

Where Do "Traditional" Focus Groups Fit Today? A Qualitative Study of the Client Perspective

By Jon Last, Executive Director, Corporate
Marketing & Research, The Golf Digest Companies,
Judith Langer, Director, Roper/Langer Qualitative Division, RoperASW

Presented to ARF Week of Workshops, September 2003

The so-called "traditional" focus group technique has come under increased attack in the last few years. Certainly, articles and speeches about the "uses and abuses" of qualitative research are nothing new; many, if not most, target focus groups as the culprit. Perhaps ironically, focus groups are both better known and more frequently attacked today than they were a few decades ago. The media – themselves heavy users of focus groups – often knock focus groups, sometimes for laughs. Within the marketing and advertising community, focus groups are increasingly drawing criticisms too. While 20 years ago it was quantitative researchers criticizing focus groups for not being scientific, now it is often qualitative researchers who claim the so-called "traditional" or regular focus group is passé and inferior to other qualitative techniques. (Even the word "traditional" implies that the regular focus group is a thing of the past.)

The regular focus group format is typically:

- Moderator role: in person, leading discussion
- Length: about 2 hours
- Respondent number: 8-10
- Location: research facility with one-way mirror
- Client involvement: behind the mirror and/or remote viewing

There are a number of variations, including "non-traditional" ones that last for 4 or 5 hours, have 25 or even up to 50 respondents, have clients directly involved with respondents, take place outside of dedicated facilities, etc.

(For this paper, "focus groups" refer to the regular format unless otherwise specified.)

American Demographics's March 2003 issue featured the cover article, *The New Science of Focus Groups*. A number of the charges against focus groups are outlined in this piece. Some excerpts:

Today, the field of qualitative research is changing, not only in response to its critics, but also to benefit from advancing technology and research methodology. Some are turning to cutting-edge segmentation science to ensure that they're studying the right group of respondents. Still others are taking a page from ethnographic research, creating focus group

experiences that are less clinical and a lot more like real life. And as research from the 1990s, dubbed the decade of the brain, wends its way into the business world, cutting-edge qualitative researchers are opting for one-on-one interviews and borrowing cognitive science techniques, such as response latency and neuroimaging, to access emotions and feelings that consumers don't even know they're having. Qualitative researchers predict that such creative and effective approaches may ultimately leave the traditional construct of focus groups far behind.

In search of qualitative research that would elicit deep insights, emotions and motivations from college students, Target hired San Mateo, Calif.-based research firm Jump Associates.... The firm sponsored a series of "game nights" at high school grads' homes, inviting incoming college freshman as well as students with a year of dorm living under their belts.... To get teens talking about dorm life, Jump devised a board game that involved issues associated with going to college. Jump researchers were on the sidelines to observe, while a video camera recorded the proceedings.... [Jump's managing associate] calls the game night "the antidote to the traditional focus group," a process he views as "a customer terrarium, with people behind glass," much the same way plants and lizards are taken out of their natural surroundings and observed for scientific purposes. In [his] view, traditional focus groups often make it impossible for market researchers to learn the truth about what customers are feeling.... **"Focus groups are the crack cocaine of market research. You get hooked on them, and you're afraid to make a move without them."** [Our bolding.]

Some qualitative researchers are turning away from groups entirely. Gerry Katz, executive vice president of Applied Marketing Science, in Waltham, Mass., says that for new-product development, one-on-one interviews are more valuable than group interviews in obtaining fresh insights. Katz says that when a company conducts "voice of the customer" research for new product development, searching for wants and needs not yet met in the marketplace, the goal is to hear something new – and group dynamics can often make that difficult.

Gerald Zaltman, at Harvard... believes that one-on-one interviews are better poised to take advantage of the cutting edge of cognitive science. He's highly skeptical about consumers' ability to report on their decision-making process accurately – or on the true state of their emotions. Zaltman argues that consumers rarely are rational when making decisions that they rely far more on emotions than on rational thinking when they decide what to buy. Further, he maintains that consumers can't really describe their decision-making process because they "have far less access to their mental activities than marketers give them credit for – 95 percent of thinking takes place in the unconscious mind."... By hooking

people up to a magnetic resonance imaging machine [MRI] and showing them advertisements, researchers could visually track blood flow to the parts of the brain associated with positive or negative emotions, or the parts of the brain associated with memory, and get a more accurate read on how the participants are feeling and whether they will remember an advertisement.

Companies are finding that online bulletin boards, where a moderator posts a question and consumers respond when they want – and thus are able to give their responses more thought – are useful, says Gerry Katz. Although spending on this type of online research is still negligible today, over time, these bulletin boards are likely to become more popular.

The article also noted focus groups continue to dominate qualitative research: “In 2001, companies spent \$1.1 billion on qualitative research, most of this for focus groups, says Larry Gold, editor and publisher of Inside Research, a monthly publication based in Barrington, Ill., that tracks the market research industry.”

