



TAKE YOUR PICK

WHILE MARKETERS CONTINUE TO RELY ON TRADITIONAL FOCUS GROUPS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH, NEW ALTERNATIVES ARE BURSTING ONTO THE SCENE

BY MICHAEL J. McDERMOTT



WHAT'S ALL THIS TALK ABOUT the demise of the traditional focus group? Dig a little deeper and it appears that the buzz is blown out of proportion. Yes, exploding bandwidth and impressive advances in digital technologies are making all kinds of innovative alternatives to the conventional focus group feasible, accessible, and in some cases more cost-effective. But even the staunchest champions of these new tools concede that the focus group continues to play a critical role in qualitative research, and that's not likely to change anytime soon.

The Spring 2012 GreenBook Research Industry Trends (GRIT) Report projected a slight increase in the proportion of qualitative versus quantitative research undertaken last year, but more than half the respondents expected their proportions to remain unchanged. Many brand marketers have seen declines in their overall research budgets over the past five or 10 years, and in some cases focus groups and other qualitative methodologies took the bigger hit. For example, her allocations for focus groups and their alternatives have "definitely" declined, says Theresa Lewis, vice president of market research at Wyndham Worldwide Corp.'s Wyndham Hotel Group, but the overall research budget has also shrunk over the years. Even when budgets recover, "it doesn't always go back

- The traditional focus group has ongoing value to marketers, but its use as a tool in qualitative research is changing.
- Ethnographic deep-dive methodology offers more insight than what was available in the past.
- Pilot programs are gaining traction as an alternative.
- Researchers are choosing evidence over testimony.
- Technology is enabling innovative approaches to consumer research.
- Mobile apps can bring an added dimension to the innovative approaches to consumer research that researchers are embracing.



to the same split for qualitative and quantitative,” Lewis says. “It’s just driven by the demands of the business. A lot of times you want to do qualitative, but there’s no time or money. Qualitative is trending down, but in a perfect world it would still be 25 percent.”

The GRIT survey did identify a slight ebbing of face-to-face focus groups and in-depth interviews (IDIs), down about 6 percent in 2011, but they still remain the most widely used qualitative research methods by far. Eighty-two percent of research buyers/clients and 77 percent of research providers/suppliers used traditional focus groups in 2011, and it was the qualitative methodology used most often by 58 percent on the client side and 48 percent on the supplier side.

“The traditional focus group continues to be an area of focus in our qualitative research efforts,” says Jennifer Young, senior director of advertising and research at Robert Half International. “The opportunity to hear verbatim feedback and interaction, as opposed to online and some of the other emerging alternatives, is still really engaging from a reaction perspective.” The ability to take conversations down different paths is another valuable aspect of the traditional focus group, Lewis adds. If the conversation takes a tangential but interesting turn, it’s easy to pursue it. Sometimes entirely new revelations, outside the initial scope of the session, come up, and that’s like finding gold for the researcher.

As president of Egg Strategy Chicago, a brand strategy and innovation firm, and Over the Shoulder, a smartphone-based research initiative, Tom Trenta might be said to be in the business of dislodging the traditional focus group, but he candidly acknowledges the technique’s ongoing value to marketers. “Focus groups continue to play a critical part in most of our clients’ innovation and strategy processes. For some of our new clients, it’s a too-rare chance to see their target audience in real life and to hear how their target thinks about their brands, their products, and their categories,” he says.

Some marketers use focus groups for specific strategic purposes and in conjunction with or as a precursor to quantitative research. Wyndham’s Lewis favors focus groups as an effective tool for qualifying and clarifying language with consumers at the outset of brand repositioning programs and new product launches. Doing that first “provides us with certainty that we are speaking the same language when we go out

and do our quantitative study,” she says. “I also believe that it’s helpful to get the brand marketers in the room while the focus group is taking place. They can sit, listen, and hear what the consumers are saying, then take what they’ve learned back and share it with their team.”

Moving Away from Tradition

Support for the traditional focus group as a useful qualitative research tool is widespread, although not ubiquitous, in the marketing community. But many believe the ways in which it will be used are changing, and its importance may be waning. “We still sit down face-to-face with our customers, and I imagine we always will,” says Ed Martin, director of mobile marketing at the Hershey Co. and chair of the ANA Research and Measurement Committee. “But with big data on one end and ethnography on the other, my guess is the role of the traditional focus group behind the one-way mirror will lessen over time, displaced by the new approaches technology is enabling.”

