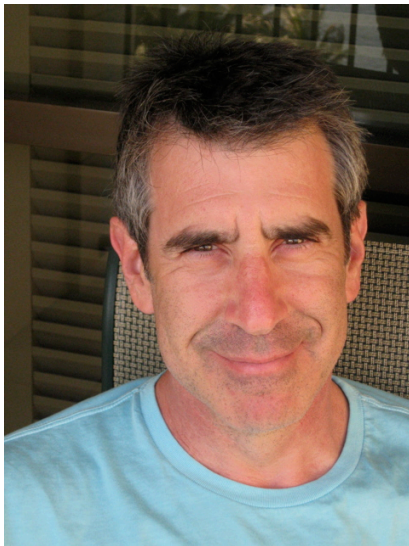


# A Right Brain Approach to Focus Groups

*Eight guidelines for maximizing understanding*







Jeff Hirsch is the Founder and President of The Right Brain Studio in Studio City, California. He is an accomplished marketing innovator and highly skilled moderator.

His business-building strategies and new product ideas have touched the vast majority of the U.S. population and generated hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues for prestigious consumer-oriented companies such as Pepsi, General Mills, Johnson & Johnson, Brown Forman, Harrah's Entertainment, Dial, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Anheuser-Busch, Disney and many others.

His contagious enthusiasm isn't limited to work. Jeff is an avid reader, cyclist, gym rat, filmgoer and music lover. You'll find over 6,000 songs on his iPod ranging from Verdi and the Kinks to Count Basie and the Dandy Warhols and beyond. His rock band regularly plays in the Los Angeles area. Jeff is strongly committed to social responsibility, and currently serves on the Board of Directors for Enrichment Works, a non-profit organization working to inspire learning in Los Angeles schools through theater. He has volunteered his time for numerous other education-oriented initiatives and local community efforts.

Jeff started his career at DKG Advertising in New York City. He was subsequently recruited by one of his clients, Brown-Forman, to work in Brand Management. He then returned to the advertising business, joining Campbell-

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Now more than ever, qualitative research can -- and *should* -- play a major role in company's marketing efforts. True, a plethora of exciting new research technologies and methods have emerged in the past several years. The ability to conduct quantitative research quickly and cheaply online, tracking brainwave responses or biofeedback in response to marketing communications and other techniques should indeed inspire us to reevaluate how marketing budgets are allocated.

Still, there is no substitute for the low tech, face-to-face, highly personal, in the moment, dynamic interaction with consumers provided by qualitative research.

The keys are honesty, creativity, open-mindedness, and most importantly, the acknowledgement that focus groups aren't designed to give you "the answer," but to provide the rich, human, emotionally based understanding and direction to move forward. When qualitative research is well conceived, well executed and used appropriately, it's the closest you can get to the consumer.

#### Eight Guidelines for Maximizing Understanding

Focus groups are very effective if managed properly with a clear understanding of their best use in gaining consumer insights. The following guidelines will help marketers uncover the highly emotional underpinnings of consumer attitudes and behaviors to set direction for product and communications development as only qualitative research can.

1. We are in the mental health profession, not the marketing business.

Focus groups are like marriage counseling. You want to sell, consumers want to buy, but poor communication and lack of understanding can stop a sale dead in its tracks much the same way they can undermine relationships. The idea is to tear down barriers and identify shared values and mutually supportive behaviors.

## Focus groups are **their time** to let go and share insights.

As in therapy, respondents come to focus groups to be heard, not just for the financial incentive. Life is tough and most people have few outlets to vent. Maybe they've just come from work where bosses, customers and co-workers have made unreasonable (as they perceive them) demands all day long.

Perhaps they have nagging partners or out of control kids at home. Not to mention the daily bombardment of one-way communications, the commercial messages they can't help but see everywhere they look.