While conceding that focus groups won’t go “out of business,” the writer ended this paragraph on a pessimistic note about their future:

This doesn't mean that scientific advances and whiz-bang technology will put focus groups out of business. Even Zaltman concedes that "there are circumstances where I think focus groups are warranted." For example, he says that if you want to learn the vocabulary a group of consumers uses to describe an experience or if you want to know about how word-of-mouth operates, focus groups are appropriate. "But you shouldn't use focus groups to get in-depth insights," he says. Since focus groups typically run two hours and involve 10 people, he argues that each person gets only 12 minutes of time. "You can't get very far – you can't get very much depth – in 12 minutes with any one individual," Zaltman says. And since depth is the goal, the group approach that has been a fixture in marketing research for the past six decades may go the way of the dinosaur.

The question raised by articles like this is: If focus groups are so outdated, why are they still such a frequently used technique? Do clients, the end users of focus groups, agree with the criticisms expressed by researchers with competing techniques and by the trade press? Why do they continue using focus groups and, looking ahead, do they anticipate continuing to use the technique in the future?

To explore the role of focus groups today, we conducted a study among past year client users. We sought to speak with those users who had commissioned or conducted a breadth of research, including regular format focus groups, in order to gain a better sense of the technique’s appropriate place today in the

overall marketing research tool kit. We targeted recent users because we felt they could speak to the benefits and limitations of traditional focus groups within a broad context.

Our research is qualitative in nature. We invited over 100 market researchers on the client side (advertisers and advertising agencies) across a range of industries. The sample was an amalgamation of research decision-makers culled from multiple sources, including a list of ARF members, past clients of Roper (not necessarily the Roper/Langer Qualitative Division), advertisers of The Golf Digest Companies and other clients. Over 60 researchers participated in the study, which was conducted in late June through mid-July via a self-directed questionnaire pushed via e-mail and hosted by QualTalk. We thank Ted Kendall of QualTalk for all his assistance in setting up the study site and tabulating closed-ended answers.

Continued Vitality of Traditional Focus Groups

Like the subject matter itself, the preponderance of our study learnings came from an extensive battery of open-ended questions. We also included some close-ended questions to provide a directional sense of recent and anticipated usage of various qualitative methodologies.

To set the initial context, we asked respondents to indicate how their company's research budgets were allocated between qualitative and quantitative research. Using current 2003 and last year's research budgets in tandem, our respondents indicated that the mix of methodologies was weighted slightly to the quantitative side, with a mean of 60% of all research dollars going towards qualitative projects, though a wider range of responses were provided. However, in contrast to the popular notions mentioned earlier, less than half of those interviewed indicated that there had been a recent shift towards using slightly more quantitative (defined as 5-10% more) or significantly more quantitative research over the past three years. In fact, over a third of those interviewed indicated that they had been shifting their research mix more towards the qualitative side over the same time period.

Not only were our respondents past year users of focus groups, but the technique was by far the methodology they used most. The traditional focus group remains the most prevalent qualitative methodology utilized by our respondents today. Nearly all of those interviewed (95% in both cases) had used focus groups both within the past year and within their careers, by far the overwhelmingly most popular qualitative method deployed in both timeframes. In fact, in-person interviews were the only other qualitative technique utilized by more than half of our respondents within the past year. A more thorough look at preferred methodologies can be found in the chart below.

Qualitative Methodology	Incidence of Past Year Utilization	Incidence of Utilization Over Respondents' Career
Traditional Focus Groups	95%	95%
In Person Interviews	53%	72%
Phone Interviews	40%	70%
Dyads/Triads	39%	67%
Ethnography	33%	54%

A more telling demonstration of the popularity of the traditional focus group is seen in respondents' budget allocations for the 2002-3 time period compared to expenditures on alternative qualitative methodologies. The traditional focus group commanded nearly two-thirds of these end users' budgets on average. Only in-person depth interviews and "non-traditional" focus groups received greater than 6% of the qualitative budget, and they were the second and third most popular techniques, respectively.

Adding further support to the conclusion, that, to badly paraphrase Mark Twain, "the death of the traditional focus group is greatly exaggerated," were the answers to the question of whether the methodology is more relevant, less relevant or no different in relevance than it was five years ago. Nearly 90% indicated that the relevance of the traditional focus group is unchanged (64%) or greater (25%) today than it had been half a decade ago.

The decision to continue using the traditional focus group, according to respondents, has support from research professionals as much as from general marketers. Contrary to some popular perceptions, the proliferation of traditional focus group usage is not just a manifestation of management's comfort level and ease of understanding of the methodology. The idea that FGs' popularity stems from management's embracing their simplicity and accessibility may be true. However, respondents indicated that they, as market research directors, are most typically the force driving the decision to use focus groups. The results of our study indicate that a sizeable 70% of the decisions to utilize focus groups came from internal research departments or agencies rather than from marketing or brand management.

(Some) Alternative Qualitative Methodologies Gain in Popularity

While this study points to a continued reliance upon traditional focus groups as the primary qualitative methodology, respondents did display a familiarity and growing comfort level with several alternative techniques. We asked end-users which out of a battery of qualitative tools they or a colleague had utilized and found to be more productive or useful than focus groups. Ethnographic or observational research has been used by 51% of the respondents. In-depth interviews conducted by telephone is also popular, being cited by more than a

third of the respondents. Online qualitative research (defined as live chats, e-mail or bulletin boards) also showed some strength with 17% of end-users indicating that they had found the methodology useful. However, more than a quarter of those interviewed rejected any other qualitative technique as having been more productive or useful than the traditional focus group.