Marketers are candid about the drawbacks and limitations of focus groups as well as their benefits. Lewis Oberlander, senior vice president of worldwide marketing research at Warner Bros. Pictures, says the biggest problem today is the same as it was 20 years ago: the risk of getting a rogue participant. “You get that one individual in the group who skews everything and makes the entire session go astray. It’s the moderator’s job to get that under control, but when it happens, it still taints the rest of the opinions in the room,” he says. Young agrees: “You have to worry about who recruited the candidates and the quality of insight they’ll provide. Clearly, some turn out to be rejects, and it’s hard to screen for that in advance.”

Other baggage weighing down traditional focus groups includes logistics, cost, wide variability in the quality of moderators, and the uninspiring facilities in which they are held. “Why is it a rule that focus group facilities are some of the most uninteresting spaces that exist?” wonders Malinda Sanna, founder and owner of the New York City-based market research firm Spark, which created Sensory Safari, an immersive exercise that uses sensory stimuli to evoke genuine reactions to ideas, as an alternative to traditional focus groups. Most facilities provide “a bland, sterile, and unnatural setting” that “sucks the life

out of people's energy," she contends. Instead, Sanna scouts locations such as galleries, loft spaces, and hotels for Spark's research events, and her approach has won clients like Unilever, Coca-Cola, Starbucks, and Time Warner Cable.

Spark's Sensory Safari, which aims to draw out deeper, more meaningful responses from research participants by having them create collages and engage in other forms of artistic expression, is just one approach in an array of new qualitative tools available to researchers these days. Many of them build on or complement the kind of results researchers have long been getting from traditional focus groups, but some of them are breaking entirely new ground.

►CASE STUDY

THE DEEP DIVE

Sense Worldwide transforms brands by diving in at home

Sense Worldwide, a London-based brand consultancy, specializes in transforming brands. Its qualitative research method of choice is an ethnographic deep dive with what it calls "extreme consumers," basically the antithesis of the "average" consumer most focus groups target. The venue of choice for deep dives is the home environment, and the fruits of that approach can be seen in an integrated marketing campaign for Diageo's Ketel One brand of vodka that grew out of a chance observation during a deep dive.

"We spent an evening in the apartment of a music composer, and he had an interesting object on his mantelpiece," Brian Millar, director of strategy at Sense Worldwide, recounts. "When the researcher asked him about it, he launched into a half-hour discourse on the merits of cut-throat razors. They're difficult to use. Most people would never bother. You have to acquire a skill. You choose mastery over convenience. In that one interview, we got to a fundamental consumer truth about our market: their love of the mastery of difficult things."

That finding resonated with the Nolet family, makers of Ketel One, who go to extraordinary lengths to distill the spirit and have a great affinity for others drawn to do the difficult and follow their own path.

"A half-hour digression became a cornerstone of a global brand and led straight into a communication and activation route," Millar says. "That just wasn't going to happen over snacks in front of a one-way mirror."

—M.J.M.



Researchers polled for the 2012 GRIT report expressed strong interest in innovative methodologies, mobile research applications, social media research, and online application methods. Almost 40 percent of respondents (a combination of client-side and supplier-side researchers) said they were introducing new qualitative methodologies into their mix. And some new platforms are already making the transition to the mainstream, says Susan Saurage-Altenloh,

president of Houston-based Saurage Research Inc. and president of the Qualitative Research Consultants Association.

"One of the key nontraditional platforms, online discussion boards, has now become traditional," she says. The platform uses threaded messaging technology to allow respondents to answer questions; post messages, thoughts, images, and video; and respond to stimuli posted by other participants, all at their own convenience. "Clients can view the interaction in a virtual backroom, as well as comment on responses or ask for additional feedback from the participants," Saurage-Altenloh says. "Without this asynchronous platform, we would not be able to generate the quality of insights that clients demand in today's business world." Other qualitative research tools gaining traction as alternatives to the traditional focus group include mobile apps, webcam focus groups, online journaling, online communities, and various ethnographic deep dives that still use face-to-face interactions but in new ways.

Tom Denari, president of Young & Laramore, an Indianapolis-based full-service agency, is a proponent of the deep-dive methodology and believes the only time a traditional focus group should be used is to gather initial hypotheses, possible directions, or potential uses of a product or service. Its fatal flaw — one it shares with some other research methods — is that it "puts consumers in relatively artificial or uncomfortable settings that likely inhibit them from revealing what they are thinking or feeling on a deeper level," he says. In this respect, the traditional focus group fails because it's not enough to know what people buy or would like to buy. "We need to know what they care about, what they believe in, and what's really important to them," he says. "If we don't know who these people really are, persuading them will be very difficult."

