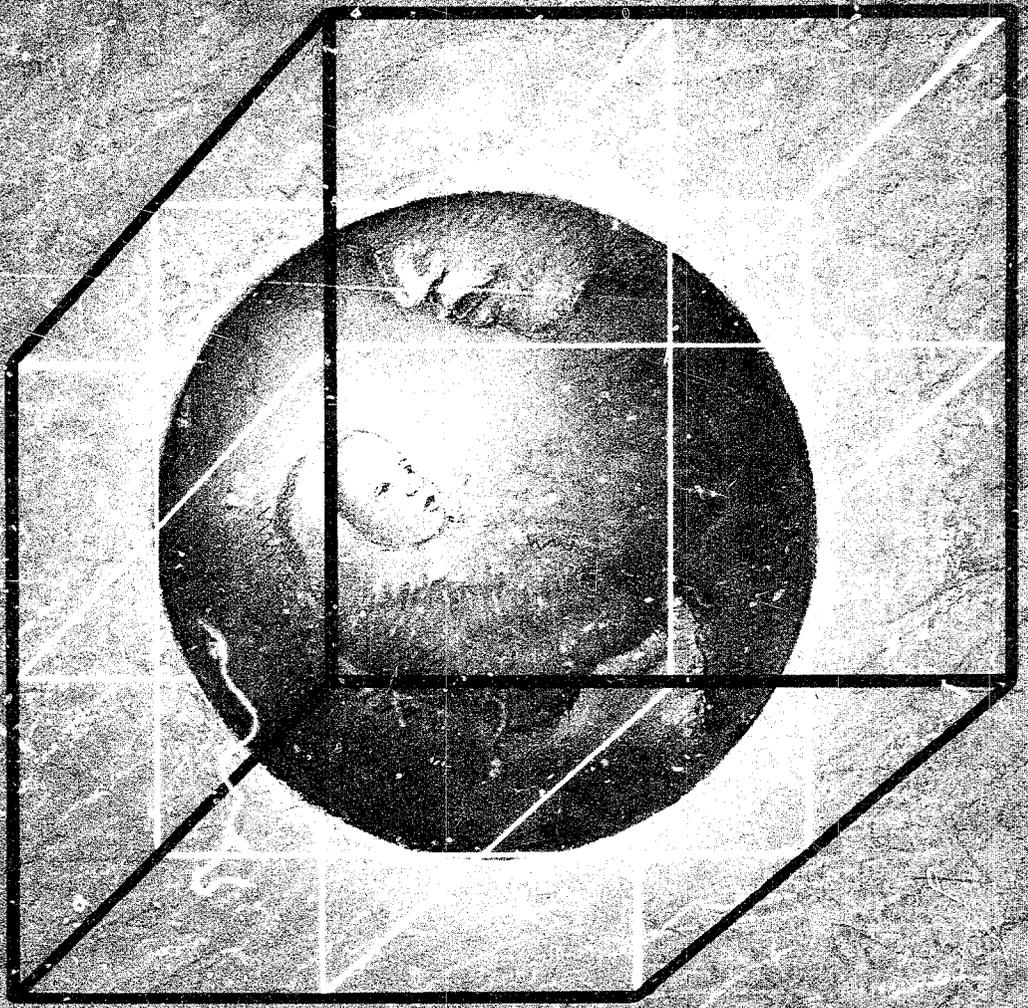


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Handbook for
Excellence in
Focus Group
Research

Mary Debus
Porter/Novelli

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FOREWORD

Focus groups are a widely used marketing research tool in the Western world. In the past several years, as social marketing has gained popularity, focus group research has become extremely popular in developing countries as well. Being the most "low tech" of the marketing research techniques that exist today, focus group research provides a fast, easy and practical way of getting in touch with the target population under investigation.

But the inherent chance for the *misuse* of focus groups is great. This is particularly true where the communication infrastructure is not fully developed, making modifications and "bending the rules" a necessity. The purpose of this document is to provide practical guidelines for the correct use of focus group research, as well as suggestions for modifications to Third World realities.

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WHAT IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Qualitative research is a type of formative research that offers specialized techniques for obtaining in-depth responses about what people think and how they feel. It enables program management to *gain insight* into attitudes, beliefs, motives and behaviors of the target population. When applied properly, qualitative techniques are used along with quantitative techniques in an interrelated, complementary manner. For example, the qualitative approach provides *depth of understanding* about consumer responses, whereas the quantitative approach provides a *measurement of consumer responses*. By its very nature, qualitative research deals with the emotional and contextual aspects of human response rather than with objective, measurable behavior and attitudes. It adds "feel," "texture" and nuance to quantitative findings. Qualitative research is conducted to answer the question *why*, whereas quantitative research addresses questions of *how many* or *how often*. The qualitative research process is one of *discovery*; the quantitative research process pursues *proof*.

Additionally, the qualitative nature of this research applies not only to the techniques for eliciting responses, but also to the qualitative nature of the analysis. Qualitative research is *interpretative* rather than descriptive. It involves *small numbers* of respondents who are not generally sampled on a probability basis. No attempt is made to draw firm conclusions or to generalize results to the population at large.

The two primary qualitative research techniques are (1) individual depth interviews and (2) focus group discussions. These will be discussed in greater detail in later sections of this document. Emphasis will be placed on focus group research.

WHAT ARE THE ROOTS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

Historically, qualitative research grew out of several disciplines: literary criticisms, social sciences and psychoanalytic theory. The nature of qualitative analysis is tied to literary criticism and to the social sciences. The interpretation and synthesis of ideas and concepts has always been part of literary criticism, and the type of qualitative analysis that requires insight and illumination is part of sociological tradition. The *interviewing techniques* of qualitative research grew largely out of psychoanalytic theory. These techniques were then applied to the marketing field in what was known as motivational research, research that used highly intensive, in-depth, individual interviews supplemented by projective and other psychological tests. These techniques were aimed at understanding the motivations and reasoning behind the verbal responses, and they required an extremely high level of professional skill to both implement and evaluate.

Motivational research as it was practiced in the 1930s is no longer in use today. However, qualitative research

continues to play a very important role in the field of **marketing**, and the qualitative techniques employed have been continuously refined and developed. Despite this evolution, it is important to recognize the roots of qualitative research in order to understand the basic premises upon which it is built. **If a researcher is not applying some aspects of these original disciplines, he/she is not conducting true qualitative research.**

WHY USE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH?

There are both conceptual and practical reasons for using qualitative research. The primary conceptual reason for using qualitative research is that it provides greater depth of response and, therefore, greater consequent understanding than can be acquired through quantitative techniques. In addition, qualitative techniques, particularly one-on-one interviews, enable the researcher to tie together clusters of behavior that relate to a given consumer decision or action. For example, a program manager may want to understand in greater detail the chain of decisions that leads to trial of an oral rehydration salt (ORS) product. In a qualitative study, the program manager can identify the relationship of all of the various decisions at an individual level, getting a clear picture of the complete adoption *process*. A quantitative study would instead provide data on individual steps within the process—for example, the number of outlets visited, the price consumers are willing to pay, the level of product awareness and so forth.

Another conceptual reason for using qualitative techniques has to do with the nature of qualitative research itself and how it relates to the decision process in research. It can be argued that both the qualitative research process and the broader formative process retain major subjective or intuitive elements. The initial steps in the formative research process—that is, defining the problem and information needs, formulating hypotheses and defining variables—are all essentially intuitive and therefore qualitative in nature.

In addition to the above, there are many *pragmatic* reasons for using qualitative research methods.

Cost. In general, qualitative research is more economical than quantitative research.

Timing. Some qualitative techniques, particularly focus groups, can be executed and analyzed quickly in the absence of data processing capabilities.

Flexibility. The study design can be modified while it is in progress.

Direct link with target public. Qualitative techniques give program management the opportunity to view and experience the target groups directly.

Technical facilities unnecessary. Qualitative research can be conducted in areas where no computer or other technical facilities are available.

PROBLEMS WITH QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

One major problem exists with qualitative research: It is often applied inappropriately. In other words, qualitative research will sometimes be used when a quantitative technique is more appropriate. Or, qualitative research will be analyzed *as if it were* a quantitative study, drawing hard and fast conclusions or projecting responses instead of developing hypotheses and gaining insights.

Another problem with qualitative research is related to its subjectivity. Since it is highly dependent upon insight and interpretation, qualitative research is highly susceptible to subjective bias on the part of the researcher or observer. Because no hard data analysis is conducted, it is very difficult to verify whether the analysis of qualitative data is correct. And, because of the nature of qualitative techniques themselves, it is even difficult to determine whether the research is being conducted properly. As a result, many qualitative researchers in the field today have only marginal or mediocre experience. Finally, because qualitative research has a high degree of flexibility and does not require a highly structured questionnaire format, it is possible for the researcher or program manager to be undisciplined and not fully think through the research issue.

Much controversy has been associated with qualitative research because of its potential pitfalls. A good deal of discussion in the research field centers on how to ensure the quality of qualitative research, yet users and practitioners still do not agree on many of the aspects of good qualitative research.

HOW IS QUALITATIVE RESEARCH USED?

Qualitative research is used largely in four general ways: (1) as a tool to generate ideas; (2) as a step in developing a quantitative study; (3) as an aid in evaluating a quantitative study; and (4) on occasion, as the primary data collection method for a research topic.

1. *A tool to generate ideas.*

- To stimulate ideas by providing program management with first-hand experience in observing and hearing the target population; observing them interacting with the product, discussing the practice, or listening to their language about the issues. This behavior and language may be quite different from that used or imagined by the program manager.
- To develop new ideas for the communications strategy, the product positioning or creative execution.
- To explore the ideas and messages the target population perceives in visual or verbal stimuli such as advertising, brand names, packaging and posters.

- To explore a product or behavior category that is relatively unknown and for which the researcher is not yet able to provide the specifics required to conduct a quantitative study.

2. *A preliminary step to aid in developing a quantitative study.*

- To develop hypotheses about the thought and decision-making processes of the target population as they relate to the product, practice or issue being researched
- To specify particular information needs for the quantitative study.
- To help identify the types of people to be interviewed in the quantitative study—for example, the primary and secondary target populations and the relevant decision makers.
- To aid in the development of question wording and sequencing—for example, to identify all of the attributes of a particular product that should be included in the quantitative questionnaire.
- To assist in problem identification and definition—for example, to develop hypotheses about the reasons for a sudden drop in usage of a particular product, or discontinuance of a particular practice.
- To select and refine materials for a larger quantitative study—for example, qualitative research can be used to reduce the number of advertising concepts being evaluated or to refine the concepts prior to going into a quantitative test.

3. *A way to help understand the results of a quantitative study.*

- To explain, expand and illuminate quantitative data—for example, to understand the reasons for an unexpected finding.
- To gain some understanding about the reasons for certain trends—for example, to understand why mothers who have tried ORT (oral rehydration therapy) are not reusing it.
- To describe the factors that are affecting an attitude change—for example, to illuminate why one particular piece of advertising or promotion is more persuasive than another to the target audience.

4. *The primary data collection method.*

- Some research problems do not lend themselves easily to a quantified approach and, therefore, qualitative research may be used as the primary data collection strategy. For example, when a bank wants to understand how its pension and trust department would be marketed to large corporations, a quantitative technique would be inappropriate for such a small sample and detailed topic. The best approach in this case might be to conduct a series of one-on-one interviews with chief financial officers from twenty firms in the market.

THREE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

There are three keys to conducting good qualitative research. First, the research must develop the *art of asking "Why?"* Second, the researcher must develop the *art of listening*. Third, the researcher must approach the research as a creative process of investigation.

The Art of Asking "Why?"

Qualitative researchers have been developing the art of asking "Why?" for many years. Paul Lazarsfeld wrote an article on the issue in 1934 pointing out that simply listening to the answers to an open-ended question could result in a confusing overlap of various influences, product attributes and individual motivations. He urged the following:

- That "why?" questions be given specificity so that these elements can be untangled.
- That questions be specifically tailored to fit the experience of the respondents.
- That we recognize the biases or assumptions made by every researcher so that we are in fact asking what we really want to know.

To dramatize these three points, Lazarsfeld quoted from a G.K. Chesterton detective story:

Have you ever noticed this: that people never answer what you say? They answer what you mean or what *they think* you mean. Suppose one lady says to another in the countryhouse, "Is anyone staying with you?" The lady does not answer, "Yes, the butler, the three footmen, the parlormaid, and so on," though the parlormaid may be in the room or the butler behind her chair. She says, "There is nobody staying with us," meaning "nobody of the sort you mean." But suppose a doctor inquiring into an epidemic asks, "Who is staying in the house?" Then the lady will remember the butler, the parlormaid and all the rest. All language is used like that; you never get a question answered literally, even when you get it answered truly.

In asking "Why?" the experienced qualitative researcher will be careful to: (1) ask in a neutral manner; (2) avoid leading the respondent; (3) ask only one question at a time; and (4) note verbal and nonverbal clues of confusion or evasion from the respondent. Therefore, when applied, the art of asking "Why?" is like the workings of a detective who is trying to uncover the perpetrator of a crime. The last thing the detective will do is ask the suspected criminal why he murdered the victim. A good detective, like a good researcher, will use indirect questions, projective techniques, observation, body language, symbolism and experimentation.

The Art of Listening

The art of listening takes time and practice to develop fully. Qualitative researchers must be acutely aware of the fact that accurate listening is extremely difficult and that listeners often make unconscious errors. Truly creative listening requires a high degree of sensitivity, intuition and reflection, as well as accuracy. Some things to keep in mind about listening include:

- Active listening is closely related to *empathy*, one's ability to identify with another in terms of the way that person would feel or act.
- The *way* things are said may reveal more of the intended meaning than the words that are spoken.
- Good listening requires hearing what is meant as well as what is said. This means picking up on nonverbal clues—indicators of anxiety and uncertainty, of confidence and assertiveness. Hesitations, silences and variations in word choice are also relevant.

Research as a Creative Process of Investigation

Qualitative research, then, is very much like the investigatory process that would be carried out by a detective. Although some specific techniques and standard questions are almost always applied, the key to getting the right answers is to adapt and create the process to suit the specific research issue. It generally does not work to apply an "off-the-shelf" approach. Just as no two crimes are alike, no two qualitative research projects are alike. A high level of creative thinking must be applied to each new situation if the qualitative research process is to be truly successful.