A Look Ahead at Qualitative Research Usage

This movement to certain alternative qualitative methods appears to be having some staying power. More than three-quarters of the study participants indicated that they expect to use more non-traditional qualitative techniques in the future. But again, our findings point to a pre-eminent place for the traditional focus group in the years ahead. Two-thirds of those surveyed indicated that they plan to continue using the method as much over the next few years as they have in the recent past. An additional 6% of respondents anticipate greater use of focus groups, while 29% will use them slightly (26%) or significantly (3%) less.

Now, looking at the in-depth open-ended questions, the candid and often extensive responses help to explain both why the traditional focus group continues to hold a prominent place among market research techniques and why some alternatives are attractive.

Focus groups = qualitative research

For most of the clients interviewed, focus groups are qualitative research. These market researchers know that there are and have used a variety of other qualitative techniques. Their internal clients, however, do not always make the distinction and, according to some respondents, may not even be aware that other qualitative approaches exist. The request from the researchers' clients for qualitative research is often expressed, as "we want focus groups." Obviously, this may be one reason why focus groups are used more than other qualitative methodologies.

The identification of focus groups with qualitative research also results in FGs being blamed for whatever limitations qualitative has. FGs as a technique are blamed for their misuse by clients, even when company and agency researchers and qualitative practitioners counsel otherwise.

Increasingly, clients want and need hard numbers, respondents said. While focus groups continue to provide insights, several problems arise:

- Marketers are sometimes frustrated not to have projectable findings. In effect, they criticize qualitative research for not being quantitative research.

- Focus groups are sometimes used as a quantitative research substitute because they are (relatively) quick and less expensive than a full-scale survey. While this is hardly new, the increased pressure to deliver research faster-and-cheaper can contribute to the misuse of focus groups. The hypotheses coming out of a focus group study are taken by some marketers as being definitive answers.

(Note: some respondents preferred not to be quoted by name.)

[Internal clients] use the term "focus group" pretty loosely. Sometimes what they want is just a facilitated discussion, not a research project. Other times they are seeking to "validate" something quantitatively with focus groups. (Lisa Cooper, Fireman's Fund Insurance)

Traditional focus groups are being replaced by online surveys and telephone interviews for a number of applications in my company.... Management is prone to see focus groups as "soft" research, okay for editors or for early exploration but not for business decisions. Because of that, they don't want to spend a lot of money on them, so won't do enough groups in a series to feel comfortable with drawing conclusions from them. The biggest cavil about traditional focus groups is that they aren't representative. Our numbers-oriented management doesn't trust them. (Isobel Osius, Meredith Corporation)

[Internal clients] usually allow the researchers to decide on the right method for addressing their objectives, although they always say they want to do focus groups (which I have learned over the years means, "I want to do research"). (Robin Pearl, Estée Lauder)

Our greatest obstacle is people want to use them instead of quantitative research and then they shy away when they are reminded of the non-scientific way participants are selected and that they are not "representative."

Made decisions: client believed that 12 chatty-kathies represented more than 12 chatty-kathies. (Jim Patterson, Television Bureau of Canada)

Similarly, FGs as a whole are taken to task when inadequate, unprepared or inexperienced moderators do a poor job. The technique, some respondents said, is highly dependent on the quality of the moderator. More sophisticated market researchers recognize differences among moderators, but non-researchers may assume the problem is focus groups in general. A client whose company used an internal staffer untrained as a moderator said this cost-saving approach backfired.

Fieldwork issues affect the credibility of FGs too, a few respondents said. Concerns about "professional respondents" and poorly recruited groups were expressed by some clients.

There are too many "professional" respondents out there to yield fresh insights from traditional recruiting and interviewing methods.

Because of the former over-use of qualitative, finding objective participants can be a challenge. (Kevyn Aiken, Rodale)

Bad recruiting or bad moderating is the bottom line for any of my "worst case" stories. It's not usually a matter of choice of qualitative technique but execution, in my experience. (Isobel Osius, Meredith Corporation)

My "worst case" stories aren't due to method, but due to poor moderators and/or overbearing clients. (Carol Stuckhardt, Hearst Magazines)

The only focus groups I have moderated or conducted that did not work/failed was for one of these reasons: the wrong people were recruited or the moderator was wrong for the topic.

Poor moderation, got people who were poor matches for the subject. Also challenges of focus groups done worldwide, creating a comparable experience in multiple regions, and understanding in-depth what the similarities and differences are between regions.

Focus groups have become the bastard stepchild of marketing research. They are abused and misused, filling the room with as many people as can be seated and running them through 8-10 page discussion guides, yielding little more than "let's see a show of hands..." Lots of questions with lots of participants somehow equates to "value," but it isn't. It's the most expensive, non-representative, small-sample size quantitative research one could possibly do. Focus groups are meant to be qualitative. Groups sizes should be small (6-8), discussion guides should be short (2-3 pages) and the moderator should know as much about the client and study objectives as possible, to follow the group where it can go, while still being relevant to the client's issues.