Young & Laramore's approach embraces ethnographic research, a "consumer immersion" process it prefers to conduct through one-on-one interviews in the subject's home. "It starts with the observation that people aren't rational beings, particularly when it comes to making purchase decisions," Denari says.

His goal is to uncover motivations that exist just below the surface and actually drive behavior. Other tools the agency uses include specially designed journals ("Little Truth Books") that draw out subjects' true feelings and "friendship groups" that add two close friends

Q&A WITH COMBE'S RANDY BERKOWITZ

As vice president of market research for Combe Inc., Randy Berkowitz is tasked with providing data that drives marketing decisions for a stable of health and personal care brands, including Just for Men hair color products, Vagisil feminine care products, and Sea-Bond denture products. Privately held Combe was founded almost 65 years ago, and its product lineup consists of long-established brands. Berkowitz finds that getting the most from qualitative research these days requires a combination of tried-and-true techniques and cutting-edge technologies. Here, he shares his insights.

Q. HOW IMPORTANT IS THE GENERIC CONCEPT OF THE FOCUS GROUP TO COMBE'S QUALITATIVE RESEARCH EFFORTS?

A. Very important. Focus groups are where we generate hypotheses and come up with ideas. Then we use quantitative research to test those ideas. It's the foundation of our research efforts.

Q. THERE IS A LOT OF INNOVATION TAKING PLACE IN THIS SPACE, INCLUDING ALTERNATIVES TO THE TRADITIONAL FOCUS GROUP. ARE YOU USING ANY OF THESE NEW TOOLS?

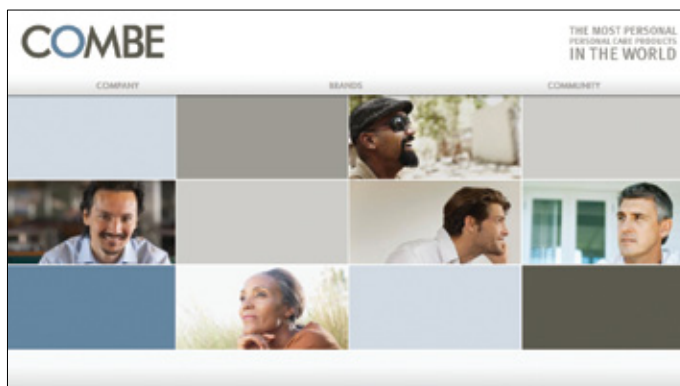
A. One I've used recently is an online focus group, with six people located in different parts of the country. Each participant could see the others and the moderator, but they were all in their own homes. It's something we had looked at several years ago, but the technology really wasn't there yet. It's come a long way, and now it really does work.

Q. WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF USING AN ONLINE FOCUS GROUP VS. A TRADITIONAL ONE?

A. Logistics and cost are big ones. Online makes it possible to assemble a geographically and demographically diverse group with no travel expenses involved. We can observe from our computers individually or gather as a group in our videoconferencing room and watch it on the big screen. We can interact with the moderator via instant messaging, with no notes being passed into the room disturbing the flow of the focus group.

Q. HOW ELSE ARE YOU USING TECHNOLOGY IN YOUR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH EFFORTS THESE DAYS?

A. I recently needed to find one-on-one interview subjects with a very specific set of brand-user characteristics. It was the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack, and I never would have been able to find enough subjects in one location. The Internet gives me the ability to target at a very high level, and with the quality of video now available, online one-on-one interviews can be very effective. We are also looking at testing a smartphone app and using moderated self-contained communities on the Internet over an extended period of time. — M.J.M.



of the subject's choosing to the in-home, one-on-one interview.

While Denari doesn't typically expect campaigns to come directly out of these research efforts, sometimes they do. In the case of Farm Bureau Insurance, the research revealed that people are so confounded by insurance and what it covers that they don't even want to think about it. One research team member reported that his respondent had no idea about his coverage and simply shrugged his shoulders and knocked on wood. "Sure enough, almost everyone had a similar story to tell, and the 'Stop Knocking on Wood' campaign for Farm Bureau Insurance was born," Denari says. The campaign included strategy, research, creative, media planning and buying, and digital, website, and social media, and it succeeded in reenergizing a familiar brand in a crowded, low-interest category.