**TABLE 1-1
DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN
QUALITATIVE AND QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH
INTERRELATED**

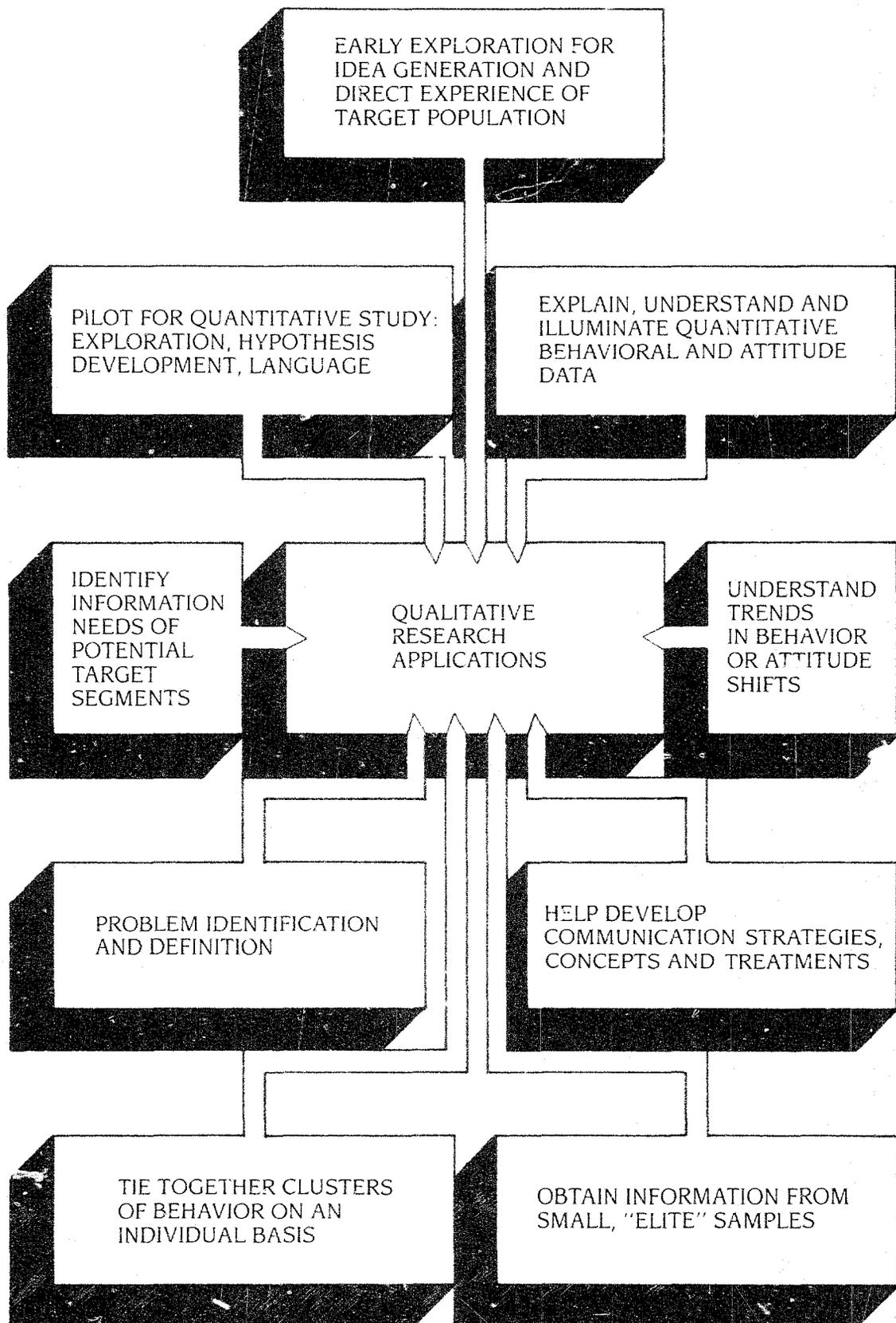
QUALITATIVE	QUANTITATIVE
Provides depth of understanding	Measures level of occurrence
Asks "Why"?	Asks "How many?" "How Often?"
Studies motivations	Studies actions
Is subjective	Is objective
Enables discovery	Provides proof
Is exploratory	Is definitive
Allows insights into behavior, trends, and so on	Measures level of actions, trends, and so on
Interprets	Describes

**EXHIBIT 1-1
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ILLUMINATES QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS:
AN EXAMPLE**

A manufacturer of 35mm cameras conducted a national advertising campaign designed to illustrate the simplicity of the product. A quantitative evaluation of the campaign indicated that there was very high awareness of the product and of the campaign, but that there continued to be a perception among the non-35mm users that the product was too complicated for them to use. In order to identify more clearly the reasons for this perception, the manufacturer could put together several focus groups composed of those individuals who had been exposed to and remembered the advertising, but who were not convinced of the basic copy platform that the camera was simple enough for them to use. Focus groups would give the manufacturer the ability to listen in detail to the consumers' reasons for feeling this way about the product.



TABLE 1-2
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPLICATIONS



Individual depth interviews and focus groups are two leading qualitative research techniques. Focus groups capitalize on group dynamics and allow a small group of respondents to be guided by a skilled moderator into increasing levels of focus and depth on the key issues of the research topic. They are by far the most widely used qualitative technique. Individual depth interviews, like focus groups, are characterized by extensive probing and open-ended questions, but they are conducted on a one-on-one basis between the respondent and a highly skilled interviewer.

WHEN TO USE INDIVIDUAL DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Although individual depth interviews are less widely used, there are specific circumstances for which they are particularly appropriate. These include:

Complex subject matter and knowledgeable respondents. For example, a study among pharmacists or physicians on their attitudes and practices regarding the treatment of a particular disease.

Highly sensitive subject matter. A study among women who have had an abortion regarding their feelings about sexuality and family planning.

Geographically dispersed respondents. A study among population policymakers in eight countries regarding their reactions to a document on child spacing and maternal health.

Peer pressure. A study among consumers to obtain their reactions to a potentially controversial advertisement where a "social desirability" response might cloud the real persuasive power of the message; for example, a study of male teenagers to explore their attitudes about sexually responsible behavior.

When individual depth interviews are being considered as the research technique, it is important to keep several potential pitfalls or problems in mind.

There may be substantial variation in the interview setting. Depth interviews generally take place in a wide range of settings; this limits the interviewer's control over the environment. Interviews conducted in a hospital or at a store may have to contend with many disruptions, all of which inhibit the acquisition of information and limit the comparability of interviews.

There may be a large gap between the respondent's knowledge and that of the interviewer. Individual depth interviews are often conducted with knowledgeable respondents (such as physicians) yet administered by less knowledgeable interviewers, or by interviewers not completely familiar with the pertinent social or cultural context. Therefore, some of the responses may not be correctly understood or reported. Particularly in the case of the "elite" respondent,

the respondent may have a desire to speak beyond the limits imposed by the interviewer and to seek more interaction with the interviewer, widening the "knowledge gap" even further.

The potential for management observation and feedback is limited. Because a program manager generally does not observe the interviews, the feedback procedure either does not exist or takes considerably longer to conduct. It is time-consuming to debrief the interviewer after each of the initial interviews is conducted (so that changes can be made).

Additionally, some key interviewer behaviors are important to the success of conducting depth interviews and should be kept in mind. It is important that the interviewer be able to: (1) accurately receive the information; (2) accurately recall the information; (3) critically evaluate the information; and (4) act upon the information as it is received in order to regulate the interview process.

Accurately receiving the information can be inhibited by interviewer fatigue, interviewer boredom, interviewer bias or expectation of answers, interviewer preoccupation with taking notes, and by technical language foreign to the interviewer. Steps should be taken to avoid these problems if possible.

Accurately recalling the information can be inhibited by a confusion of content between interviews, selective retention on the part of the interviewer, and by the interviewer's attempt to retain too much information.

Critically evaluating information during the interview is a function of the interviewer's ability to identify the actual level of richness of the content being provided. It is important that the interviewer steer the respondent away from irrelevant information and induce richness when superficial answers are being provided.

Acting upon the information being received and altering the interview as it takes place is important both within a given interview as well as across the series of interviews. The ability of the interviewer to regulate the information *within* a given interview is really an issue of probing, focusing and staying on track with respect to the interview objective. Regulating or altering the process *across a series* of interviews is a matter of assessing information that has been accumulated from one interview to the next in order to refine the interview guide and make it more responsive to the overall objectives of the research.

WHEN TO USE FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are far more widely used than individual depth interviews. The main reasons focus groups are selected more often as the qualitative technique include:

Group interaction. Interaction of respondents will generally stimulate richer responses and allow new and valuable thoughts to emerge.

Observation. The sponsor can observe the discussion and gain first-hand insights into the respondents' behaviors, attitudes, language and feelings. This is particularly important in the early, "creative" stages of program development.

Cost and timing. Focus groups can be completed more quickly and generally less expensively than a series of depth interviews.

Examples of when the above factors might be important are provided in the following specific applications of focus group research:

Idea generation. A group discussion is conducted among pharmacists or physicians to generate new ideas for an improved ORS product (food additives, vitamin A additives, flavor additives, etc.). A group works best to build on ideas generated.

Package design screening. Alternative package designs, either in concept or in prototype

form, are presented to potential user groups to reduce the number of concepts for a quantitative test. A group works best because design personnel can be present to view the group and get ideas.

Evaluation of message concepts. Messages in some rough, pre-production form are presented to potential target audience groups for evaluation and refinement. A group works best because creative personnel can be present to view the group.

Problem identification and definition. A group discussion is conducted among condom users to generate hypotheses about why a successful condom brand failed when introduced into a new region. Groups work best to get a quick reading before planning a quantitative study.

A more complete breakdown of issues to consider when choosing between focus groups or depth interviews is included in Table 2-1.

TABLE 2-1 WHICH TO USE: FOCUS GROUPS OR INDIVIDUAL DEPTH INTERVIEWS?

Issue to consider	Use focus groups when...	Use individual depth interviews when...
Group Interaction	interaction of respondents may stimulate a richer response or new and valuable thoughts.	group interaction is likely to be limited or nonproductive.
Group/Peer Pressure	group/peer pressure will be valuable in challenging the thinking of respondents and illuminating conflicting opinions.	group/peer pressure would inhibit responses and cloud the meaning of results.
Sensitivity of Subject Matter	subject matter is not so sensitive that respondents will temper responses or withhold information.	subject matter is so sensitive that respondents would be unwilling to talk openly in a group.
Depth of Individual Responses	the topic is such that most respondents can say all that is relevant or all that they know in less than ten minutes.	the topic is such that a greater depth of response per individual is desirable, as with complex subject matter and very knowledgeable respondents.
Interviewer Fatigue	it is desirable to have one interviewer conduct the research; several groups will not create interviewer fatigue or boredom.	it is desirable to have numerous interviews on the project. One interviewer would become fatigued or bored conducting the interviews.
Stimulus Materials	the volume of stimulus material is not extensive.	a larger amount of stimulus material must be evaluated.
Continuity of Information	a single subject area is being examined in depth and strings of behaviors are less relevant.	it is necessary to understand how attitudes and behaviors link together on an individual pattern basis.
Experimentation with Interview Guide	enough is known to establish a meaningful topic guide.	it may be necessary to develop the interview guide by altering it after each of the initial interviews.
Observation	it is possible and desirable for key decision makers to observe "first-hand" consumer information.	"first-hand" consumer information is not critical or observation is not logistically possible.
Logistics	an acceptable number of target respondents can be assembled in one location.	respondents are geographically dispersed or not easily assembled for other reasons.
Cost and Timing	quick turnaround is critical, and funds are limited.	quick turnaround is not critical, and budget will permit higher cost.

In setting up focus group discussions, the researcher must make a number of decisions about the design and implementation of the research. These decisions include determining the number of groups required and the respondent qualifications for each group. The length, size, location and time for the groups must also be determined.

DETERMINING THE NUMBER OF GROUPS NEEDED

In order to determine how many groups are needed, it is first necessary to gather some information or generate some hypotheses about the topic under study—for example, the degree to which respondent age or geographic location is important to the topic. Following the information-gathering phase, some guidelines for setting the number of groups are as follows:

1. **Conduct at least two groups for each variable considered relevant to the topic area.** For example, conduct two groups among each major target population segment—males and females, users and non-users, younger mothers and older mothers—if such segments are considered substantially different in attitudes or behaviors related to the topic area.
2. **Conduct enough groups to rotate the order of communication materials presented in the group.** When new product concepts, posters, advertising concepts or other stimulus materials are being presented to the group, it is critical that enough groups be conducted so that the order of these stimulus materials can be rotated. For example, when evaluating two alternative message pieces, responses to the second one introduced will be biased by responses obtained to the first. While this is true of all research methodologies, it is particularly true of focus groups, where opinions are verbalized in front of other respondents. Therefore, it is important to conduct another group in which the order of stimulus materials is reversed.
3. **Conduct groups until the information obtained is no longer new.** That is, conduct groups until the outcome conforms in a general way with previous results. If two groups on the same subject produce wildly different results, it is necessary to explore this difference in additional groups to make the research results understandable and usable.
4. **Conduct groups in each geographic region where a meaningful difference is felt to exist.** Such differences are likely to be important when the product or the behavior being studied is influenced by climate, weather, water conditions, local economic conditions or some other geographic or economic feature. Such variations are also important when the topic under study is influenced in some meaningful way by culture or local lifestyles. Geography would be important in medical

research, for example, where particular weather conditions affect *susceptibility* to a particular ailment, or in political research, where great variations may exist among regions or between urban and rural areas. Variations in the level of literacy may be great enough to warrant conducting groups in different regions.