The recruiting has to be dead on. When we've had nightmares, it's due to the loose recruiting by the research company. It was a complete waste. (Sara Killeen, Nike Golf)

Bad groups I've observed ... have been more about a moderator who wasn't skilled and simply asked questions from a questionnaire-type guide and never probed "why" to any response. (Kathy Canady, The Buntin Group)

We [made] the mistake of trying to save costs by having the wrong personnel conduct the sessions. Either they were too inexperienced/lacking of research methods (Regional Marketing Managers) or they were too invested in the feedback and unknowingly affected the direction of the conversation (Operations, Store Manager). Never again!

Clients themselves are to blame for FGs "failing," some respondents said. The study sometimes is not thought out enough on the client side, especially when the objectives are not agreed upon. Sometimes the FG process goes well but clients refuse to listen, hearing only what they want to believe. Most striking, some respondents described outright misuses of FGs by clients.

Main "problem projects" I've experienced were when 1) team members weren't in sync with regard to the real objectives of the project and 2) preparation was lacking (e.g., expecting to gain useful information when all positionings or other stimuli have only small, subtle differences).

The only thing that gets in the way of effective use of qualitative research is a moderator who talks more than s/he listens, AND a management that doesn't listen to its consumers when they're speaking. (Susan Walsh, Hearst Magazines)

Very important – often we do focus groups when research is not the main objective. They definitely get in the way of good research. Example: the client wants to get in the room to “demonstrate” his product in a marketing sense, or people who shouldn't be behind the glass, who know the respondents, are there and we have to reveal who is watching the respondents – makes them less candid. [“Worst case”] When the clients hand-picked the respondents; the group of 5-6 clients all knew the respondents. We didn't know until the day before who would be in the room and who would be observing, and the whole group (clients + participants) all met for a photo shoot immediately after the group. It would have been better to just have a group meeting instead of trying to frame it as a research project. (Lisa Cooper, Fireman's Fund Insurance)

Focus group results gave valuable feedback, but internal business clients chose to go with their own ideas instead of thinking they knew best. Internal business clients probably were looking for validation at the start vs. going in with an open mind.

[“Worst case”] To prove a point to upper management or to determine the “winning” concept when there was little consistency in response across groups and markets.

Some members of management often argue that we won't learn anything new. Those same people will also say upon our return, “I could have told you that.” No respect for what the consumer has to say and how they articulate it.

The qualitative/quantitative balance

As noted earlier, these recent FG users tend to be doing a greater percentage of their research with quantitative methodology. One consequence of the “faster/cheaper” trend is that some clients who previously turned to qualitative research and FGs in particular now are using online quantitative research for a portion of their needs.

On the positive side, this move to online research may mean that they are using qualitative research when what they need is truly qualitative – insights rather than decisions based on a handful of FGs.

People depend on research more and more to assess strategic and creative ideas. Clients and agencies realize that quantitative techniques do not always lend themselves to analysis of such ideas. Therefore, qual seems to be regaining some relevance. (Madhavi Gupta, GSD&M)

Cost/time considerations. I can often do a quick Internet survey in much less time for much less money than focus groups.” (Jack Bookbinder, Kaiser Permanente)

Why do clients use traditional focus groups?

Focus groups are perhaps even more relevant than in the past, according to some respondents, because of the advantages that qualitative research in general provides. Qualitative insights and connection with consumers are needed more than ever, several asserted. Marketers are competing to stand out in an increasingly commoditized world and have also become more removed from “real” people. They want and need to know the “reasons why” consumers feel and behave as they do.

While other qualitative techniques may offer these advantages too, FGs are seen by some as an excellent approach for delivering insights and close-up views of consumers and business customers. Specific benefits of FGs respondents talked about include:

- Client comfort. Many clients are both familiar and satisfied with the FG process, respondents said. A number “enjoy,” even “love,” watching FGs. This comfort in turn makes it easier for advertiser and agency researchers to get acceptance for the use of FGs.
- “Cost-effective.” FGs are less expensive and more efficient than other qualitative methods, some said.
- Firsthand experience. Viewing FGs from behind the one-way mirror gives clients a “firsthand” feel for consumers and for their own customers. Viewers “get” it on an emotional level. Interestingly, this advantage was not mentioned for in-person depth interviews.
- The group behind the group. The experience of watching FGs together process has a value in itself. Normally, busy executives are brought together to focus, quite literally, on an issue, typically in an environment free of interruptions from the outside.

[Focus groups] allow everyone in attendance to see firsthand consumers' response. Makes it easier sometimes to get buy-in on next steps (e.g., the creative dept). (Robin Pearl, Estée Lauder)

Focus groups do provide a cost-effective means of exploring a number of topics on a given product category (albeit in probably not as much depth as they should be explored)... Financial considerations are very important. A lot of more “out of the box” approaches are more costly and require more time.