Focus groups are their time. Discussion guides need to be well planned, but there are immense benefits of "letting go" from time to time. Allowing respondents to babble from time to time presents an unparalleled opportunity to experience meaningful human moments. Understanding who your respondents really are and your brand's role in their lives is where qualitative really shines.

Consumer thought processes are not linear, and great focus groups don't always need to be either.

2. It's a journey, not a destination.

Just as no one gets “fixed” in therapy, at least not in the short term, it is unrealistic and counterproductive to expect to find “the answer” in focus groups.

“Validation,” or “the winning concept” is not what we are after here. We work in a risky business, still more art than science. And without conflict and ambiguity, there would be no art.

One can scan the Cliff Notes for “The Brothers Karamazov,” but true appreciation can only come from diving in and wrestling with the great issues of the human condition represented in this long book.

In art, as in life, sharply contrasting beliefs can be equally important and equally valid. In both cases, the answers, in and of themselves, are shallow without the insights and understanding that support them.

It's the wrestling, the journey, the struggle that matters.

Focus groups are the marketing equivalent of this process. A great intellectual and creative adventure where spontaneity and unexpected twists make everything all the more rewarding and the insights that emerge so much more valuable.

Ideas and solutions don't come from focus groups or any research. They **come from people who have thought and felt deeply.**

The renowned David Ogilvy quote on research cannot be cited too many times.

"I notice increasing reluctance on the part of marketing executives to use judgment; they are coming to rely too much on research, and they use it as a drunkard uses a lamp post for support, rather than for illumination."

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When approached as this "journey" or intellectual struggle, the focus group process can provide incredibly rich food for thought, serving as the foundation for smart, creative marketers to wrestle with and develop their ideas.

### 3. Be Honest

Qualitative research is the time for creativity and open-mindedness. It is not about forcing our opinions (or ads, logos and new product concepts) down the throats of our target consumers. It is about accepting responsibility and not assigning blame.

If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research.

How many times have we heard the advertising agency art director, observing in the back room, say, “Those respondents are really stupid. They don’t get the work.”

It is not about us as marketers. It’s about them as consumers. What we think is irrelevant in the long term, and the more defensive we are, the more we try to rationalize past decisions, the deeper we dig ourselves into a hole.

Given internal corporate politics and a hostile economic climate that breeds job insecurity, it’s not easy for us to be honest with each other and ourselves. If something isn’t working, we need to adjust our approach.

As Albert Einstein once said, “If we knew what it was we were doing, it would not be called research, would it?” In the long run, honesty – and humility – will pay off handsomely.

4. If it feels good you’re probably on to something.

When the great Louis Armstrong was once asked to define jazz, he replied, “If you have to ask, you’ll never know.” Like a mesmerizing Armstrong improvisation or Ella’s scat singing, great marketing comes from the soul.

True, we are commercial marketers first, not artists, but to minimize the influence of art and emotion in favor of an overly analytic approach can be a fatal mistake.

Bonds between brands and their consumers are no different from how any art form connects with its audience. Legendary brands are created with vision and inspiration, never with research. But qualitative research, and focus groups in particular, present a unique opportunity to feel our way through works in progress as we are in the moment with target consumers and our professional colleagues.

5. Nothing is more important than great stimulus.

Focus groups are like the old saw about computers. Garbage in, garbage out. Consumers often know what they like and what they want, but can't always articulate their feelings. We need to provide them with the tools, or the vocabulary, to talk about these complex emotions.

Therefore, whenever exploring a new product concept, positioning, communications alternatives or any kind of innovation, it is essential to present a wide range of single-minded positioning concepts. Putting "stakes in the ground" provides an excellent starting point for meaningful, articulate discussion with respondents.

Getting respondents **involved in exercises right away**, even something as simple as a brand sort, helps get them going.

6. Put respondents to work and take them out of the “Critic’s Chair.”

Getting respondents involved in exercises right away, even something as simple as a brand sort, helps get them going. The goal is to get respondents talking, preferably to each other, and not answering “yes” or “no” questions posed by the moderator. This direct involvement grows exponentially in importance when exploring concepts.