DETERMINING THE FOCUS GROUP COMPOSITION

Focus groups are generally conducted among homogeneous target populations. Answering the question “Which respondent variables represent *relevant* similarities among the target population?” requires some thoughtful consideration when planning the research. The following respondent variables should be considered:

1. **Social Class.** It is always advisable to conduct a group session among respondents who have similar social status. When social classes are mixed, the more literate and articulate higher-class respondents may suppress participation by the lower-class respondents, who may feel inadequate even when they may know quite a bit about the subject matter under discussion. In developing countries, social class or social status may be related not only to socioeconomic factors but may also include specific village-level roles that should be considered carefully when selecting the group.
2. **Lifecycle.** The place where the respondent fits in the lifecycle relevant to the topic under discussion may be critical, and respondents at substantially different points in the lifecycle should generally *not* be included within the same group. For example, new mothers or women who are newly involved in family situations may respond substantially differently from older mothers or mothers with a larger family, even when the basic age of the mothers is similar. In such cases, the less experienced mother is apt to defer to the veteran.
3. **User status.** Generally speaking, it is best to separate users of a given product from non-users, or to separate practicers from non-practicers. However, there may be reasons for including them in the same group, such as when the intention of the group is to explore or highlight the contrasts between such groups. This mixing of user status is only feasible, however, if the product or behavior carries no social stigma. For example, smokers may be considered “bad” by non-smokers. Similarly, if non-users of a particular product would be considered by users to be lazy, stupid or in some other way negative, then the two should not be integrated in a single group session.

On the other side of the issue, it is very difficult to interview both users and non-users in one group since conflicting opinions within the group may

invite either a "rational" defense or a "withdrawal" by those who perceive their opinions to be in the minority. Often, separating users from non-users enables the researchers to see the two points of view more clearly. Additionally, when users and non-users are included in the same group, it generally means that half of the group will have nothing to do while the other half is talking, and vice versa. This does not contribute to positive group dynamics.

4. **Level of expertise.** The level of experience or expertise that a respondent has can greatly affect his or her responses to a particular topic. Respondents who vary widely in their level of experience should not be included in the same group. For example, a respondent who has used a particular product for a considerable length of time may be different from a new user. This is particularly true when length of usage corresponds to the level of the respondent's knowledge and expertise. This may be very important when dealing with focus groups among professionals or semi-professionals in the medical community, for example.
5. **Age/marital status.** Depending on the subject matter under investigation, respondents of substantially different age and/or marital status generally should not be included in the same group. For example, focus groups conducted about the use of contraceptives among married and unmarried women should not include both types of respondents, even though the two groups may be equally sexually active and may have had the same length of history of contraceptive product use.
6. **Cultural differences.** Respondents of vastly varying cultures should not be included in the same group when those cultural differences have an impact upon the attitudes and behaviors of the topics under discussion.
7. **Sex.** There is a sharp division among focus group moderators regarding the effectiveness of mixing sexes within a particular focus group. Some moderators believe this is never wise because it may inhibit conversation or interfere with the order and flow of discussion. Others feel it is highly desirable to mix the sexes when the topics being discussed concern a joint decision. Most moderators will agree that it is acceptable to mix sexes when the discussion topic is not related to or affected by sex stereotypes. One approach for handling this dilemma is to experiment with both conditions and see if the results differ.

DETERMINING THE LENGTH OF THE FOCUS GROUP

On rare occasions all-day or half-day focus group sessions are used for idea generation. As a rule, however, the focus group should not last longer than one and one-half to two hours. Frequently, when very

specific information is required—such as reactions to one particular advertisement—the focus group may be as short as forty minutes.

DETERMINING THE SIZE OF THE FOCUS GROUP

The accepted size for a focus group has traditionally been eight to ten respondents, but the trend has been moving to smaller groups, or what is known as mini-groups. An optimal group, therefore, would consist of five to seven respondents. This trend emerged in response to some of the following limitations or problems encountered with larger groups:

- Each participant's speaking time is substantially restricted. Dominant/submissive relationships are almost inevitable.
- The group moderator is forced into a more directive role.
- Frustration or dissatisfaction among group members is likely to result because of some members' inability to get a turn to speak. This produces lower quality and quantity of output.
- Respondents are often forced into long speeches, often containing irrelevant information, when they get to speak only infrequently.
- The tendency for side conversations between respondents increases.

In contrast, smaller group sessions are felt to provide greater depth of response from each participant. The group is often more cohesive and interactive, particularly when respondents are professionals, such as physicians or pharmacists.

The key factor concerning group size is generally that of group purpose. If the purpose of the group is to generate as many ideas as possible, a larger group may be most beneficial. If the purpose of the group is to maximize the depth of expression from each respondent, a smaller group works better.

DETERMINING THE GROUP SETTING

In the United States, focus group facilities with audio or video recording equipment, one-way mirrors and observation rooms are the standard. In developing countries, such facilities are rare. Therefore, factors to consider in determining the setting include the following:

1. **The setting should provide privacy for the focus group participants.** Select a location where group participants can talk without observation by others who are not in the group. It may be necessary to station research team members outside the facilities in order to divert or entertain potential observers or intruders.

2. **Select a location where it is easy to hear respondents speak.** Avoid noisy areas so that respondents can hear one another and the moderator can hear all respondents.
3. **Select a comfortable location.** Extremes of temperature or other factors can adversely affect the quality of the focus groups.
4. **Select nonthreatening environments.** Be sensitive to the socioeconomic status of the respondents and do not attempt to conduct the group in a facility that could inhibit their responses or encourage them to respond in a "socially desirable" manner. Schools or government buildings may induce a desire to respond "correctly."
5. **Select a location that is easily accessible by respondents.** Even if transportation is provided, lengthy travel time to and from the group could affect group results.
6. **If possible, select a group environment in which an observer can be present without disrupting the group.** In countries where observation facilities are not available, this can be accomplished by setting up partitions, using adjacent rooms with open doorways and so forth.

DETERMINING THE GROUP SEATING ARRANGEMENT

Generally, focus groups are conducted around a conference table, in a sitting room atmosphere or in

some other room arrangement that seems natural to the respondents. Whatever the environment, respondents should be seated in a manner that encourages involvement and interaction. Some guidelines include the following:

Avoid designating status in the seating arrangement. Respondents seated closest to the moderator or at the head of a table may project a higher status. The moderator should be alerted to the probability that participants seated in these locations may require more control to prevent them from leading or disrupting the group.

Make it possible for the moderator to have good eye contact with all respondents. This is important for controlling the group, bringing out shy respondents and subduing dominant ones. Respondent name tags, enabling the moderator to call on group members by name, also facilitate moderator control and group interaction.

Seat respondents at approximately equal distances from the moderator and clearly in sight of all other participants. This will encourage interaction and a feeling of being part of the group. It will also help discourage side conversations that may occur when some members are off to the side or too far away from the moderator.

In developing countries where makeshift facilities are often used, the research team should be creative with the seating arrangement. A traditional school-house setting can be rearranged so that desks are moved out of rows and into a semicircle. It is not necessary to accept things just as they are—take control of the environment and make it work!

EXHIBIT 3-1

THE THINKING PROCESS IN DETERMINING THE GROUP COMPOSITION AND NUMBER OF GROUPS TO BE CONDUCTED

A pharmaceutical firm was considering the introduction of a new high-potency multiple vitamin. Expecting that users of competitive high-potency vitamins were loyal to their current brands, the firm hypothesized that its major opportunities would be with non-users of vitamins and among current users of regular-strength multiple vitamins. To aid in determining whether opportunities really existed among these market segments, eight focus groups were conducted with the following specifications.

Group I: Mixed male and female respondents, aged 21 to 39, who are non-users of vitamins.

Group II: Mixed male and female respondents, aged 21 to 39, who are users of regular vitamins.

Group III: Mixed male and female respondents, aged 40 to 59, who are non-users of vitamins.

Group IV: Mixed male and female respondents, aged 49 to 69, who are users of regular vitamins.

All four groups were conducted in two separate regions for a total of eight groups.

The rationale for the group specifications was as follows.

- **Ages were segregated** due to an expectation that the three age groups would possess different needs for the product and would subsequently display different attitudes toward its purchase and use.
- **Users and non-users were segregated** because it was felt that they would have clearly different attitudes towards the product. In addition, each group might have opinions about the other that would inhibit an open and productive discussion.
- **The groups were conducted in two markets**, one East Coast market and one West Coast market, due to the feeling that different regional lifestyles and cultures may influence acceptance of the product.
- **Sexes were not segregated in the study.** The primary reason was pragmatic; the client had four variables of concern: age, location, sex and usage, and varying each of them would have generated a need for a total of sixteen groups, or eight groups per market. It was felt that sixteen groups was excessive, so sex was selected as the least important factor on which the group could be segregated. There was some element of risk in this decision: quiet, nondisclosing groups might suggest that the information required was too sensitive for mixed groups.

Note: An alternative design would be to recruit only female heads of households, as these women probably make most of the purchase decisions concerning vitamins. This would have sacrificed the opinions of male consumers, but might have allowed women to be more open about their attitudes towards vitamins.

TABLE 3-1 CHECKLIST FOR SETTING UP FOCUS GROUPS

Determine the Number of Groups Needed

- Are there at least two groups for each relevant variable?
- Are there enough groups to rotate the stimulus materials?
- Were groups conducted until responses were showing similarities?
- Are groups needed in different geographic regions?

Determine the Composition of Each Group

- Are respondents of the same social class?
- Are respondents similar in terms of their "lifecycle" or "experience status" regarding the topic area?
- Can users and non-users (or practitioners and non-practitioners) be put together without stifling group interaction?
- Do respondents have similar levels of expertise on complex topics?
- Is it important to separate respondents by age and/or marital status?
- Are respondents of similar cultural background?
- Can males and females be mixed without inhibiting responses?

Determine the Length of the Group

- Can the information needs be met in one to two hours?
- If not, is another research technique more appropriate or should additional groups be set up?

Determine the Size of the Group

- Will respondents be able to say all they know in ten minutes? (eight-ten respondents)
- Is the subject complex enough for each respondent to give twenty minutes of relevant information? (five-seven respondents)
- Does the subject matter require a small, intimate group?

Determine the Group Setting

- Will respondents have sufficient privacy to talk freely?
 - Can all respondents see and hear one another?
 - Is the location accessible to respondents?
 - Will respondents be threatened or intimidated by the location?
-

WORKING SESSION:

DESIGNING A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH STUDY FOR PRENATAL VITAMINS

MAIN POINTS ADDRESSED

- Background of the Project
- Overview of Fe-Natum Plus Research Design
- Phase I: Depth Interviews Among OB/GYNs
 - Key Findings
- Phase II: Focus Group Discussion
 - Topic Guide
 - Onsite Screening Questionnaire

SECTION OBJECTIVE

1. To illustrate the process of research design by using a concrete example.

CASE STUDY:

PRENATAL VITAMIN SUPPLEMENTS

BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

A pharmaceutical company is planning to introduce a prenatal multivitamin and mineral supplement in a new type of formulation. It will be positioned against two other products, Materna and Stuart-Natal, its two main market competitors in the field of nutritional supplements for pregnant women. The new product, Fe-Natum Plus, will include a necessary core of iron surrounded by seventeen essential vitamins and other minerals.

The product's perceived superiority, it is hoped, will be the incorporation of its targeted iron "delivery system," a system that creates improved iron tolerability due to a wax matrix designed to release most of the iron in the duodenum and jejunum where it is best absorbed and tolerated. But because of its unique formulation, the daily dose would result in an oversized tablet. This problem has been resolved by the decision to turn each daily dose into two fair-sized tablets that could be taken either at once or one at a time at different times during the day.

Because of the established correlation between iron intake and constipation, especially among pregnant women, the manufacturer is particularly interested in exploring the viability of presenting Fe-Natum Plus as a

welcome solution to the problem of iron-induced constipation among pregnant women and, of equal importance, exploring the question of compliance related to the two-tablet dosage system.

There is also some indication that women today are taking a more active role in planning their nutritional and general health care while pregnant. Introducing Fe-Natum Plus directly to consumers, as well as to doctors, may be a viable approach. Therefore, four alternative positioning statements for Fe-Natum Plus were developed.

1. **Scientific approach** – "Introducing the only prenatal supplement with a time-release delivery system."
2. **Consumer/physician benefit** – "Introducing the prenatal supplement that does what you expect."
3. **Consumer "lifestyle" benefit** – "Introducing the prenatal supplement that fits into her/your lifestyle."
4. **Physician-benefit, side effects** – "Fewer side effects for her mean fewer complaints for you."

Exercise Qualitative Research Design Prenatal Vitamins

(to be Completed by the Reader)

Respondent profile:	Rationale:
Number of groups/interviews:	Rationale:
If groups, composition of each group:	Rationale:
Moderator/interviewer people:	Rationale:

Three potential tag lines were also created:

1. "Advanced design, enhanced performance."
2. "It's easier to take."
3. "Designed with her/your comfort in mind."

The manufacturer's intent was to explore these positioning concepts and the tag lines as a way of getting an early reading on the viability of and approach for introducing Fe-Natum Plus.

OVERVIEW OF FE-NATUM PLUS RESEARCH DESIGN

This is an outline of the actual research strategy:

Stage 1: Conducted sixteen Individual Depth Interviews among doctors who were:

- OB/GYNs
- In private practice
- Writing at least five prescriptions a week for prenatal supplements

Stage 2: Conducted two initial focus groups among expectant mothers:

- Mothers were at least three months pregnant.
- Women pregnant for the first time were mixed with women who already had children.
- No qualifications regarding supplement usage or constipation problems were used.

Stage 3: Conducted a final pretest of the winning concept(s) using quantitative research.

Rationale: Because the product positioning and creative concepts were in an early stage of development, it was decided that qualitative research would be used as an initial screening and that, if the direction was clear, the winning concept would go into a quantitative test.

No significant differences were felt to be present geographically because the two universes were already narrowly defined. Because there were indicators that most women were aware of the constipation problem, the manufacturer decided to risk first-time expectant mothers with more experienced ones.

PHASE I: DEPTH INTERVIEWS AMONG OB/GYNs

ACTUAL KEY FINDINGS:

- Constipation was not mentioned as the first or most immediate complaint associated with taking prenatal

supplements. Therefore, overall response to the concepts was moderate.

- It is difficult for doctors to ascertain when constipation among pregnant women is iron induced and when it is not. Further research is required to quantify this link.
- No particular brand loyalty emerged. Reasons for prescribing one supplement over another appeared to be more related to habit, relationships with retailers (salesmen) and to the sample supplies received.
- The concepts as a whole communicated the Fe-Natum Plus benefit story clearly. However, the response to specific creative executions varied.
- The "scientific" approach was most positively received, largely because of its perceived look and tone of scientific significance—of new medical technology—and because of the clarity with which it depicted the two-ply tablet. More research is needed to confirm this.
- The two-tablet dosage did not appear to present a significant concern with compliance for the prescribing physicians.
- Price was not an issue for these physicians because they felt that the benefits of a superior prenatal supplement far outweigh any additional costs. It should be noted that these physicians dealt with a middle- to upper-middle- income patient population.