Our clients like to observe the groups. [It] helps when they see the customer firsthand. Also we are using videotapes for training and sometimes promotional (with participant permission) purposes.

Many researchers in our company prefer qualitative research because they find it more fun, like to travel, and enjoy the richness of information it produces.

Most people love groups. You get that up close and personal feeling. You're no longer just talking about the faceless “consumer.” (Julie Medalis, Sylvan Learning Center)

As with all techniques, it depends on the research objectives. In our case, it has been necessary to get directional measures – and for this we have used traditional focus groups. Also, a good video clip of respondents can be worth a lot more than 50 sheets of paper.... We use traditional groups to give us direction. We use them to delve into purchase processes and criteria, and to evaluate products and packaging. I also use them when my clients specifically request the methodology – as long as I believe it's appropriate. (Cyndi Boehm, Gates Corporation)

Time/logistics. Financial, most definitely. We can do groups much less expensively than any other technique. (Kathy Canady, The Buntin Group)

It's flexible and quick with immediate results when you walk out the door at the end of the last session. Great opportunity for us to brainstorm the implications and next steps. These don't take the place of traditional tracking studies or ethnographic work for us, but they remain an important tool in our mix of technique. (Kathy Canady, The Buntin Group)

Asked what they believe is FGs rightful role and when they use the technique, most respondents described what Robert Pearson of Office Depot calls “textbook” uses and Carol Stuckhardt of Hearst Magazines terms “presearch.” FGs are and should be used as a first step prior to quantitative research, for exploration rather than decision-making, respondents agreed. At this stage, clients may not even have a clear picture of what their problem is, Sara Killeen of Nike Golf said:

When we've used traditional focus groups, it was because we were not only having trouble defining the solution...we were also having trouble defining the problem. We needed to quit guessing, and have the consumer tell us their perspective.

Comments on specific uses include:

*Traditional groups are most useful **when exploring a new category** or in trying to understand the underlying drivers of consumer behavior. While quantitative is more powerful and has more weight in the organization, there is no substitute for having consumer quotes that explain the “why” behind the numbers. Marketers are so close to their business they often miss the obvious barriers to product trial which is usually very common sense based and so readily articulated by consumers!*

***In testing and or developing theories or hypotheses** to be tested in other ways. They are also essential in testing concepts, artwork, printed materials, etc. When we want to spend time in depth discussing an issue with a group. We also like to see the reactions of the participants and the group dynamics.*

***Early exploration of ideas to better understand hot buttons.** Insights from early product or category adopters helps in crafting alternatives to be developed.*

Sometimes it is truly to better understand the dynamics of a concept or idea, so that we can twist and turn the idea into something more motivating.

*[Concept] phraseology still needs to be studied before quant studies can be performed, etc.... Focus groups should be used to flesh out issues before a full quant study is conducted, and they should be used to show concepts and early iterations of products or advertising in order to get a feel for the gut reaction of the average consumer to your idea. **To test theories or wordage for a quant study.** (Susan Walsh, Hearst Magazines)*

***To physically show new products or advertising** and get visceral reaction to executions, or suggestions for improvement. To help your clients visualize their product being used by actual consumers. (Susan Walsh, Hearst Magazines)*

Exploratory research. Survey development. Confirmatory research. Disaster checks.

*They're great for initial explorations in an area, or for some phases of product research when you have a **product to fine-tune** and want people to see and touch and react to it (including media products)... We use traditional focus groups to raise/illuminate the issues or get an initial reading, then move into quantitative. For example, for new products, we may use focus groups to look at the market environment and gaps in met needs, and then use quantitative. (Isobel Osius, Meredith Corporation)*

Discovery, immersion, language generation, understanding, preliminary learning. (Barry Goldblatt, Church & Dwight Co. Inc.)

We use traditional groups when we want to back up depth information that was not revealed in a quantitative study.

*As they were from the outset, traditional focus groups are terrific for **"PREsearching" issues, consumer language, formulating objectives**, etc. prior to the conduct of quant research. Traditional groups are also great for putting a "face" on the consumer and bringing them "to life." Sounds corny, but marketers tend to forget that they're selling to HUMANS, not statistics.... Before we do major quant work, we have routinely conducted traditional focus groups: Good "presearch." (Carol Stuckhardt, Hearst Magazines)*

New ventures, update lists of customer perception statements, as a pre-step to quant. (Tom Flint, FedEx Services)

Use to probe emotional issues, to compare strategic ideas, to explore unknowns, to find ideas for strategies. Also anything that's not straightforward visually that can't be described online.... Last minute "check" of creative when there's no time for quant or concept's not fully formed yet.

Creative evaluation (use both – allows for perspective and confidence).... Focus groups let us: really dig in to the consumer mindset; get to WHY. Have key stakeholders buy into what was happening together and quickly. Develop better work. (Madhavi Gupta, GSD&M)

Other uses that go beyond research per se were mentioned by a few respondents. Video clips can be an effective training tool for internal personnel and useful for public relations purposes. For a retailer, FGs can be a loyalty tool in itself, since customers appreciate a store's concern for their views, one respondent said.