Evidence vs. Testimony

Margaret J. King is a cultural analyst and director of Philadelphia-based Cultural Studies & Analysis, a think tank that studies human perception, thinking, and behavior by understanding shared cultural values. She says it is "almost impossible to get anything decently informative from the outcomes" of traditional focus groups, and she thinks any alternative that facilitates deeper penetration is a good thing. The quest is to find ways to get legitimate answers that explain why people buy things, and she believes the "exclusively legitimate way" to find this out is to see what people do when actively faced with a real choice, for real money, on the ground, in real time.

"This is evidence, and it differs markedly from testimony, which is what people say about how they bought something or whether they might buy it in some imaginary future scenario," King asserts. The real problem is that "90 percent of participants swear they will buy anything," when what they really mean is only that they want the option to buy, she adds. "Lee Iacocca famously said that no focus group ever told him to build a minivan. People must actually see and feel and measure what's out there to do anything about it as buyers."

That may be the most meaningful value-add that new alternatives to the traditional focus group represent. Web-based surveys, pilot programs, virtual focus groups on social media platforms, and mobile apps can be effective at taking the social stigma or “press” out of group-table situations if they pose the right prompts, but responses are still guided and limited by the way they are evoked or phrased. “You can’t get to the answers you want by asking direct questions; people studies don’t work that way,” King says. “Buying behavior is a business of modeling known

groups. The results have generally aligned with our expectations, but there are always a few surprises. There have been some interesting findings from the panels.” She adds that it is important to take a close look at how much time participants spent on the panels when evaluating this input.

Young is also a proponent of pilot programs and thinks marketers in virtually every category can benefit from them. Their primary advantage over focus groups is the one King calls out: the ability to measure actual rather than professed behavior. Pilot programs allow marketers to try out new ideas with reduced risk, which can result in less organizational resistance internally. If the program merits a full-scale rollout, the feedback and buying behavior of customers participating in the pilot can be used to tweak the final product or service, and best practices developed during the trial period may speed time-to-market and boost the ultimate return on investment.

Trending Now: Mobile Ethnography

Mobile apps can bring an added dimension to the kind of ethnographic deep dives that more and more researchers are embracing. Just 7 percent of client-side researchers and 14 percent of supplier-side researchers said they were using mobile ethnography when GRIT researchers surveyed them in 2011, but 31 percent and 43 percent, respectively, said they planned to start in 2012. What’s more, when GRIT researchers asked survey respondents for its soon-to-be-released 2013 report on what research techniques they would choose as specialty areas if they were creating their own research company, 75 percent specified mobile ethnography.

That comes as no surprise to Trenta, who launched Over the Shoulder in 2009 after years of in-facility research and after testing every mainstream social media channel as a potential research platform. The app runs on all Apple and Android devices and allows researchers to live “in the pocket” of their target audiences. Trenta says smartphone ethnography provides three benefits that far exceed focus groups for exploratory research:

- Unprecedented access to the ordinary moments in people’s regular lives. “Rather than bringing a mom to a focus group to talk for an hour about her dinner routine, she pauses for

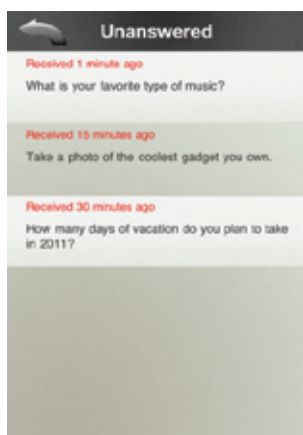
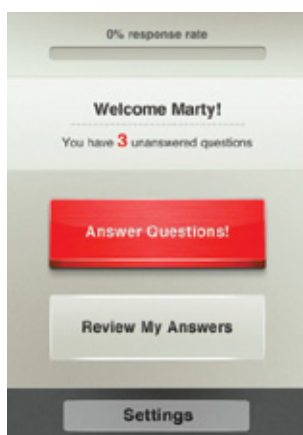
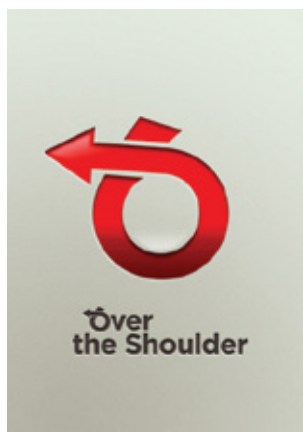
BEST PRACTICES FOR ALTERNATIVE FOCUS GROUP STRATEGIES FROM EGG STRATEGY’S TOM TRENTA AND uSAMP’S YAN HURLBUT



- Recognize new methodologies not just as variations on the focus group but as new tools to gain access to a new level of insights.
- Find methodologies based on behaviors consumers already embrace (like using smartphones and social media).
- Do demos to see how new tools really work.
- Don’t cling to one methodology.
- Recognize the two types of suppliers: tech/data providers and research strategists.
- Know which type of supplier you need and which one you are hiring.

human values and behavior, not overhearing one brilliant-sounding remark that may or may not be on target.”