PHASE II: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION MODERATOR'S TOPIC GUIDE FOR FE-NATUM PLUS

1. Warm-up and Explanation (10 minutes)

A. Introduction

1. Thanks for coming.
2. Your presence is important.
3. (Describe what a focus group is—like an opinion survey, but very general, broad questions.)

B. Purpose

1. We will be discussing your reactions to being pregnant, the physical changes and the changes it creates in your lifestyle.
2. I'm interested in all your ideas, comments and suggestions.
3. There are no right or wrong answers.
4. All comments, both positive and negative, are welcome.
5. Please feel free to disagree with one another. We would like to have many points of view.

C. Procedure

1. (Explain use of videotape and/or audiotape.) All comments are confidential, used for research purposes only.
2. I want this to be a group discussion, so you needn't wait for me to call on you. Please speak one at a time, so that the tape recorder can pick up everything.
3. We have a lot of ground to cover, so I may change the subject or move ahead. Please stop me if you want to add something.

D. Self Introductions

1. (Ask each participant to introduce herself.) Tell us your name and something about yourself,—for example, what you do, how long you've lived in this area, how many children you have.

II. General Perceptions of Pregnancy

A. Diagnosis of Pregnancy

1. How did you learn you were pregnant? (Was this a self-diagnosis? A doctor's diagnosis?)

B. Feelings While Pregnant

1. How did you feel when you first learned that you were pregnant?
How do you feel now? (Probe: What kinds of emotions did you have? What kinds of physical sensations?)

C. Lifestyle Changes

1. How did your pregnancy affect your life?
2. Did your lifestyle change during the course of your pregnancy?
3. Was there anything special you started to do while you were pregnant?
4. Were there things suggested by your doctor that you thought of on your own? (Exercise? Special diet? Vitamin supplement?)
5. Has anyone experienced any side effects from taking supplements?

D. Physiological Changes

1. What physiological changes have you noticed in your body or in the way your body is functioning?
2. Do you think these are things that happen to most women?
3. Are there any particularly uncomfortable things that occur?
4. When you first came in, we asked you to fill out a checklist of some possible symptoms that might occur during pregnancy. Have any of you experienced any of these?

E. Constipation

1. Has anyone experienced constipation as a problem during pregnancy?
2. What did you do to alleviate it, if anything?
3. What did you do to prevent it, if anything? (Can anything be done to prevent it?)
4. Was it a big problem or a minor inconvenience?
5. What do you think some of the causes are?

III. Presentation of Concepts—"Lifestyle"

We've been talking about prenatal vitamin supplements, and all of you are taking supplements. I'd like you to look at some concepts for a new product. These are not finished ads. I'd like you to give me your reactions to the idea of the product, rather than the image or the color used in the display.

A. Present Concept A—"Lifestyle"

1. (Read major copy and hand out text.)
2. (Read text aloud to group.)
3. (Ask group to write down the first impressions and general reactions; allow two minutes.)

B. Probe: General Reactions/First Impressions

1. How do you feel about what is being said?
2. What idea is this trying to get across to you? (Is it believable? Clearly written?)
3. What idea are they trying to tell you *about the product*?
4. How interested are you in trying this product? Would you be interested enough to ask your doctor about it?
5. What, if any, advantage do you think this product would have?

C. Probe Specifics of Product

1. How do you feel about the two-tablet dosage? Is it more difficult or easier than using other supplements?
2. How do you feel about the time-release system? Do you understand how it works?
3. What is the headline telling you? Does this idea matter to you?
4. What is the "tag line"—the line here at the end—telling you? Does this idea matter to you?
5. How do you like the name of this product? Could you remember it?

IV. Presentation of Concepts—"Advanced Design"

A. Present Concept B—"Advanced Design"

1. (Read major copy and hand out text.)

2. (Read text aloud to group.)
3. (Ask group to write down first impressions and general reactions—allow two minutes.)

B. *Probe General Reactions/First Impressions*

1. How do you feel about what is being said?
2. What idea is this trying to get across to you?
3. What idea are they trying to tell you *about the product*?
4. How interested are you in trying this product? Would you be interested enough to ask your doctor about it?
5. What, if any, advantage do you think this product would have?

C. *Probe Specifics of Product*

1. What is the headline telling you? Does this idea matter to you?
2. What is the "tag line"—the line here at the end—telling you? Does this idea matter to you?

V. *Presentation of Concepts—"Your Comfort"*

A. *Present Concept C—"Your Comfort"*

1. (Read major copy and hand out.)
2. (Read text aloud to group.)
3. (Ask group to write down first impressions and general reactions—allow two minutes.)

B. *Probe General Reactions/First Impressions*

1. How do you feel about what is being said?
2. What idea is this trying to get across to you?
3. What idea are they trying to tell you *about the product*?
4. How interested are you in trying this product? Would you be interested enough to ask your doctor about it?
5. What, if any, advantage do you think this product would have?

C. *Probe Specifics of Product*

1. What is the headline telling you? Does this idea matter to you?
2. What is the "tag line"—the line here at the end—telling you? Does this idea matter to you?

VI. *Ranking Concepts*

Now that you've had a chance to look at all three ways that Fe-Natum Plus might be presented, I'd like to ask you which one you like best.

1. How many like the "Lifestyle" approach best? Why?
2. How many like the "Advanced Design" approach best? Why?
3. How many like the "Comfort" approach best? Why?

VII. *Closing*

- A. Before we end, I'd like to go around the room once more and ask each of you if there's anything else you'd like to say about the idea of a prenatal vitamin supplement as we've described it tonight. Anything else you like or dislike? Anything that we haven't mentioned that would be important to you in taking a supplement or choosing which brand you would take?
- B. Thank you so much for coming tonight. Your time is very much appreciated and your insights have been very helpful.

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

(Completed by focus group participants)

Name _____

How many children do you have? What are their ages?

Child

Age

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

2. During pregnancy, have you experienced any of the following:

	Yes	No
Water retention	()	()
Nausea	()	()
Tiredness	()	()
Shortness of breath	()	()
Constipation	()	()
Frequent urination	()	()
Lower back pain	()	()
Other (Specify) _____	()	()

3. While pregnant, have you taken prenatal vitamins? () ()

4. If yes, what brand(s)? _____

Thank you.



WHAT IS THE TOPIC GUIDE?

The topic guide is a list of topics or question areas that are to be covered in the focus group. It is an extremely important aspect of focus group research. If the topic guide has been properly thought out and constructed, the research will be substantially more productive.

The topic guide serves as a *summary statement* of the issues and objectives to be covered in the focus group. Preparing the topic guide is an exercise that forces both the moderator and program management to organize their thoughts and to review research objectives carefully. A loosely constructed topic guide generally suggests that the subject has not been thought through in sufficient detail to obtain truly valuable research results from the focus group.

The topic guide also serves as a road map and as a *memory aid* for the moderator. A good moderator will have the flexibility and skill to stay on course and to cover all of the objectives of the focus group, yet allow the discussion to flow naturally and spontaneously from respondents and to pursue new issues raised by respondents *if they are relevant* to the research objectives.

HOW TO PREPARE THE TOPIC GUIDE

The topic guide can be written as a list of specific questions, but it is generally better to outline question areas or issues and then to include special probing questions under each of the key issues. The amount of detail in the guide depends on the experience of the moderator; an inexperienced moderator will need more detail in the topic guide and may need an actual list of questions. In many developing countries it may be necessary to include detailed, specific questions as well as supplementary probing guides to cover special topics of interest.

The topic guide is *prepared jointly* by the moderator and by someone from program management and the research team. The moderator should be very well versed on the subject matter of the group and on the specific objectives of the research.

It takes time to develop a good topic guide. Often the moderator will prepare and review several drafts of the topic guide with program management before the guide is finalized. This may entail several days of development. The topic guide also is frequently modified slightly after each group is conducted.

WHAT SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN THE TOPIC GUIDE?

The topic guide should *not attempt to cover too many issues*, or the participants will become bored and fatigued, and the group will jump from topic to topic in an unnatural manner. Having too many different issues in the topic guide suggests that the research has not been sufficiently focused, or that perhaps a different type of research is needed.

In preparing the topic guide, one should strive to eliminate those kinds of questions that are "nice to know" but not specifically relevant to the research objectives. One should also review the topic guide and eliminate questions that may be more appropriately addressed in a quantitative study—for example, questions of "how many?" or "how often?"

THE FLOW OF THE TOPIC GUIDE

The sequence of the topics in the topic guide *generally moves from the general to the specific*. There are several reasons for this:

It makes the flow of the focus group more natural. For example, one would begin a discussion by talking about general child-rearing practices or health-related behaviors in child-rearing before talking specifically about diarrheal episodes.

It allows the analyst to have a framework for the comments that are made in the group.

For example, if a mother initially states that she has too little time to care for her children, the analyst will better understand why this mother later reacts negatively to a health product that requires additional steps to administer.

It allows for key issues to emerge naturally.

For example, the analyst would do better to let respondents begin talking about their general reactions to a poster and then observe which aspects of the poster emerge spontaneously as contributing to those reactions, rather than to probe specific aspects of the poster before they are mentioned spontaneously by the respondents.

Topics in the topic guide should be ordered in such a way that respondents are not put in irreversible situations or at verbal "dead ends." For example, an initial discussion that reveals the current attitudes of the respondents will sometimes prejudice their perception of new ideas that are presented to the group. This occurs when respondents take a strong stance on a subject during the initial general discussion and do not want later to be seen to vary from their original points of view.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE TOPIC GUIDE

Even with the same subject, it is often necessary to prepare *different topic guides* for focus groups that have a different composition of respondents. For example, the topic guide prepared for a research project on family planning will vary somewhat for married females and unmarried females, or for current users of contraceptives and non-users.

If materials such as posters are to be evaluated in the focus group, it is necessary to *carefully review* each of these materials, to understand their communications objectives and strategy and to incorporate specific topic areas relating to each piece of material in the topic guide.

TABLE 4-1 A SUMMARY OF STEPS IN DEVELOPING THE TOPIC GUIDE

1. Assemble the project team, the moderator and key research or program management personnel.
2. Agree upon decisions/actions to be taken from the focus group findings.
3. Agree upon the specific objectives and information needs of the research.
4. Brief the moderator about prior research findings, important issues, hypotheses and opinions.
5. Determine what background information is needed from respondents in order to evaluate their comments during the group.
6. Prepare a list of topic areas that move from general, nonthreatening issues to specific topics of interest.
7. Prepare a list of probing questions for each major topic area. These are to be used *if* the information does not emerge spontaneously. Think through *contingencies*.
8. Prepare probing questions to be pursued depending upon the responses given.
9. Prepare transition approaches to be used when moving to a new topic or introductory stimulus materials.
10. Carefully examine any stimulus materials used for special areas of concern and questioning.
11. Review the guide and eliminate any non-essential topic areas, "dead-end" questions or quantitative-type questions. Assign a flexible time estimate for each remaining topic area based on its priority and complexity.
12. Sleep on it, and review the guide again with fresh eyes before final agreement.

EXHIBIT 4-1 SAMPLE TOPIC GUIDE

(Conceptual-Topic Approach)

I. Conduct Warm-up Portion of Interview

II. Top-of-Mind Associations About Family Life

When you think of family life around here, what is the *first* thing that comes to your mind?

- (Take what you get and probe, probe, probe:)
 - Tell me more about that.
 - Could you explain that?
 - Give me an example of that.
 - How do you feel about that?
 - (Prove why, why, why or why not.)

III. Feelings About Children

Tell me a little about children. How do they affect family life?

- (Take what you get and gradually fill in background information about each respondent—number of children, age and sex of each child, etc.)

continue on page 26

- What is your child's/children's life like now?
 - Happy?
 - Healthy?
 - Well cared for?
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)
 - What will your child's life be like in the future?
 - Similar to yours?
 - Different from yours?
 - Better?
 - Worse?
 - How?
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)

IV. Family Planning

When I mention the term "family planning," what is the first thing that comes to your mind?

- (Take what you get and probe:)
 - What about that?
 - Can you explain that?
 - How do you feel about that?
 - How does your husband/wife feel about that?
 - How do your in-laws feel about that?
 - Tell me more about that.
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)
- For those already using family planning, provide an understanding of the decision process.
 - What do you use?
 - How long have you used this?
 - Why did you select that one?
 - How did you learn about it?
 - Who advised you about it?
 - What else have you tried?
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)
- For non-users of family planning, provide an understanding of why they have not adopted family planning.
 - Up to now, why haven't you tried family planning?
 - Have you ever tried it?
 - What happened?
 - (Challenge contradictory statements!)
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)
- Pretend I'm a friend who told you that I wanted to begin using family planning. What advice would you give me?
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)

V. User and Non-User Perceptions

Here are five pictures of different couples. Which ones will use family planning and which ones won't?

- (Probe why, why, why or why not.)

VI. *Exposé Ad or Ads*

When you look at this, what is the first thing you think of? What else do you think?

- Probe:
 - Likes
 - Dislikes
 - Comprehension
 - Confusion
 - Believability
 - Meaningfulness
 - (Probe why, why, why or why not.)

VII. *Product Impressions*

Suppose I was from another village far away and had never heard about (method). Tell me all about this method. Why would I want to try this method? (Why, why, why or why not?)

VIII. *User Perceptions*

Who are the people who use (method or brand)? What do they look like? Tell me all about them. What is their life like? How are they different from those who use (other methods or brands)?

IX. *Benefits and Barriers*

Tell me about two or three situations when you/people like you would decide to try (method or brand) and two or three situations when you/they would decide to try something else. Tell me about situations when you/they would decide not to try anything.

X. *Closure of Group*

(Bring together patterns, consensus and any conflicts that emerged during the group.)

Many focus group techniques have evolved over time. Broadly, the differences between those techniques relate to: (1) different moderating approaches; (2) functional group differences; (3) structural group differences; and (4) the variety of processes that have emerged to address specific marketing or informational needs.

MODERATING APPROACHES TO FOCUS GROUPS

There are two primary aspects of the moderating approach. First, the questioning technique can be either directive or non-directive. Second, the flow of the focus group can be either structured or non-structured.