Frankly, they have a dual purpose – true qualitative research and customer satisfaction/loyalty. Those who attend are extremely pleased with being invited, getting the opportunity to voice their opinions, and are impressed that a company cares enough.

On the negative side, client comfort with focus groups can prevent researchers from being able to introduce new techniques to their companies, some respondents said.

There is a reluctance to try new methods due to resistance within the broader organization.... Focus groups are used because people in general understand how to use them. There is reluctance to experiment due to the challenges of introducing new methodologies to the broader marketing and management organization. Yes, these get in the way of the research.

I believe they [traditional focus groups] are somewhat overused due to staff comfort with them.

Sometimes we try to convince them to do other things instead as being a more effective use. However, for some, traditional groups are familiar and "safe." (Kathy Canady, The Buntin Group)

Non-research problems with focus groups

Practical and/or political considerations play a role in clients' decision not to use FGs, even among these past-year users.

- **Money.** Online quantitative research is seen as cheaper and clients may not be appreciative of the quality differences, some respondents said. Since quantification is needed with qualitative research, some companies would rather skip to that phase, leaving out any qualitative research.
- **Time and money.** These are interrelated reasons: attending in-person focus groups take a lot of both, resources that companies are short on today. Remote viewing (which also costs money) is not necessarily accepted as a good substitute.
- **Boredom.** Some observers find the FG format too "static." Perhaps after watching FGs for years, they want something more exciting.
- **Past problems.** Internal clients who – rightfully or wrongfully – were disappointed with previous FG studies may veto the use of the method.

Time is the enemy. No one wishes to commit to the travel and sometimes this restricts the willingness to go to more distant markets. My clients aren't as interested in video-technology, still feel being there firsthand somehow enhances their experience.

Tight travel budgets prevent many clients from participating in the qualitative research thus limiting its value.

Focus groups can be expensive and time-consuming to plan and execute. We are resource-constrained on both – therefore, there has to be a good reason to conduct them.

Start with budget, which always shapes the decision on what methodologies are used. Then add individual preferences, such as a refusal to do focus groups because of a past negative experience. Throw in time pressures and naive research users who have heard that the Internet is faster and cheaper than anything else. Then add the fact that you generally have to do quantitative anyway, to back up the business decision, and it can be difficult to talk people into seeing the value of focus groups as a first step in the research process.... Financial, time, personal preference, naïvete about research generally. (Isobel Osius, Meridith Corporation)

Sometimes it is a battle to get marketers/salespeople to agree to focus groups, because they "seem so static and boring." What I've realized, the problem is this: [some] marketers and salespeople have a very highly developed sense of entertainment, and they're simply bored by the process. Even though focus groups work (if they're done right) and valuable info is gained by

them, some of them have trouble sitting still long enough to realize that they're working. [Because of heightened demands and busy schedules, as well.] This is probably the longest these people have sat in one room in the past 10 years! The MTV effect is definitely happening here as well, as more and more executives expect flashing lights, a grooving soundtrack and special effects at all times. So, they get pulled in by all the exciting bells and whistles that some companies offer and ignore the depth of info they COULD be getting with traditional focus groups. They still work, it's just that today's executives are less capable of listening.... I will continue to argue in favor of groups, but I can't say I'll start winning more arguments any time soon. (Susan Walsh, Hearst Magazines)

Focus groups can be expensive and time-consuming to plan and execute. We are resource-constrained on both – therefore, there has to be a good reason to conduct them.

One tool in the toolbox

This description of traditional focus groups as just one of many techniques was repeated by several respondents. FGs are and should be used when they are appropriate to the objectives of the particular research study. They are not meant to be an all-purpose approach; the fact that other qualitative techniques may be more appropriate in certain cases does not mean FGs is a bad method.

They are one of many techniques available – it all depends on the issues you are attempting to address.... Convenient. My research department is capable of addressing most issues with this technique.... We do what is right to address the issue. The only reason we are so comfortable with traditional qualitative is because my research group skews older (50+) so they are experienced enough to be able to address most research issues in this way. We consider focus groups first.

I feel that we continue to improve techniques and methods we use within focus groups, but they are still just as relevant to our needs as in the past.... They will be [one] of many tools within our qualitative toolbox.

Variations of group interviews – dyads, triads, mini-groups – and individual depth interviews (in person or by phone) are qualitative alternatives, which some respondents prefer at times. These techniques have been around a long time too, putting them in the “traditional” category along with focus groups. For some clients, the issue is not either/or – they use a combination on an individual project or over the course of the year. “I don't see it as focus groups vs. IDIs but just “qualitative,” one respondent wrote.

Advantages of IDIs and smaller group interviews cited by some respondents include:

- Greater depth because each respondent is interviewed at greater length than in a FG, more participation by each respondent.
- More appropriate for sensitive topics.

- Avoiding group bias, dominant respondent problem of FGs. Interestingly, while this issue has often been mentioned in articles over the years, only a few study participants brought it up as a FG negative here.
- Better for communications research on advertising and concepts, since reactions in real life are typically on an individual level.
- Better for executive level respondents who don't have time or desire to be part of a larger group or do not want to travel to a meeting location.
- Sometimes the only practical choice, e.g., when respondents are geographically spread out and FG recruiting would be impossible.
- Less expensive than FGs because of fewer respondents and, in the case of telephone depth interviews, no travel costs.