A common complaint about focus groups is how easily they seem to transform consumers into know-it-all marketing critics. This should be no surprise. Handing out concepts for respondents to mark up or reading concepts one at a time for group feedback is an invitation to hold forth on the dos and don’ts of marketing.

This pitfall exists no matter how skilled the moderator, how well the guide is crafted or how fabulous the stimulus might be. Respondents can be instructed at length to express feelings, not judgments, to focus on the big picture and not the minutia, but by the time the second or third concept comes up for discussion, most have turned into judge and jury, confidently predicting that “people will (or won’t) like this one.”

Consider instead a workshop approach, where a group of eight might be split into “teams” of four. They are given a packet of concepts, anywhere from five to ten or more, and then charged with selecting the one or two most motivating concepts and bringing them to life. We can ask them to name products, design packages, write commercials, choose a spokesperson that best personifies the product, or any other number of things.

A lot of good things happen with this approach. Most importantly, when respondents are deeply engaged with this challenge (which they seem to relish), they become passionate participants with a stake in the process, not aloof critics.

As they talk to each other and think out loud, first as they feel their way through the concepts and then bring them their favorites to life, we are able to observe the consumer thought process up close and personal. The ultimate output of the creative exercise is not important, and expectations should not be high in that regard. But the experience of this psychological and creative journey is invaluable. This approach also removes the temptation to “keep score.”

Depth of understanding and direction are the keys to great focus groups, not an unquantifiable scorecard.

If we test ten concepts, two of them show remarkable promise but the other eight are laughed out of the room, does this connote failure? Or if ten of ten are received positively, is that an unqualified success?

Absolutely not. Depth of understanding and direction are the keys to great focus groups, not an unquantifiable scorecard.

#### 7. Adapt Proactively

Unlike quantitative research, focus groups are a live, ongoing experience that can last a day, a week or more. This provides the opportunity to evolve, to absorb, consider, and adapt. The discussion guide and stimuli need to be reexamined after each day of research. Inaction and static thinking are your enemies. “Keeping it all the same so we can compare apples and apples” doesn’t hold water.

Best to push your thinking, aggressively. You can always keep the “old” concepts in your back pocket for the next market for a reality check or the apples to apples comparison, but being ready with something new that reflects learning to date will maximize the value of the research.

8. Embrace the shared experience to build consensus.

Focus groups are a highly social, shared experience. This isn't just a metaphorical journey, but a real one. Together, we hang out in airports drinking coffee desperately seeking Internet connections, fly from city to city, stuff ourselves with junk food in the back rooms of research facilities and have drinks at the hotel bar when it's all over each night.

The stated purpose of the journey is to connect with consumers, but the opportunity to connect with our colleagues is equally important. Selling an idea internally is often far more difficult than selling it to end consumers. Corporate politics and conflicting interests have been known to kill great ideas well before they are given a fair chance to be developed.

Focus groups enable us to observe consumers first hand, absorb their feedback, and talk through key issues, allowing our thinking to evolve collectively. Ideally, key members of the brand team and outside agencies take part in this experience, implicitly granting them "insider status" and enlisting them as champions of a marketing idea or direction.

Building the bonds of a united front make it far easier to push worthwhile ideas through the system.

## Conclusion

It is likely that the most vocal critics of focus groups may not truly grasp the power of meeting consumers face-to-face, and are likely uncomfortable with anything that isn't a "fact." The process demands of those involved the need to wrestle with many ambiguities.

But we are stronger for this intellectual and creative struggle in the long run, as deeper understanding will lead to more incisive quantitative questionnaires and far superior marketing executions.

Contrary to the prevailing belief of many marketing research professionals, quantitative research is not the end all. To quote Albert Einstein one more time:

"Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted."

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