1. Questioning Technique

A directive moderating approach uses questions that are very pointed and that specifically restrict the range of responses that might arise. This questioning technique is used only when the objective of the focus group is very narrowly defined.

Example: Specific positive attribute statements about a product are required to construct an attribute rating scale on a quantitative questionnaire. The moderator specifically limits the discussion to pointed questions about perceived product attributes.

A non-directive moderating approach uses questions that are open-ended and non-biasing. This type of question permits respondents' honest feelings to emerge, minimizes the moderator's influence and helps to eliminate later confusion in summarizing what was said in the group. This type of questioning is almost always the best style to use when conducting focus groups.

Example: What were your reactions when you first saw the character in the poster? (Not "What did you like about the character in the poster?")

2. Focus Group Flow

In a structured focus group the moderator works from a prepared topic guide that contains the issues to be addressed and the specific areas for probing. The topic guide ensures that all areas relevant to the research objectives are covered. The probing outline ensures that the specific information needs of management are met in each topic area. Structured focus groups are readily compared across a series of groups.

Example: General reactions to three package designs for a family planning product are obtained. Specific probes are added to the outline to address perceptions of product quality, safety, ease of usage, price and other product attributes.

A non-structured focus group is conducted using a very sketchy topic guide. The group participants themselves largely determine the content and flow of the group. The rationale for conducting this kind of group is that it eliminates moderator/management judgment as to what issues are salient. This style is rarely used because it often misses many information needs important for program management. It is sometimes used in the early problem-definition stage of a project when no prior research has been conducted and when management has little experience with the subject and has no hypotheses regarding the relevant issues of the subject.

Example: Bus ridership has decreased. Management has conducted no prior ridership research and has no hypothesis about the decline. A group is set up to discuss public transportation.

Except in unusual situations, focus groups should use the non-directive, structured moderating approach. In practice, most effective groups are actually semi-structured – the moderator is skilled enough to cover all of the issues in the structured topic guide while maintaining a flexible flow of conversation, a conversation that pursues issues as they are mentioned by respondents and relevant new topics as they arise.

Table 5-1 outlines the options with respect to questioning technique and level of structure of the focus groups.

FUNCTIONAL GROUP DIFFERENCES

The type of focus group being conducted is determined by the group's purpose – what it is intended to accomplish. Traditionally, groups have been divided into three broad categories:

Exploratory groups. The purpose of the group is to generate ideas or to stimulate a rich level of respondent thinking on specific topics. The moderator generally plays an active role, encouraging respondents to build on each others' ideas. This type of group is often used to help design a quantitative study.

Clinical. The purpose of the group is to uncover the psychological and sociological motivations for attitudes and behavior. Projective techniques are often used, and analysis relies on clinical judgment. Clinical groups have limited use in marketing; however, the approach may be very useful to enhance and expand the understanding of previous research findings.

Phenomenological. The purpose of the group is to provide researchers with a direct link to the target population as they describe in detail and in their own language their thinking and behavior in real-life situations

**TABLE 5-1
FOCUS GROUP MODERATING APPROACHES**

QUESTIONING STYLE:

	Directive	Non-directive
FLOW OF GROUP:		
Structured	<p>A "GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricted, pointed questions • Structured topic guide 	<p>A FOCUSED GROUP DISCUSSION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-ended questions • Structured topic guide
Non-structured	<p>A "DISASTER"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Restricted, pointed questions • Unstructured or no topic guide 	<p>A "RAP" SESSION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open-ended questions • Unstructured or no topic guide

and decision making. Such a group is generally more focused and generates more concrete, specific responses, such as reactions to products, packaging concept statements, communication and other stimuli.

SPECIALIZED GROUP PROCESSES

Over time, special qualitative techniques have been developed or modified to suit the needs of researchers in the field of marketing. These include (1) laddering; (2) hidden-issue questioning; (3) symbolic analysis; and (4) projective techniques.

The Laddering Technique

In this technique, the line of questioning proceeds from product characteristics to user characteristics or benefits. For example, the method might begin by asking respondents to indicate how one product or behavior differs from another, to identify key variables such as "easier to use." That difference is then probed to determine what is important about it—what its benefit to the user is. For example, the answer "doesn't

take time away from household chores" is probed until multiple layers of *underlying* benefits are elicited. This is often referred to as "tapping into the user's network of meanings" and is meant to uncover deeper levels of benefits and barriers.

Hidden-Issue Questioning

This technique focuses on respondents' feelings about sensitive issues in their lives. Common themes that surround a particular topic such as child care or sexual intimacy are drawn out so that intimate personal issues are developed into widely shared, sensitive life themes. The procedure calls for individuals to construct specific "best case" and "worst case" scenarios about topic areas so that their daydreams, anxieties and hopes are brought to the surface. For example, answers to the question "What was the happiest time in your life?" or "What would you do with your time if you were given 5 million dollars?" are then probed to identify the significant leverage points for motivating behavior.

Symbolic Analysis

This technique calls for researchers to examine how consumers perceive the opposites to the behavior or product under study. For example, in order to learn about disease, medical researchers often study

health and well-being. There are three ways to study such opposites. The first is to investigate *non-usage* or non-doing. For example, the researcher might ask "What is someone like who never uses this?" or "What would it be like if you could no longer smoke?" The second way is to imagine a "*non-product*," or a non-version of the existing one, like "nonfattening" or "nonalcoholic." A third way to study opposites is to investigate perceptions regarding *opposite types of products* or behaviors. For example, the opposite of ice cream might be yogurt because it is less fattening, or it might be soup because "a good meal *begins* with soup." Understanding how respondents determine opposites unlocks keys to the real meaning of the product or issue.

Projective Techniques

A projective technique is an instrument that obtains responses in an extremely indirect manner. These instruments were devised to overcome the inability or unwillingness of individuals to express their true interests, opinions or motivations in response to more direct questioning. The technique can reduce the bias resulting from approval-seeking because the respondent does not know exactly what the moderator is going after. The most common methods used by marketing and communications specialists include: (1) Thematic Apperception Tests (TATs); (2) role playing; (3) cartoon completion; and (4) association.

Thematic Apperception Tests (TATs).

Visual stimuli depicting a situation are presented, and the respondent is asked to comment on the situation by explaining it and telling what might have gone on before and what is going to happen next.

Role playing. The respondent is asked to give the opinions and attitudes of other people.

Cartoon completion. The respondent is asked to complete a cartoon caption that fits the sketch provided or that responds to what another cartoon character has said.

Association. This includes word association and sentence completion techniques in which the respondent is asked to give the first word or phrase that comes into his/her head in response to those given by the interviewer.

QUALITATIVE MODERATING TECHNIQUES

How do we make all this happen? What makes a focus group or depth interview different from any discussion? Here are some "tricks of the trade" that are

designed to get beneath the surface of a response or to help people express what they may not even realize themselves about their feelings and opinions.

ADDITIONAL MODERATOR "TRICKS OF THE TRADE"

A skilled moderator will use a combination of techniques as the situation requires. Here is a list of some techniques that are frequently applied:

1. **Building the relevant context information** – What are the experiences or issues that surround a product or a practice that influence how it/he/she is viewed?
2. **Top-of-mind associations** – What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say "family planning"?
3. **Constructing images** – Who are the people who buy Panther condoms? What do they look like? What are their lives about? (Or) Where are you when you buy condoms? Describe the place. What do you see? What do you feel? What do you do?
4. **Querying the meaning of the obvious** – What does "soft" mean to you? What does the phrase "it's homemade" mean to you?
5. **Establishing conceptual maps of a product category** – How would you group these different family planning methods? How do they go together for you? How are groups similar/different? What would you call these groups?
6. **Metaphors** – If this birth control pill were a flower, what kind would it be and who would pick it? If this group of products were a family, who would the different members be and how do they relate to each other?
7. **Image matching** – Here are pictures of ten different situations/people. . . . Which go with this wine and which do not? Why?
8. **"Man from the moon" routine** – I'm from the moon; I've never heard of Fritos. Describe them to me. Why would I want to try one? Convince me.
9. **Conditions that give permission and create barriers** – Tell me about two or three situations in which you would decide to buy this chocolate and two to three situations in which you would decide to buy something else.
10. **Chain of questions** – Why do you buy "X"? Why is that important? Why does that make a difference to you? Would it ever not be important? (Ask until the respondent is ready to kill the interviewer!)
11. **Benefit chain** – This cake mix has more egg whites; what's the benefit of that? (Answer: "It's moister.") What is the benefit of a

moister cake? (Answer: "It tastes homemade.") And why is homemade better? (Answer: "It's more effort.") And what's the benefit of that? (Answer: "My family will appreciate it.") And? (Answer: "They will know I love them.") And? (Answer: "I'll feel better; they'll love me back.")

12. **Laddering (chains of association)**—What do you think of when you think of Maxwell House Coffee? (Answer: "Morning.") And when you think of morning, what comes to mind? (Answer: "A new day.") And when you think of a new day? (Answer: "I feel optimistic.")
13. **Pointing out contradictions**—Wait a minute, you just told me you would like it to be less greasy and now you're telling me it works because it's greasy and oily—how do you explain it?
14. **Sentence completions and extensions**—The ideal ORS product is one that. . . The best thing about this new product is. . . It makes me feel. . .
15. **Role playing**—Okay, now you're the Chairman of the Board, or the Mayor of this city. What would you do? (Or) I'm the Mayor, talk to me, tell me what you want.
16. **Best-of-all-possible-world scenarios**—Forget about reality for a minute. If you could design your own diaper that has everything you ever wanted in a diaper and more, what would it be like? Use your imagination. There are no limits. Don't worry about whether it's possible or not.
17. **Script writing**—If you were to tell a story or write a movie about this company or city (or whatever), what would it be about? Who are the heroines and heroes? Does the movie have a message? Would you go see it? Who would?

The real trick is to know when to use any of the above techniques and how to enlist respondents into playing along with the game. Later, the challenge is to try to make sense of what they tell you.

STRUCTURAL GROUP DIFFERENCES

In order to meet the objectives of the research, many different focus group formats have evolved. While the application of these new formats is limited, they are worth mentioning briefly.

- **Traditional groups.** An interactive, focused discussion of eight to ten people.
- **Mini-groups.** An interactive, focused discussion of about six people.
- **Dyadic groups.** An intense discussion between two people, such as husband and wife or a product user and a non-user.
- **Family unit, cross-generational groups.** An interactive, focused discussion on a topic that is highly influenced by family ties and values (for instance, childbearing or rearing children). The entire family, including the grandparents, participate.
- **Ad labs.** Groups designed specifically to create and refine advertising.
- **Repeat focus groups.** Respondents are generally asked to do something between groups, such as buy or use a product so that responses can be tied together.
- **Qualitative panels.** These are similar to the above groups but generally consist of more respondents, are repeated over a longer period of time, and are often connected to quantitative studies.

The focus group moderator's role is critical to conducting an effective focus group. In selecting the moderator it is important to evaluate: (1) personal characteristics; (2) moderating style; and (3) experience and background.

PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Some individuals simply have the right combination of personal traits and raw talent to make effective moderators. Things to look for in a potential moderator include:

- The ability to feel at ease and comfortable with other people: someone who is relaxed and not threatened by personal interaction with others.
- The ability to put others at ease: someone others just naturally open up to quickly.
- The ability to project unconditional regard and acceptance of others: someone who is genuinely nonjudgmental or who can appear to be.
- The ability to convey warmth and empathy: someone who projects understanding of others' feelings and thoughts.
- Good verbal and interpersonal skills: someone who gets along well in many different situations and with many different kinds of people and who can use language to seem like one of the group.
- Good listening skills: someone who pays close attention to what others say and does not feel compelled to always inject his/her own thoughts and comments into the conversation.
- The ability to project enthusiasm: someone who seems genuinely interested in others and whose general enthusiasm stimulates heightened interest in others.
- An awareness of one's own nonverbal reactions: someone who is capable of maintaining body language and facial expressions that project the above traits and do not convey annoyance or frustration.
- Physical characteristics that are not threatening, intimidating or off-putting to others.
- A close matching of the focus group respondents so that rapport can be established.
- The ability to *conceptualize* and to think through *contingencies*, as opposed to thinking literally and in a rote manner (in developing country settings, this trait is critical.)

MODERATING STYLE

Styles of group moderating vary greatly. Some moderators facilitate the group discussion by being friendly and involved, others by being more "laid-back." Still other moderators are challenging, almost argumentative in their style. An extremely experienced moderator often can vary his/her style to suit the type of respondents and the objectives of a group. In selecting a moderator, it is important to be aware that such differences in style exist and to try to match the moderator style with the needs of the group.

MODERATOR EXPERIENCE AND BACKGROUND

Moderators who have specialized moderating experience dealing with the subject matter to be discussed (e.g., specific health issues, a specific product) or with the type of respondents (e.g., teens, professionals) generally will be more effective.

The academic backgrounds of moderators may vary widely. Many are psychologists trained in group dynamics. In dealing with marketing issues, a moderator with some marketing or social science background may be useful. In some cases (for example, dealing with underlying motivations on a particular subject), it may be most useful to select a moderator with skill in using projective techniques or with experience in one of the qualitative approaches developed for that purpose, such as laddering or hidden-issue questioning.

Occasionally, particularly in developing countries, circumstances are such that an experienced moderator is not available and someone with experience in the field being studied (such as a nurse or other health provider) must conduct the group discussions. In this case, it may be necessary to stress certain key points to the acting moderator:

- A moderator *is not* a teacher.
- A moderator *is not* a judge.
- A moderator *does not* look down on respondents.
- A moderator *does not* agree or disagree with what is said.
- A moderator *does not* put words in the respondents' mouths.

Also:

- The focus group *is not* a text—there are no right answers.
- The focus group *is not* a time to inform.
- The focus group *is not* a time to persuade.

BRIEFING THE MODERATOR

Once a moderator is selected, he/she must be thoroughly briefed on the project. This generally occurs

as the moderator works together with the sponsor to develop the topic guide. If the moderator is working from an independently prepared topic guide, it will be necessary to brief him/her on why the research is being done, what is to be achieved from the research, and the specific application of the research findings.