In-depth interviews in person give a more complete picture due in part to the interviewer's ability to observe discrepancies between what the respondent says and what can be observed on site.

Once we've decided on qualitative, the decision comes down to small (one-on-one, triad) vs. larger (mini-groups or groups). This choice is usually driven by the sensitivity of the topic, the need to provide complete privacy, the desire for group interaction, and the potential for group bias. Recently used a mix of groups and IDIs to explore issues of race, class, and education. The combination was critical in seeing that people were extremely uncomfortable speaking in what they feared were racist or classist terms. But the same concerns emerged in both settings, helping us feel they were real and powerful. In the past, have used a mix of groups and IDIs for creative testing, as a way to limit and assess the effect of the group on responses. (Julie Medalis, Sylvan Learning Center)

We don't use traditional focus groups as much as we used to. We have reduced the size of our traditional type groups to 4 or 5 respondents. With 8 to 10 we find that we are paying for several people to "hang out" in the group and those that will talk do. Smaller groups are easier to manage and, more frequently, all respondents participate.

If seeking understanding of core emotional benefits surrounding a product, laddering techniques are best used apart from a traditional group setting. Marketing communication checks (e.g., advertising, logos) are also not a good fit with traditional [focus groups].

One-on-ones are more times than not the better choice for b2b research: wanting to get the "facts" and not the face nor body language nor interactive responses; also these respondents are not likely located in close proximity to each other. (Tom Flint, FedEx Services)

I think focus groups should be one tool in the toolbox. Personally, I don't think this is a good way to get detailed design input, though they are often used for this purpose. I also don't think it is a good way to get information on sensitive topics in which individuals may not be totally honest in a group setting. I doubt they would be accurate at predicting the success or acceptance of truly innovative concepts. People tend to want what they have and then enhance it. It isn't until they can really see something in action or use it that they realize how much they wanted it. I think exploration with

individuals and small interactive discussions are more suited to true innovation, as well as observational research.

Often a group environment can move individuals towards the thoughts of the "leader" in the group. They find common ground too quickly, and it may not reflect the range of opinions on a topic.

Among the newer or newly popular alternative approaches, ethnography sparks the most interest as an alternative and, in some cases, a complement to FGs. Several clients said they have used ethnography successfully and several others talked about wanting to use it. Referring to its current popularity, Kathy Canady of The Buntin Group indicated that "new techniques have become 'the rage,' i.e., ethnographic push."

Observing people in their own environments offers a more "honest" view of what people really do, rather than relying on their verbal reports, some respondents stated. Interviews in respondents' home and other natural settings also put people at ease and encourage greater candor than the "forced" facility environment, some respondents said.

With the observational research we were able to observe without the "respondents" knowing we were observing or what we wanted them to do. Sometimes people in focus groups try and give what they think is the right answer we are looking for.

The camera doesn't lie – observation sometimes speaks volumes as to how someone truly feels or uses a particular product. I wish I could do more of this. (Kurt Lowell, L'Oreal)

Our marketing team had been conducting almost 100% focus group research but their ability to anticipate the competition was poor. After doing some ethnographic research last year that resulted in great insights they are investing more in research outside of focus groups. I think the biggest barrier to effective use of qualitative research is using the wrong method for the research questions.

Identification of new consumers' needs – ethnography research is better. Understanding of potential product issues after launch (in-home visits could be a good idea)... Interaction with the product and the real environment situation. (Soledad Miguel, HJ Heinz)

Clients want more true/in-depth insight into the consumer. We believe this is more readily achievable outside the "forced" environment of a focus group facility. (Jackie Bunnell, Callahan Creek)

Some of the advantages of ethnography can be integrated into the FG process less expensively.

Have set up mini-groups in which consumers were asked to create collages at home related to the given topic, or take photos of the environment in which the product was used. Can then do content analysis of what they bring to the interview. It's a pretty cost-effective way of getting some more emotional/motivational and ethnographic insight.

Another respondent also explained that a variety of techniques within traditional focus groups can enhance their value.

I prefer to combine homework, pre-work and/or in-depth interviews with the focus groups for more robust information.... I have found that homework in addition to the focus group better prepares and engages respondents. I also like combining ethnographies and focus groups for more robust data and confidence in what we're seeing.

Online qualitative research, while not used by as many of the respondents, is seen as offering several key advantages. Like phone one-on-ones, it is a less expensive way of interviewing people all around the country, including hard-to-reach respondents. Logistically, online qualitative can be easier to execute than FGs, too. A few respondents specified a preference for bulletin boards over live chats; this suggests that there are differences among different types of online qualitative research.