Most marketers have already added some digital alternatives to traditional focus groups to their qualitative research mix, especially web-based surveys and panels. “The logistics of the focus group and getting all the data points can be a barrier to entry,” Robert Half’s Young says. “In our web-based surveys, we are getting a wider perspective and more data points, based on response rates, and they provide more timeliness than traditional focus



Over the Shoulder, a mobile app that works on iOS and Android, launched in 2009 after years of in-facility research and testing. It provides researchers with access where they previously had little.

a moment in the midst of her actual dinner routine to answer questions about what she is doing right at that moment," he says. The technology opens a window into places market researchers could never access before — restaurants during happy hour, upscale clubs at 2 a.m., workplaces, bathrooms, bedrooms.

- Long-term engagements with your target audience. Most Over the Shoulder studies last seven to 10 days, but several have lasted for many months, allowing researchers to get to know their participants in ways one-time meetings could never match.

- The honesty that comes from talking to no one. Even the best interviewer brings his or her own influence into a research session, Trenta says, but participants in Over the Shoulder studies do not know to whom they are talking, and the app has no gallery or way to review answers. "As a result, people speak with a level of honesty that continues to surprise us," he says. "This has proven to be especially useful for brands that face issues of social acceptability or those that are quite personal — alcohol, nicotine, personal care, money, relationships."

As the GRIT figures cited above suggest, mobile may well turn out to be the breakout platform among the new crop of digital qualitative research tools. "The trend to move from computer-based online research to mobile is picking up fast," says Yan Hurlbut, vice president of client services and programming at uSamp, a Encino, Calif.-based provider of online market research panels and SaaS technology for global market research. "The mobile environment can collect real-time experiences — store check-ins, photos, location verification, bar code scanning of products purchased — without relying on participant recall. With the popularity of smartphones across all demographics, it is a research tool that you should watch out for."

Into the Future

Notably, Over the Shoulder's Trenta does not see smartphone ethnography, or any other purely digital methodologies, replacing focus group research, and he believes nothing can replace the intimacy of a great face-to-face interview. For most of its clients, Egg Strategy Chicago deploys a combination of smartphone ethnography and individual interviews. "Rather than spending the first part of our research session trying to uncover what people do with their lives, we now

enter those conversations with a depth of knowledge about what they do," he says. "And now our strategists can focus their efforts on understanding *why* they do those things."

Hershey's Martin appears to be in the majority of marketers when he speculates about a future for qualitative research that is decidedly more digital and less reliant on conventional focus groups. But there are dissenters, and even those who are confident about a mostly digital future admit it's tough to predict how long or how difficult that journey might be.

Asked where he sees the trend going in the future, Warner Bros.' Oberlander says he would throw a dart. "We still have some purists out there, and people who just like eating the M&M's in the focus group," he quips. He also notes that for the type of research Warner Bros. conducts, the ability to screen movie clips and promos on a big-screen TV remains an advantage traditional focus groups have over digital alternatives. Still, he admits that when it comes to reaching younger demographics, digital is coming on like gangbusters. "If you are speaking to that population, I do think there will certainly be growing use of the alternatives, and I imagine they will go more in the mobile/tablet direction, driven by technology trends," Oberlander says.

Robert Half's Young says she struggles with this question. "There is value from an engagement perspective in that face-to-face exchange and hearing verbatim what they have to say," she says. "But we live in such a digital age, and the young demographic is so engaged with the technology that it's hard to get them to look up from their screens."

Given the scope of the traditional focus group's entrenchment in the qualitative research space, and the dynamic growth of mobile and other new tools notwithstanding, it seems likely that the one-way mirrors, moderators, and M&M's are not going to fade from the scene in the foreseeable future. As Martin observes, "Getting folks to break out of their 'this is the way we've always done research' mentality is going to be a challenge. Whenever something new comes along, it takes time to educate people and to get buy-in from the brands."

But digital will continue to make inroads, he adds, and the face-to-face manifestations of qualitative research that remain will become more ethnographic, providing marketers with deeper, more meaningful, and more actionable insights than has been the case in the past. ■