In order for the interviewer to be adequately briefed for the study, the sponsor of the project should familiarize the moderator with prior research findings, important issues, hypotheses and opinions. Anything that helps to inform the moderator about the subject area or the sponsor's thinking is important and enables a skilled moderator to listen better and to ask meaningful follow-up questions. Prior information reduces the possibility of exploring directions that have been previously researched or that are irrelevant to the study objectives.

EVALUATING THE MODERATOR'S WORK

Focus groups are commonly evaluated by the volume of respondent output produced—that is, by the moderator's ability to keep the group actively talking for sixty to ninety minutes. While this is a simple and easy way of determining whether the group was productive, it is far from conclusive. The length of the focus group discussion is, of course, far less relevant than the quality or "richness" of the group. Richness refers to findings that are thought provoking and that communicate a wealth of relevant information. The

following key points also deserve consideration in evaluating a focus group:

- Did respondents feel comfortable enough to discuss their attitudes openly?
- Were respondents made aware of the task at hand?
- Was there real interaction among group members, or was it a series of individual interviews?
- Did the moderator ask questions in an unbiased manner?
- Was the viewer able to tell how the group really felt about an issue?
- Was a substantial amount of post-group analysis necessary to separate true respondent feelings from those expressed due to moderator demands?
- During the course of a single group, did the moderator demonstrate enough flexibility to pursue new directions?
- Across a series of sessions, was each group conducted identically, or did the moderator permit the discussions to evolve?
- Did the moderator exercise the proper amount of control—loose enough to permit expression among respondents, yet tight enough to avoid chaos and interruptions?

A more detailed guide for evaluating the moderator's work is included in the Focus Group Evaluation Form (see exhibit 7-1.)

Once participants are assembled in the focus group setting, the moderator will open the group by giving a brief introduction. Following the introduction, the moderator will proceed with the three major sections of the focus group: (1) the warm-up; (2) the body of the in-depth discussion; and (3) closure of the group. For each of these three major sections, the specific content, purpose and appropriate moderator behaviors will be discussed.

MODERATOR'S OPENING

Before a group actually begins, the moderator will provide a brief introduction. The objectives of this introduction are to relax respondents, to establish the "ground rules" for the group and to begin developing rapport with the group participants.

Respondents begin to relax when they observe that the moderator is relaxed and when the moderator speaks in a casual, friendly manner. Some informal banter as group members are being seated can be helpful.

The moderator introduces himself/herself. This is done by telling respondents his/her name and sometimes by providing information about himself/herself, which facilitates rapport with the group and establishes the group as a safe place for mutual self-disclosure.

The general purpose of the group is explained. Respondents are told why they have been brought together. This will facilitate their feelings of group purpose. They are also told what they have *not* been assembled for in order to reduce their anxiety and to eliminate any misconceptions.

Varying opinions are encouraged. Respondents are generally told that, in that group, there are no right or wrong answers and that it is okay to have feelings that are different from others. They are encouraged to feel free to give their frank and honest opinions.

The moderator's neutrality is established. The moderator generally assures respondents that he/she is in no way connected with the subject or product under discussion, and that their opinions will not make him/her feel good or bad or affect him/her in any way.

Group rules are given. Respondents are asked to speak one at a time and to interact but to avoid interrupting one another. If the group is being video- or audio-taped other specific rules may be necessary.

STAGE I: THE WARM-UP

The *content* of this section generally consists of respondents giving their names and responses to a couple of nonthreatening questions about themselves, such as the number of children they have, the age and

sex of each child, how long they have been married and so forth. These questions should provide basic background facts relevant to the subject matter. If a specific product category is being discussed, some initial questions about product use, such as frequency of use or brand selection, may be appropriate during the warm-up stage. It is important to remember that:

1. Introductory questions that might place participants in stereotyped roles should not be used.
2. Introductory questions that will identify status differences among respondents should not be used.

The *purpose* of the warm-up is to transform the group, in approximately ten minutes, from several individuals to a participating and interacting group. In addition, the warm-up:

- Gives respondents the opportunity to speak very early in the group session. This will help to overcome speech anxiety—an anxiety that tends to mount if speech is delayed.
- Establishes the moderator and the group situation as "safe" and thereby initiates nonthreatening self-disclosure by respondents.
- Gives respondents some idea of what the group process is and permits them to "know" other group members.
- Provides the moderator and any group observers with a picture of the group that will (1) influence later questioning and (2) provide a frame of reference to evaluate what group members say during the remainder of the group.

The *moderator behavior* appropriate during the warm-up phase of the group is that of genuine interest in what participants have to say, of impartiality and of "unconditional positive regard." That is, the moderator makes no negative judgments about respondents regardless of what they say. The moderator also must do what is needed to obtain the initial background information for the group. This often will entail the following:

1. Probing respondents for *clarity* and *understanding* before proceeding with the next stage of the group. For example, if the average number of children among a group of young mothers is two and one group member reports having six children, probing may clarify that three of the children belong to a sister-in-law who is considered part of the family.
2. Maintaining the structure of the group and keeping group participants on a fairly narrow course so that the essential background information is obtained in a brief period of time with minimal digressions on the part of respondents.

STAGE II: THE BODY OF THE IN-DEPTH, FOCUSED DISCUSSION

The *content* of this portion of the group will involve a subtle transition from general topics to an increasingly specific discussion of issues to be covered. Typically this also will involve moving from concrete areas of discussion (such as the number of children in the household) to more abstract issues; from a factual discussion to a discussion of attitudes, feelings and deeply held beliefs, some of which may be relatively threatening to respondents. At some point in the group discussion, specific concepts or issues may be introduced by the moderator in order to focus respondents' reactions on key areas of interest.

The *purpose* of this stage of the group is to obtain an understanding of the true issues related to the topic area. The purpose also is to explore fully the nature of the attitudinal dynamics associated with respondent behavior and to observe, firsthand, the respondent language and emotions associated with the topic area. The purpose is not to quantify or to establish any estimates of degree associated with a particular area covered in the topic guide.

The *moderator behavior* appropriate for this section of the focus group is complex and requires a high order of skill. Some key moderator actions include:

1. **In-depth probing** to clarify and illuminate responses given by a group member. Some examples of probes include:
 - Remaining silent—allow the respondent to amplify what he/she said
 - Using the mirror technique—restating what the respondent has just said.
 - Repeating the respondent's words as a question—"It's good?"
 - Confronting the respondent to clarify a position. "I'm a little confused. Earlier you said 'X', now you're saying 'Y'."
 - Using "key word" probes such as the following:

Respondent Statement	Moderator Probe
"It's good."	"What about it is good?"
"I like the size."	"What is it about the size?"
"It would be convenient."	"In what way would it be convenient?"
"It works."	"How can you tell that it works?"

- Using the third-person technique. "You seem to feel strongly about this. How do you think others might feel about it?"
- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What about that?"
- "What do you mean by that?"
- "What makes you feel that way?"
- "Can you think of an example of that?"
- "I'd like to know more about your thinking on that issue."

- "I'm not sure I understand how you are using the word _____."
- "What are some of your reasons for feeling as you do?"
- "What does the message say for you?"
- "What does it say to you personally?"
- "What were you thinking as you were watching it?"
- "What stood out in your mind? What other things made an impression?"
- "You started to say something about. . . ."
- "You mentioned something about. . . ."
- "Did you get any new insights about. . . . from the . . .?"
- "What words would you use to describe. . . .?"
- "Why?" or "Why not?"

2. **Sensitivity** to the receptivity level of participant disclosure at any given time during the group. A good group moderator will know when to move the group from a general discussion of child feeding habits to a more sensitive topic such as fears about infant mortality.
3. **Reweaving** information provided at an earlier stage of the group into the current discussion. Often a respondent will make a comment critical to the ultimate purpose of the group at a premature stage of the discussion. The moderator may let the comment drop until the appropriate point in the flow of the group and then ask the respondent to expand upon the comment that was made earlier. This not only shows the moderator's attention to what is being said but provides a smooth transition to new topic areas and helps to make the session a continuous discussion rather than a series of disjointed segments.
4. **Continuously linking** together comments made by different group members so that they present a cohesive group meaning.
5. **Flexibility** in discussing issues relevant to the topic, regardless of their presence in the topic guide. The moderator must know the subject matter and the objectives of the research well enough to know whether an unexpected direction in the group is useful information or an unnecessary digression.
6. **Handling** special problems that often occur in focus groups, such as conflicts between respondents or a general lack of enthusiasm on the part of the group as a whole.
7. **Using a variety of moderating tactics** and approaches intended to facilitate the group and make it productive. For example, an effective moderator will:
 - stimulate the group members to *talk to each other*, not necessarily to him/her;
 - know when to probe and when to keep quiet;
 - use in-depth probing without *leading* the respondents;

- be able to convey a lack of complete understanding about what a respondent says without appearing "phony";
- pay close attention to what is said in order to foster that behavior in the other group members;
- be sensitive to nonverbal cues given by respondents to understand better and facilitate respondents' *true feelings*;
- *not assume* that what a respondent says is what he/she really does or really means;
- encourage honest disagreement between respondents—not force a consensus;
- encourage unresponsive group members to speak;
- discourage dominant or disruptive group members;
- be kind but firm—combine a "disciplined detachment" with "understanding empathy";
- be permissive, but keep the group on track;
- expect the unexpected and know how to react to it;
- be prepared to improvise if something doesn't work or if no useful information is being gathered;
- use projective techniques or other "tricks" to gain more insight if respondents are unable to respond to direct questions.

STAGE III: CLOSURE OF THE GROUP

The *content* of this stage of the group consists largely of summarizing and recapping the identifying 'themes' of the group. It may be appropriate at this time to open a discussion about the strength of attitudes expressed, or the degree to which some feeling that emerged is present among group members. It may also be appropriate to point out key differences that occurred between group members ("Some of you felt that, but others feel differently") and to clarify these distinctions. Additionally, closure may be a good time to point out any remaining inconsistencies in respondent statements and to seek clarification.

The *purpose* of this stage of the group is to assist the moderator, the observer and the respondents in understanding what has occurred during the group. It permits an opportunity for respondents to alter or clarify their positions or to add any remaining thoughts they may have on the subject matter. It also allows the moderator to test his/her conclusions and hypotheses for accuracy and appropriateness.

The appropriate *moderator behavior* for the closure stage is basically to summarize or nonjudgmentally identify differences of opinions among respondents and to synthesize the findings from the group.

THE ROLE OF OBSERVERS

The observation of the group discussion by those who ultimately will make use of the research can be one of the key benefits of focus groups. Observation provides first-hand experience with the target population, its attitudes, concerns, language and other responses. The respondents may be quite different from the observers in both social and professional background.

While viewing focus group discussions, observers can do several things to enrich their experiences. These points should be communicated to observers prior to the start of the focus groups.

- Observers should not expect every moment of the discussion to be meaningful, every question to work, or every response to be salient and quotable. Participants will be real people responding spontaneously.
- Observers should not expect to experience a consensus within a group or among groups. Qualitative research is designed to generate a range of responses, develop hypotheses and deepen understanding.
- It is important for observers to listen carefully to what is being said—that is, to avoid selective listening to support a preconceived point of view and to avoid projecting personal meaning and values into what is being said. In listening, it is important to be alert to shades of meaning and to word selection.
- Observers should try to watch as well as listen. Nonverbal cues can sometimes be more meaningful than verbal responses.
- During the discussion, observers should make notes of key impressions for discussion during the debriefing after the focus group.
- Observers may want to ask for additional probes or to insert new questions during the discussion or at the end of the session.

AFTER THE GROUP

Ideally, the moderator and observers should meet immediately following each session to discuss their impressions. This debriefing process is an opportunity to clarify and crystallize the meaning of what has transpired. It allows observers to check their impressions against the skilled listening and interpretation of the moderator, and it gives the moderator an opportunity to *discourage premature conclusions* before all the interviewing and analyses are completed. Also, it is the time to review priorities for subsequent interviews in the series. Some of the issues that may be addressed include:

Refinement of the topic guide. Should some unproductive areas of questioning be removed? Can some topic areas be approached differently to elicit richer, more meaningful responses? Are new topic areas needed? Should the flow of the discussion be altered?

Respondent qualifications. Is it necessary to alter or tighten respondent screening questions? For example, in listening to a group conducted among product users, it may become apparent that only those respondents who have been users for six months or more or who use the product frequently are really qualified for the discussion.

Cancellation or additional scheduling of groups. Is it necessary to cancel the remaining groups that have been set up in the series or to schedule new ones? For example, it sometimes becomes clear that the target population has been

incorrectly defined, that stimuli presented to the group are either off target completely (rejected) or are insufficiently formed (i.e., too abstract). In such cases, it is wise to cancel the remaining groups set up and return to the drawing board. On the other hand, additional groups may be warranted if it becomes apparent that added segments of the target population are relevant—new versus long-term product users, for example. It also may be of value to conduct additional groups with refined stimulus/concept materials or to explore unresolved issues and new hypotheses.

EXHIBIT 7-1 FOCUS GROUP EVALUATION FORM

I. Evaluation of the Focus Group

<i>Setup</i>	YES	NO
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Were respondents qualified? Did they meet the age, sex, family size, socioeconomic status, product usage or other requirements necessary to the research objectives? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Did the group composition make sense? Were respondents similar enough in terms of characteristics that matter for an effective group discussion to take place and for group findings to be unclouded by major respondent variables? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was the size of the group right? Were all respondents able to participate and to talk for long enough to cover most of what they know on the subject? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was the setting of the group appropriate? Was it natural and comfortable for group members— not so casual as to preclude control and not so formal as to inhibit spontaneity and an open expression of feelings? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Did the seating arrangement of the group work? Did it seem natural to respondents and did it facilitate group interaction? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was the group free from outside interference such as observers, interruptions? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was the length of the group appropriate? Was it long enough to obtain specific, actionable information and not so long that group members got bored or fatigued or began to over-intellectualize? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was the content of the topic guide complete? Were all information needs and objectives met? 	()	()
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Was the content of the topic guide appropriate? Were the topic areas covered all relevant in terms of focusing the discussion on the study objectives, or did some questions throw the discussion off course? Were they questions that group members could answer? 	()	()

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II. Moderator Evaluation

Assign the moderator a rating for each item mentioned below (5 = excellent; 4 = very good; 3 = good; 2 = fair; 1 = poor.)