If a lot of regionality is needed, then perhaps online focus groups or bulletin boards are a better choice. Also, if the target is so obscure that it would be ineffective to try to recruit enough in one region to have groups. (Susan Walsh, Hearst Magazines)

Online bulletin boards are quick and the input can be much richer and more in-depth, if done right. (Isobel Osius, Meredith Corporation)

Moving ahead, I do think the nature of our qualitative work will evolve, with more participation by Web, more online, etc. This is more easy to swallow in terms of time commitment and money. The trade-off is that you lose some immediacy of feeling, and the ability to sit as a client group to think and react together. (Julie Medalis, Sylvan Learning Center)

The future

This research, then, suggests that rather than becoming research “dinosaurs,” traditional focus groups may remain a – or the – major qualitative method in the near future. Clients find value in the process, are comfortable with it and think it is efficient in many cases. However, focus groups’ qualitative share of market also seems likely to decrease as a wider array of techniques, both “traditional” and new, are used by clients. Such a shift may result from greater awareness on the part of market researchers and their clients that focus groups are one tool in a diverse toolbox of techniques, to be used instead of or in addition to other techniques when it suits the objectives of the research.

Like any good piece of research, our work is not complete without first assessing our findings within a larger marketing context. There’s much to derive from this study. We were somewhat pleasantly surprised to see among our respondents that contrary to some of the earlier expressed hypotheses, focus groups were not always the “catch-all” panacea that has become synonymous for all marketing research among some in the popular press. The end users we studied have strongly defined and articulated opinions regarding the benefits and limitations of the methodology. They recognize that focus groups, when conducted with a skilled moderator and among a well-recruited sample, can deliver breakthrough insights and go beyond the limitations of quantitative research by providing a deeper context from which marketers can assess concepts and ideas.

Furthermore, for us, these findings suggest that despite the significant inroads that Internet data collection has made within the realm of marketing research as a whole, the online world is not an immediate threat towards replacing or shifting much of what has long been the place of the traditional focus group to a web enabled world. To the contrary, our respondents continue to place a significant onus on the uniquely personal interaction of the traditional focus group in providing a flexibility and human capacity to put a literal face behind an attitude that the online world is still hard pressed to replicate.

The findings of our work also continue to reinforce some other important and inherent advantages that traditional focus groups will continue to have over quantitative approaches and even other more expensive or extensive qualitative methods. Much of this again ties back to what we earlier described as focus groups' outward simplicity and sensory accessibility. That is, the ease of understanding that can be derived when a client or management observes those "magic moments" of focus groups, where a participant articulates an emotion or idea that resonates with the rest of the group, and for that matter with those behind the glass, who capture that moment as a justification of or springboard towards positioning a brand.

This remains a unique attribute of the focus group, because it is there in front of all to see and experience. It is not buried within reams of cross tabulations or regression models. It is not lurking somewhere among a full day's worth of IDIs or intercept interviews, but is packaged neatly within a 90-minute to- two-hour time frame, exposed and often preserved in its rawest and purest form for many layers of management to see and easily grasp. The focus group by the nature of its simplicity and its ability to deliver those instant insights seems to have reserved an enduring place in both marketing research and popular culture as our society continues to evolve (or some may say, devolve) to an increasingly sound-byte driven world. The metaphor of focus group as television program continues to have relevance. Even for those who have begun to embrace ethnography or other observational research techniques, the focus group still remains as a succinct but still voyeuristic window into the mindset of the elusive and often otherwise faceless customer.

But all is not perfect. Some lament the continued trend towards diminishing response rates, cited by some as a hindrance to effective quantitative work, as a threat towards the efficacy of the traditional focus group. In the qualitative world, the extensive use of facility respondent databases is both devil and godsend. It takes on the latter role in its ability to quickly deliver a group of ostensibly qualified focus group participants in a typically cost effective fashion. However, on the other side, it rears its ugly head as the flag bearer for that ugly American known as the "professional respondent", one whose relative anonymity among hundreds or thousands of quantitative subjects, can be amplified to the point of nullifying the findings in a traditional focus group setting.

And what of that traditional setting? While our respondents did not overwhelmingly speak to concerns about the less than natural setting of a traditional focus group facility and its potential to hinder open and honest exchanges of ideas from group participants, we did observe some weak signals. Some of the shift towards ethnography, or IDIs, can be perceived as admissions of the limitations of focus groups and a quest towards a better way towards more open and honest qualitative insights.

Lastly, and perhaps most significantly, another pervasive theme of this study is found in an almost ubiquitous feeling that we often minimize the impact of focus groups by expecting too much of them. This manifests itself in a number of ways. We see it when clients try to force feed too much into a traditional group. It can take the form of decreasing budgets limiting the number of groups, or failing to go beyond them for a more comprehensive quantitative validation.

But looking beyond the symptoms, one can find a disturbing and unifying theme that ostensibly has little to do with the methodology itself. That theme can best be expressed as a serious question that all researchers must ask themselves, particularly now in an especially challenged business environment... Why don't the ultimate organizational decision makers get it? Are we deluding ourselves and overestimating the value of traditional focus groups or marketing research as a whole? Or, is it simply our inability to articulate the benefits of the research? This is a larger question that this particular study did not seek to answer, but as we see traditional focus groups maintain their place, yet not grow in stature, it is one that we as a profession perhaps are harder pressed than ever, to answer.