the scene. I think you get more useful information if you just ask. That’s when you’ll hear: “It’s so confusing now. There’s aspirin and Advil and Tylenol. But, what’s Aleve? Then there’s gel caps and tablets. And this brand mentions headaches, that one says muscle pain, and here’s one that suggests it will work for fevers.” Listen to him. What he’s wondering is what’s going to relieve his wife’s tennis elbow, which is why he’s standing bewildered at the shelf in the first place.

Just listen to consumers talk about the analgesics area of mass retail outlets, with nary a pharmacist in sight. And bend a little closer when those over 50, with less than perfect vision and arms that can’t reach far enough, tell you the frustration of not being able to get an item off the shelf or read the miniscule print on the label that might actually shed some light on which brand of analgesic to purchase.

You may have all the data but you haven’t heard what consumers are really saying, which is that the proliferation of similar painkillers is driving them nuts. And, if they can’t find what they want in the supermarket within 30 seconds they’ll just grab whatever is in easy reach, pay the asking price, and go about their business.

6 Beyond Listening

Surveys and focus groups shouldn't be mutually exclusive. I would never advise any client to conduct a set of focus groups in place of a statistically sophisticated survey. Marketers today need all the data they can get, and they need to be able to view any form of market research with impunity.

What qualitative research does is add depth and context. Would the results be exactly the same if you spoke to another group of 10 people? Maybe not. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative doesn't have the statistical accuracy of a survey. Focus groups are only one weapon in the arsenal of research tools that marketers use.

Often, when I tell people what I do for a living, they expect me to make an instant connection between their favorite commercial and the group of people who gave it thumbs up, or they'll present their own interpretation of focus groups: "You show new products to consumers and see how they feel about them, right?"

Focus groups have significantly less to do with gathering new product reactions than with understanding what a new product should look like, feel like, smell like, and ultimately promise the customer. Hardly anyone advances a business proposition or a new product or service based on a gut feel. The stakes are just too high.

Focus groups are an important market research tool if you are ready to listen. Don't expect answers. Don't expect solutions. Go in prepared to hear what you haven't thought about before. Usually, a good round of focus groups gives rise to more questions, but they will be more precise.

Listening in focus groups is like painting. Each panelist and each group adds color and texture. In the end, a cohesive picture should and usually does emerge. Focus groups work best for the following tasks:

- *To explore customers' purchasing habits.*

Why are they buying your mustard brand . . . or your competitor's? Why are consumers purchasing low-salt items in some food categories like snacks and not others? Why aren't they visiting your Web site even though they seem to be aware of it? Why do women drop in and out of hair-coloring products?
- *To understand more about the particular consumer in the category.*

You want to launch a product targeted to pet owners. To determine if the concept will fly, first you need to know how those consumers view and treat their pets. Why do they anthropomorphize their pets? How do they talk about their pets? Is there a difference between dog and cat owners, owners of small animals versus large animals, owners of purebred versus mixed breeds?
- *To learn more about consumers' attitudes.*

As a low-fat product marketer, you're interested in the attitudes of people who are and aren't watching their weight. What are the differences between those who buy the product for their families and those who purchase it just for themselves?
- *To examine a brand's image.*

How do people view your coffee? Are you hip moccacino grande or yesterday's tired instant? Does your potential customer see your men's store as discomfiting as a snake pit or as comfy as an old shoe?
- *To discern consumers' emotional bonds with a product.*

Your cleaning product costs less and seems to do a better job than your competitor's, yet customers consistently buy

8 Beyond Listening

the competition—why? Is it because it's the brand their mothers used or does it make users feel that they're smarter?

- *To develop an effective advertising campaign.*

Women might color their hair because they believe it makes them look as young as they feel, but do they really want to hear that in the advertising? Is it better to stress that your fast food is quick and convenient or that it tastes great?

- *To feed an educated hunch.*

You've developed a hypothesis about why people in upper income brackets might use your new financial service. How do you know if your conclusion is right?

The insights that emerge from all this prodding and probing can help marketers refine their products and services, define the core customers most receptive to them, and reach and retain those consumers with relevant and appropriate messages.

LISTENING POINTS

- ☉ Ask consumers what they think before you assume you know what they need.
- ☉ Use surveys to find out when, how many, or how often; use focus groups to find out why.
- ☉ Listen hard for opportunity; sometimes it knocks softly.
- ☉ Focus groups don't provide solutions. They help you form a picture that reveals your possibilities and limits.
- ☉ A good focus group will yield better questions, not definitive answers.