A. Moderator's preparation

Rating

- Understands the background and subject matter of the project
- Understands the research objectives
- Has collected all the sponsor's ideas
- Helped develop the topic guide
- Has the topic guide memorized
- Was ready before the group assembled

TOTAL

B. Moderator's manner

Rating

- Is relaxed and friendly
- Stimulates group interaction
- Generates enthusiasm and involvement
- Listens constructively
- Displays warmth and empathy
- Is nonjudgmental
- Probes without leading
- Conveys "incomplete understanding" effectively
- Is sensitive to the level of group disclosure
- Blends in, but controls
- Improvises when necessary
- Is flexible when pursuing new ideas
- Discusses, but does not question
- Displays neutral body language and facial expressions

TOTAL

C. Moderator's handling of group influences

Rating

- Discourages simultaneous talking
- Retains group spontaneity
- Discourages irrelevant conversation
- Discourages intellectualizing by respondents
- Permits individual differences of opinion
- Brings shy or unresponsive group members into the discussion
- Controls dominant or disruptive group members

TOTAL



III. Structure of the Group Discussion

Introduction: Moderator's Opening

	YES	NO
Put the respondents at ease	()	()
Explained the general purpose of the group	()	()
Encouraged conflicting opinions	()	()
Established moderator neutrality	()	()
Established openness: no right or wrong answers	()	()
Gave group "rules"	()	()
Began developing a rapport with the respondents	()	()
Provided a smooth transition to the next phase	()	()

Phase I: Warm-up

Established a good rapport with the respondents	()	()
Obtained necessary background information	()	()
Began stimulating group interaction	()	()
Give all respondents an opportunity to speak	()	()
Successfully diminished speech anxiety	()	()
Established the group as a "safe place"	()	()
Enabled group members to know each other	()	()
Stayed within the time limits	()	()
Provided a smooth transition to the next phase	()	()

Phase II: Body of the Group Discussion

Moved from the general to the specific	()	()
Did not disclose key issues prematurely	()	()
Obtained a depth of response to key issues	()	()
Obtained members' true feelings about topics	()	()
Linked information into a cohesive whole	()	()
Exhibited appropriate facilitating behavior	()	()
Exhibited appropriate controlling behavior	()	()
Provided a smooth transition to the next phase	()	()

Phase III: Closure

Identified key themes	()	()
Summarized key ideas	()	()
Revealed the strength of attitudes	()	()
Consolidated group feelings about issues	()	()
Identified individual differences of opinion	()	()
Gathered all respondent comments	()	()

IV. Post-Group Evaluation Issues

- | | YES | NO |
|--|-----|-----|
| • Is a substantial amount of post-group analysis necessary to separate true respondent feelings from those expressed due to moderator demands? | () | () |
| • Was this group conducted so that it can be evaluated across a series of groups, or will differences cloud the evaluation? | () | () |
| • Was the group outline sensitive to differences in group composition so that <i>differences</i> between groups in a series will be highlighted? | () | () |

V. Follow-Up Action

- Were all management information needs met? If not, how can these information gaps be filled?
- Were hypotheses developed that require follow-up? If so, how will these be pursued?
- Are more groups needed? If so, what are the purpose and objectives of these groups?
- Does the topic guide need revising? If so, in what way?
- Do certain findings need verification by quantitative research? If yes, what needs to be quantified?

Conducting a truly effective and useful focus group requires a high order of skill in handling the problems that emerge within any group dynamic. In some cases, difficulties may relate to the group as a whole, while others occur as a result of the behavior of individual respondents. In either case, the results of the group may be seriously flawed if these problems are not skillfully dealt with. The following section identifies some of the most common problems that occur during a focus group and mentions strategies commonly used for handling them.

The conforming group session

In this group, members comply or agree with the "party line." Because focus groups generally deal with personal attitudes and beliefs that are not readily verifiable, there is a danger that group members will verbalize responses that simply go along with what other respondents have said and that do not express their true individual feelings. This is particularly problematic because it is difficult to determine whether respondents are conforming or whether a genuine consensus exists.

Strategy: Emphasize respondents' freedom to disagree during the opening section of the group and demonstrate respect for divergent opinions throughout the group. Another tactic is to have respondents report their opinions regarding a key issue secretly at first, followed by an open discussion. This may be accomplished by having each respondent note his or her opinion on a piece of paper as the issue is introduced to the group. Although the paper is never viewed, it forces the group member to take a position that is less easily swayed by others in the group. Less literate respondents can do this by using pictorial scales, such as the happy face scales.

The dull group session

The dull group is characterized by a general lack of enthusiasm and involvement on a group level. General apathy among group members may be due to factors outside the group situation. For example, respondents may have felt forced to attend the group or may be suspicious of the group process. Also, the subject matter may be intimidating or simply uninteresting to the group, or respondents may not be properly qualified for the discussion. Respondent apathy also may occur as a result of factors *within* the group. For example, the group may be too large, making interaction difficult. It may be over-organized and inflexible so that spontaneity is stifled, or it may be too loosely organized, leaving respondents dismayed. The moderator's tone may be too

formal, intimidating respondents, or too casual, appearing phony to the group. The group may proceed too quickly, preventing thoughtful respondents from participating, or too slowly, creating boredom on the part of group members.

Strategy: Set up the group realistically and thoughtfully in order to eliminate many outside factors that contribute to group apathy. A skillful and experienced moderator will circumvent many of the inside contributing factors. In addition, the following specific tactics may be useful in stimulating a dull group:

- If the subject matter does not seem to interest respondents, enthusiasm may be enhanced by asking the group to interact with the topic in a novel manner, such as creating personal stories around a key issue.
- If the subject matter seems too remote or abstract for respondents to relate to, it may be made more concrete by using stimulus materials such as concept boards or pictures of situations related to the topic area.
- If the subject matter seems too intimidating or personal, group members may be encouraged to talk by using projective techniques (see Section 5).
- Respondent involvement may occasionally be increased by somewhat confrontational behavior on the part of the moderator.
- Occasionally a short break will be required, permitting group members to move around and have side conversations that can be pursued later. This allows the moderator to "re-group," possibly consult with other members of the team and get a fresh start.

Special respondent problems

In addition to problems that concern the group as a whole, there are a number of problems that frequently occur with individual respondents. These include:

The dominating respondent. This person attempts to take over the group—initiates the conversations, defends his/her position, seeks to influence others and must have the last word.

Strategy I: Avoid eye contact, or turn body away from the dominating respondent. Call on other members of the group by name. If necessary, politely tell the dominating respondent that although his/her thoughts are very interesting, you'd like to have the ideas of other group members as well.

Strategy II: On occasion it may be necessary to ask a dominating respondent to leave the group. This can be done by explaining to the respondent that "because you know so much about _____, we'd like you to complete a more detailed, in-depth questionnaire on the

subject." A "diversionary" questionnaire can then be administered to the dominant group member outside of the group room.

The timid respondent. This person is hesitant to speak at all, may be generally shy or anxious about the group situation, may or not feel his/her opinions are worthwhile.

Strategy: Use eye contact to pull the timid group member into the discussion and to communicate interest in what he/she has to say. Observe the timid member closely to see when he/she is ready to speak. If necessary, find an easy, nonthreatening question and encourage a direct response. If respondent becomes too ill at ease, continue the discussion with other respondents and come back to him/her later.

The expert respondent. This is a special variety of dominating respondent. Even if he/she is not attempting to lead the group, others will defer to him/her and their own opinions will be stifled.

Strategy: Determine if the respondent is a genuine expert or a pseudo-expert. If genuine, remind him/her that all comments are important and that others should be permitted to contribute, or ask the expert to respond only after others have been heard. It may also help to preface issues with "I know John is probably aware of. . . ."

If the respondent is a pseudo-expert, ask other group members to comment on his/her responses. It may even be necessary to be forceful and challenge him/her as much as the group will tolerate.

The verbose respondent. This person goes on and on, seemingly without end or purpose—may be a compulsive talker, or may be excessively nervous.

Strategy: Be more directive. Use probes to request specificity and concreteness. Direct the respondent back to the topic at hand. It may be necessary to politely interrupt him/her. Remind the respondent of the many topics you need to cover in a limited time frame. Do all of this carefully without alienating the respondent.

The irrelevant respondent. This person makes comments that don't relate to the topic area and can steer the group off the subject. He/she may be truly unknowledgeable, nervous or simply a poor listener.

Strategy: Try restating the question or paraphrasing. Consider coming back to the question later.

The incomplete respondent. This person gives partial answers or even *nonresponses*, such as "I don't know." These respondents are especially frustrating. Their behavior often comes from lack of confidence or unusually high anxiety.

Strategy: Work on strengthening rapport early in the discussion in order to prevent this from happening throughout the group. Try to get elaboration through restatement. Use other probing techniques.

The confused respondent. This person appears confused or overwhelmed during the group. He/she communicates this either verbally or nonverbally.

Strategy: Acknowledge the situation ("You seem confused. . . .") Try rephrasing the question, or perhaps provide an example. Attempt to ask the question again later in the interview.

The overly positive respondent. This person is glowingly positive in all responses. He/she may want to please you, to tell you what he/she thinks you want to hear.

Strategy: Remind the respondent of what he/she has been told during the warm-up: that you want to hear both positives and negatives. Try playing devil's advocate ("I've heard some people say just the opposite. . . ."). Try third-person wordings ("What about other people that you know? How do you think they would feel?").

The negative respondent. This person is negative in all responses. He/she may be using this interview to vent years of frustration and hostility. He/she may be determined not to tell you any favorable ideas or information.

Strategy: Be careful. Avoid reacting defensively. Try to defuse the respondent by acknowledging his/her hostility or negativism ("You seem to be angry about this. That's okay, because I want to find out how you really feel. . . ."). As above, try playing devil's advocate or probing in the third person.

The hostile respondent. This person "attacks" the moderator personally.

Strategy: Again, use care. Try to defuse the respondent by acknowledging the situation. Don't react defensively! Try a short period of silence. Put the onus on him/her to explain the reasons for the attack.

The disrupting respondent. This person disrupts the equilibrium of the conversation—he/she may state that another group member's ideas are wrong or that the moderator's questions are stupid.

Strategy: Attempt to stabilize the discussion quickly. Ask other participants to comment on the disrupting respondent's statement. (This may be dangerous if the disruptive statement embarrassed or angered someone.) Or present an alternative point of view: "That's interesting, but I've heard some people feel. . . ." This gives other respondents the opportunity to choose one side or the other and continue the discussion.

The questioning respondent. This person continues to ask the moderator for his/her opinions and feelings.

Strategy: Plead lack of experience or expertise on the subject. If that is inappropriate, acknowledge the situation ("Like anyone else, of course I have an opinion about this, but our purpose today is to find out how you feel. . . .").

If necessary, offer to give your opinions after the discussion is over. Another approach is to inquire about the thoughts and feelings that led to the respondent's questions. Try restating the question to the group.

Loss of control of the focus group

A skillful moderator will rarely lose control; however, a more inexperienced moderator may be quite anxious about losing control, and this anxiety may be manifested in many ways. Here are some signs to look for:

- Asking leading questions—those that imply the moderator already knows the answer.
- Asking double-barreled questions—asking two or more questions before giving the respondent a chance to answer the first question.
- Interrupting unnecessarily—cutting off a respondent in anticipation of his/her answer.
- Making assumptive statements—the moderator infers something not yet stated by the respondent.
- Giving advice to a respondent about what he/she should do.
- Changing topics too quickly—not allowing the respondent to complete his/her thoughts in one area before moving to another.

A SUMMARY OF KEY STEPS IN CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH

1. **Define the subject matter**—the research question or problem—and specify the research objectives. Be sure the research findings are actionable and relevant to program planning or decision making.
2. **Verify the method.** Be sure that the objectives of the research are best met by conducting focus groups and not by some other type of research. Refer to the selection grids.
3. **Define the qualifications of the research respondents.** Be specific. List all of the factors that can influence the topic (number and age of children in the household, etc.), and then determine which ones are critical for the research.

4. **Establish homogeneous groups.** Determine which respondent variables will affect the research findings, and set up separate groups so that respondents are similar in terms of the key variables. It is advisable to conduct at least two group sessions for each different variable.
5. **Develop the recruiting/screening questionnaire.** In rural areas it may be necessary to have the village chief or another knowledgeable authority select the group respondents rather than to use a questionnaire screening. In such cases it is always advisable to have a member of the research team accompany the village leader on recruiting visits to be sure the respondents meet the group requirements and that the village leader does not bias them or reveal too much information about the subject matter.
6. **Select the focus group moderator and the rest of the team.** It may be necessary to have more than one moderator (male and female) and to have team members who are fluent in different languages, who have specific cultural knowledge, and who have specific technical knowledge (medical practitioners and/or communication specialists, for example).
7. **Select supporting materials for the group discussion.** It may be necessary to use stimulus materials to encourage the discussion. Use two tape recorders if possible—one as a back-up.
8. **Select the focus group sites.** Be realistic about accessibility and receptivity in certain regions. Choose sites where a comfortable, quiet, private group can be set up.
9. **Select the date, time and length of each group.** Be sure there are no conflicts with special days (holidays, market days) or with individual activities (household chores).
10. **Develop the topic guide.** Work with the moderator and the rest of the team to develop a carefully thought-out topic guide or guides. Be sure only questions that relate to the objectives of the study are addressed.
11. **Conduct the focus group.** Be sure that all logistics are handled in advance and that all members of the team—moderator, observer, recorder, etc.—are clear about their responsibilities.
12. **Analyze and interpret the focus group findings.** Reviewing the focus group tapes and constructing the report can be done by the moderator, alone or in conjunction with another team member. It is also advisable to formally present the conclusions, recommendations and key findings to program management.
13. **Translate the research results into an action plan.** Eliminate actions that are not realistic or feasible; pursue actions that are readily implemented and involve minimal risk; further research areas of uncertainty or major risk.

The focus group report generally contains a description of the key findings of the research and an in-depth analysis of those findings. The final analysis requires a high order of skill and insight as well as a thorough working knowledge of the subject matter and the research goals. A good analysis will pull together and synthesize the many different patterns that emerged in the research so that they build upon each other; the analysis ultimately goes beyond the data.

STEPS INVOLVED IN PREPARING THE FOCUS GROUP REPORT

Because of the subjectivity of focus group research and the use of insight and intuition to interpret it, listing the steps of report writing is difficult and somewhat artificial. However, the following are some useful guidelines:

1. **Determine who will write the report.** In most cases the moderator will prepare the report; however, some other member of the team may be skilled at analysis and reporting. If the subject is technical, the report may be prepared jointly by a skilled researcher and someone with professional expertise in the technical area (such as a nutritionist or a physician).

2. **Develop a plan for analysis.** If the focus group research was properly planned, many of the components of the analysis are already prepared and consist of the following:

- The background of the research.
- The general purpose of the research and the specific informational objectives.
- The methodology and rationale for the design chosen.
- Details of the focus group discussion. These generally follow the topics on the topic guide.
- Screening questionnaire, self-administered questionnaires and any other materials presented to the group members, such as advertising concepts.

3. **Analyze the group content.** The analyst will generally:

- Listen again to the cassettes. It is very difficult to remember accurately all that has been said in the groups. Also, because several days usually separate the groups, it is important to get a lighter picture of this group discussion by re-listening in a closer time frame.
- Regroup the research findings according to key areas of interest. These generally align with the topic guide. It may also be necessary to separate results by different respondent qualifications (e.g., users vs.

non-users) to make the comparison and contrast task easier

- Identify the different positions or dimensions that emerged regarding each key topic area. This may be as simple as identifying those who accepted a poster and those who rejected it, or it may be far more complex.
 - Sum up each of the different positions and assess the strength of each or the degree to which each position was held by the group members.
 - Pull out verbatim phrases that best represent each position.
4. **Synthesize the group discussion.** This is the most difficult aspect of report writing and the process that requires the most thought, time and skill.
- Reread the transcriptions or summary notes of each discussion made by the moderator or any observers.
 - Identify the constants that emerged regarding each topic area. (For example, mothers' guilt feelings may be a constant thread that emerged during discussions on childhood illness.)
 - Amplify and illuminate these constants based upon other findings that emerged in the groups, that is, interpret them. (For example, the degree to which a mother feels guilt about her child's illness may be related to some other respondent factor or may be tied to only certain types of illness.)
 - Identify the differences and divergences in each topic area. Amplify and illuminate these positions based on surrounding group findings. (For example, respondents may have separated themselves by "traditional" vs. "liberal" attitudes toward child rearing, or three major clusters of concern may have arisen regarding the use of ORS.)
 - Draw out and synthesize any themes or patterns that emerged in the group and cut across the topic areas. Attempt to amplify and illuminate these patterns based upon the surrounding group findings. (For example, the clusters or threads of response that emerged may be interrelated or tied to other demographics or historical respondent factors.)
5. **Create an overall, global synthesis of the focus groups.** This involves the following:
- Spend some time thinking about the major objectives of the research and the key decisions/actions that are to be taken.
 - Based on the summary of the groups' content, address each key objective/action area with either key insights, recommendations or hypotheses or by specifying further information needs. These needs may be addressed through additional focus groups, quantitative research or some other means.

COMMON MISTAKES MADE IN INTERPRETING FOCUS GROUP REPORT

The most common mistakes by far in interpreting focus groups are the following:

1. Attempting to *quantify* the focus group results.
2. Taking respondents' comments at *face value* (literally), rather than looking beneath the surface.
3. Failing to *synthesize* and *conceptualize* findings of discussions.

Let's look at each of these common mistakes separately.

Mistake 1: Quantifying focus groups results.

Focus groups should NEVER be interpreted by a head count. It is *always* inappropriate to say, "twenty percent of the focus group respondents said _____" or "Four out of five respondents felt that _____."

Because of sampling bias and group dynamics, such statements may not only be inappropriate but may often actually be *wrong*. Misleading conclusions can be drawn from such statements, and bad program decisions can be made on the basis of such conclusions.

Sometimes the focus group researcher will justify a quantified analysis because of the large number of groups that were conducted. For example, in one study in Latin America, fifty focus groups with a total of 430 respondents were conducted. In this case, the researcher probably conducted *too many* groups. There is no reason to conduct such a large number of focus groups unless (1) the topic under investigation requires looking at many different subsets of respondents (different ages, sexes, geographic locations and so forth) or, (2) new findings emerged with each set of groups so that the topic guide needs to be revised and new hypotheses and subtopics are investigated with each new round of groups.

Unless such circumstances are present, the more appropriate approach would be to develop a quantitative questionnaire based upon findings from the initial four to six focus groups and then to conduct a small survey among 300 to 350 respondents. These quantified results would very likely be more valid and usable to program management.

Mistake 2: Taking respondents' comments at face value rather than looking beneath the surface.

Focus groups are a means to get beneath the surface of responses. This is true partially because people often *do not know* what they really feel about a subject, and if they *do* know, they often do not know how to express it. Therefore, asking the respondents directly and interpreting responses literally can lead to misleading results and conclusions.

Example: In one country, concepts for a condom print ad were being evaluated among male focus group participants. Previous research showed that the target group of men were not particularly motivated by advertising pleas to "act responsibly" and use a condom. On the other hand, men found it very important to their self image to be perceived as strong, in control and the protector of their families—to be heroes, in a sense.

The focus group research conducted in this country revealed that the condom ad concept men responded to most favorably was one in which a beaming woman was holding her robust young child and declaring what was the English equivalent of "my son the doctor!" In the text of the ad, the woman presenter praised her husband for his wisdom and his caring and for taking control of the situation by deciding to use a condom to ensure spacing between her young child and their next one. She expressed her gratitude toward her husband and the confidence she now had that her young child's future position in life could be ensured as a result of her husband's actions.

Although the focus group participants' overall reaction to this approach was very positive, the focus group moderator then went on to ask the respondents, "Who do you think this ad is directed to?" The respondents indicated that, since the ad depicted a woman, it must therefore be directed toward a woman. The ad was scrapped by management because the *target audience for the ad was men*.

This is one form of taking the respondent too literally. First, the question that was asked was itself too literal and direct. A better questioning approach might have been to ask "What do you think this woman's husband would be like?" If respondents attributed positive, heroic qualities to the husband, the advertising concept could have been assessed as "on strategy" and effective in positioning the husband as hero. If the moderator then went on to ask respondents whether the woman's husband was "someone they would like to know" or "someone like themselves" and then probed "why" in each case, more insight on the effectiveness of the ad in achieving its objective could have been gained. Conversely, had such probing revealed that respondents had no impression of what this woman's husband was like, or that their impression was in some way negative or did not hit upon the correct image or appeal that was intended by the ad, then management would have known for sure that the ad was *not* meeting its objectives. Instead, a potentially good ad was eliminated because the wrong response (the literal one) was taken at face value.

Example: In another country, posters for a family planning product were being evaluated. The poster depicted a well-dressed, prosperous and healthy-looking woman. During the group discussion, reactions to the woman were probed. Although respondents reacted to her quite positively, they pointed out that their own personal life was quite different from what hers appeared to be—they did not look as well-cared for, prosperous or healthy. Based on this, the focus group moderator's initial

interpretation was that the posters should be changed to depict a poor, more tired-looking woman, so that the target-audience would "identify" with her.

The findings from this focus group were then discussed with management and a new topic guide was developed so that, in subsequent focus groups, the moderator could distinguish between comments related to what the respondents identified with in *aspiration*, not just in reality. Additional probing and indirect questions revealed that focus group participants clearly desired the traits that they saw in the prosperous-looking woman and, not only that, they felt that having fewer, better-spaced children would very likely lead to health, prosperity and the time to care for oneself as depicted by the woman in the poster.

Here, the initial interpretation was too literal. An effective image (the prosperous woman) could have been discarded and replaced by a less effective one if the moderator had not probed beneath the surface to obtain less direct responses to the issue of presenter identification. Conversely, had this probing revealed that the woman's image was simply so far distant from that of the respondents that they had no thoughts about her at all or that they found the image totally unobtainable, then this would have indicated that the image did *not* work, even as an aspiration for respondents.

Example: During research to develop a package for a family planning product, respondents were asked directly, "What design do you think is most appropriate for a family planning product?" Respondents pointed out that none of the designs being evaluated showed a family at all. They then went on to discuss family size and indicated that it was typical for families in their culture to have many children. As a result, a new set of packages was designed by the agency, each of which included a family portrait on the front of the package. Not surprisingly, respondents indicated that the packet that displayed the largest family was "more appropriate."

Here, respondents were asked to contribute to the creative process in a manner that was far too literal and concrete. As a result, the behavior that the program was attempting to change (large families) was inadvertently reinforced by the package design itself. A better approach might have been to set communication objectives for the package (attractiveness, quality perceptions, efficacy perceptions, feelings of safety, etc.) and to observe *indirectly* the way in which respondents reacted to the package. In this way, management could either confirm or reject the packages in terms of their ability to meet those design objectives.

The above are all examples of mistakes that can be made through *literal* rather than *conceptual* interpretation of focus groups. They also point out another common mistake—that of turning the respondents themselves into experts. It is almost never useful to ask the respondent what is "correct" in a piece of advertising, a poster, a package design or some other form of creative material. *The respondents do not know management's strategy.* And they should not know it.

In attempting to conduct a true conceptual analysis, it is important for the researcher to keep in mind the following clues:

1. What was *not said* is often as important as what was said.
2. *Who* said what in the focus group is often very important.
3. *How much* was said about a topic is quite revealing.
4. The *order* in which things were said is often key in understanding the issue.
5. The *way* in which things were said is frequently very important.

The following illustrates several of these key clues.

In one Asian country, focus groups were conducted to examine attitudes toward family planning and family planning products. As part of the study, it was hypothesized that respondents did not know or understand the difference between permanent family planning methods (sterilization) and temporary methods of family planning such as pills or condoms.

First, the focus groups revealed that participants clearly knew the difference between temporary and permanent methods. Participants were able to cite in detail and with abundance the various methods available to them and the pros and cons of each method as they perceived them. The *amount* of spontaneous discussion that emerged about each method and the distinctions that respondents spontaneously provided indicated that more knowledge was present than had been originally hypothesized.

However, the researcher noted that when discussing family planning, limiting family size was always talked about first, before spacing child births. The *order* of these responses was, therefore, significant in revealing that methods to limit family size (generally sterilization) were thought of first and were understood better by respondents.

Also, when focus group participants talked about the benefits of a small family versus those of a well-spaced family, the *way* they discussed this topic was quite revealing: They spoke concretely of the benefits of a small family, gave real examples and used the first person. In comparison, respondents described spacing benefits more vaguely, did not cite concrete examples and used a third-person voice. This suggested that spacing benefits existed more in theory for these respondents and that few models existed for them to observe and verify these theoretical benefits.

Also, many respondents argued about the value of having a small family versus having a large one. Some respondents strongly defended the acceptability of having only one child or having only female children while others argued for the "correctness" of a large, male-dominated family. Therefore, the *way* in which respondents discussed this issue—with animation and raised voices, defending positions, risking disagreement and argument by other group members—suggested that the respondents were doing more than simply giving lip service to nontraditional views.

And of course *who* makes what comment in a focus group is also revealing. This is obvious when a dominating respondent is the head of the family planning group in a small village and is making most of

the positive comments related to family planning. One must put these comments in perspective. On the other hand, when a shy respondent finally speaks up in a group to defend a particular position, it is fairly safe to assume that this respondent feels quite strongly about what he/she has said, and this should be put in perspective also.

Mistake 3: Failing to synthesize and conceptualize the findings of a focus group.

This mistake often comes about as a result of lack of rigor (often referred to as laziness) on the part of the researcher and also from a lack of clarity about what the broad objectives of the research are and how the research is to be applied.

Respondents will *not* spontaneously speak in a way that answers the big questions management is concerned with. Conversely, respondents will generally go off on tangents or give too much detail on some subjects and not enough on others. It is the responsibility of the researcher to sift through all of these comments, highlight what is important and develop a clear picture and recommendations for management.

Therefore, in reviewing the transcripts or tapes of focus groups, the researcher looks for threads that run through all of the groups conducted in the series. It often helps for the researcher to label these threads so that it is easier to contrast and compare them and for management to understand them.

For example, after listening to a series of group discussions on family planning methods, the researcher in one African study was able to see that method choice was largely determined by four key variables: convenience, safety, accessibility and perceived effectiveness. These four clusters were then described fully and key respondent quotes were used to exemplify each cluster for management. It was then necessary for the researcher to look further and to determine whether some specific subdimensions existed within each of the four major ones. The researcher determined, for example, that convenience was discussed in terms of several subdimensions: (1) ease of use, (2) portability and (3) ease of obtaining. Significant respondent quotes were cited for each of these subdimensions and each was described fully by the researcher. Further analysis led the researcher to create even deeper subdivisions. For example, the researcher determined that "ease of use" was mentioned by respondents to imply (1) easy to apply, (2) easy to remember, (3) easy to store and (4) easy to dispose of.

Once the researcher had pulled together the many diverse respondent comments in a way that made it easy for management to understand them, the pros and cons of each of the identified dimensions and methods were compared and contrasted. The contrasts between user and non-user comments were illuminated to make the findings even more understandable to management.

This process of identifying and labeling the threads, dimensions, or themes of a topic is done to aid understanding and to help the report reader or management grasp the threads of discussion in a way that is integrated rather than scattered. It should never be done as an end in itself. But once done and highlighted by quotes from respondents, it serves to bring the consumer to life for management.

The final step is, of course, to conduct an overall global synthesis that leads directly to management actions, recommendations, and insights.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE FOCUS GROUP REPORT

The final focus group report will generally follow logically from project planning and the analytic plan. The report will generally consist of the following sections:

- Executive Summary
- Background
- Objectives
- Methodology
- Disclaimer (explains the limitations of qualitative research and cautions against projecting results)
- Findings
- Conclusions and Recommendations
- Appendix
 - Moderator's Topic Guide
 - Screening Questionnaire
 - Any Self-Administered Questionnaires
 - Stimulus Materials

Special Note: The key to analysis and reporting is to remember that focus groups are not quantitative and, although it is often useful to report the degree of intensity or consensus that was reached regarding a topic, focus group findings should not be counted or quantified.

REPORT TITLE

SUBMITTED TO: text text text text text text text text

PRODUCT: text text text text text text text text

Submitted by: text text text text text
text text text text

DATE: text text text

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APPENDIX

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

RECRUITING SCRIPT

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DISPLAY MATERIALS

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