

PN ABK068
ISN 74915

FIELD NOTE

**OF LOGIC AND LOGISTICS:
TRAINING ECUADORAN HEALTH COMMUNICATION PROFESSIONALS
IN THE USE OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUES**

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Sponsored by the
Office of Health and Office of Education
Bureau for Science and Technology
United States Agency for International Development
Academy for Educational Development

University of Pennsylvania, Applied Communications Technology, Needham Porter Novelli, and PATH

BACKGROUND

Qualitative formative research techniques--including focus groups and in-depth interviews--have long been used by market researchers to guide the development of effective messages for advertising and promotional programs. In addition to providing information for program design and message development which complements that provided by quantitative methods, these qualitative research tools are relatively inexpensive and can be used in a timely manner. These aspects make them especially attractive for application in developing countries' social programs.

This paper describes the field experience of a consultant to the HEALTHCOM project, who conducted a five-day seminar on the use of qualitative research, primarily focus groups, with a group of health communication professionals involved in Ecuador's PREMI project in child survival. The aim of this field note is to describe the lessons learned by the consultant in undertaking what might be called a "technology transfer" between an advertising professional from the United States, and health communication professionals in developing countries. Briefly, the seminar content was as follows:

Day One (AM and PM): Introduction and Overview

After introductions, the consultant described the goal of the seminar--to provide participants with information about how qualitative research techniques, such as focus groups and in-depth interviews, can be used most effectively to support the development of health communication programs. This was followed by an overview of qualitative research techniques, including the following elements:

- an explanation of how qualitative techniques complement quantitative methods and what each is trying to achieve;
- a brief historical context for the emergence of qualitative methodology;
- practical advantages (e.g. costs and flexibility) of qualitative methods and also some inherent problems (e.g. subjectivity of analysis);
- the criteria for choosing between the two primary qualitative research methods (focus groups and in-depth interviews);
- description (with examples) of how qualitative research contributes to developing communication programs.

Day Two (AM): Setting up Focus Groups and Developing Topic Guides

Seminar participants received guidelines for deciding on the number of focus groups to conduct, the ideal size and composition of each group. The

characteristics of the ideal group setting were also described. Seminar participants took part in an exercise in which they were given a health communication program description and asked to develop an ideal qualitative research project design.

Day Two (PM):

Participants received guidelines for the development of a focus group or in-depth interview topic guide. After this, participants were asked to pick a communication issue that would serve as the basis for their experiential learning for the remainder of the week. They selected the topic, "A Woman as President of Ecuador." For the afternoon exercises, seminar participants were divided into two work groups and each group developed a focus group topic guide on this issue.

Day Three (AM and PM): Conducting Focus Groups

Participants received guidelines for moderating a focus group and discussed these, as well as special probing techniques (e.g. role playing, word associations); the characteristics of a good moderator; the process of moderating a group (warm-up, body of discussion, closing); and techniques for responding to typical "problem" participants. The group was also shown an instructional videotape demonstrating moderating techniques. Using the topic guides created the previous day (which had been combined, edited, and elaborated by the instructor), the entire seminar class conducted a focus group among themselves, with each participant having an opportunity to play the role of moderator and notetaker.

Day Four (AM and PM): Analyzing Focus Group Data and Report Preparation

Guidelines and specific steps for analyzing focus group data were presented and discussed at length. Following this discussion, participants were again broken into two work groups and each group was given the task of analyzing and preparing a preliminary report of the "findings" from the self-conducted focus group of the previous day. The instructor consulted with each group in its analysis and report-preparation efforts.

Day Five (AM and PM): Report Writing (cont.) and Wrap-up

Participants reviewed and discussed the reports drafted by each group. Special emphasis was given to translating findings into practical implications and conclusions that could contribute to the development of a communication campaign. The remainder of the final session included a discussion of the practical problems that must be overcome in applying the focus group technique in Ecuador, and a review of the key points of the entire week's presentation.

LOGISTICS: DOING FOCUS GROUPS "RIGHT" IN ECUADOR

Focus group research to support marketing communication has yet to establish itself as a "core discipline" in the United States. Quantitative research methods draw upon the established academic standards of the social science community. In contrast, marketing research professionals have only recently begun the process of establishing consensual guidelines on the ways in which focus groups should be planned, conducted, analyzed and reported.¹

With or without established standards, however, the use of focus group research methods has increased tremendously over the past twenty years. And, along with their increased popularity has come an increase in the technological sophistication of focus group facilities and a widely-shared set of "common law" guidelines for evaluating the quality of recording techniques. Presenting Ecuadoran health communication professionals with these "state of the art" focus group practices as used in the United States led to a series of discussions which highlighted the necessity of adapting focus group methods to meet the needs and realities of health communicators in developing countries. Following are the issues that were discussed.

Group Composition and Recruitment

In the United States, focus groups can be arranged to satisfy almost any specifications. Participants are commonly recruited randomly via telephone, and lists of names are often obtained from previous qualitative, quantitative, or "mall intercept" studies, newspaper advertisements, mailing lists, and lists of purchasers of certain products. Since many of the key target audiences for Ecuadoran focus groups on child survival are poor and live in suburban or rural villages, these recruitment procedures are, for the most part, impossible. Potential participants do not have telephones, do not go to shopping malls, and often are not literate. Successful recruitment of focus group participants in Ecuador is therefore often achieved by researchers making personal visits to the village and going door-to-door to initiate contact.

¹Focus Groups: Issues and Approaches. Published by the Advertising Research Foundation in 1985, and Transcript Proceedings on Qualitative Research, also published by the Advertising Research Foundation in 1985, provide the best documentation to date of the status of the standards-setting process in the United States.

In addition, although there are exceptions, the general rule in groups conducted in the United States is that respondents should not be acquainted with one another prior to their participation in the group discussion. Such a prohibition for a group to be conducted among women of an Ecuadoran village is also impractical. It is more often the case that all women in the group will be acquainted. Whatever the social dynamics of the relationships and their potential for distorting the findings from the group discussion, the rule of non-acquaintance must be relaxed for recruitment to succeed.

Finally, there is a general rule in the United States that the purpose and issues to be addressed in the discussion groups should not be revealed during the screening/solicitation interview. Researchers do not want participants to arrive with pre-determined opinions and attitudes based on their beliefs about the subject of discussion, or sentiments towards the sponsors of the research. However, Ecuadoran health communicators pointed out that such a prohibition would make recruitment of groups in Ecuador extremely difficult.

People living in the United States are likely to be quite familiar with the "implicit social contract" inherent in research participation. They understand that by their acceptance of an incentive to participate in a research project they are expected to allow researchers to withhold such information for the sake of maintaining the integrity of the study. Ecuadorans, particularly those of greatest interest to health communicators, have no such familiarity with social science research protocol. In fact, they are likely to be extremely suspicious of researchers' motives and have unwarranted fears about the consequences of cooperating with research investigations.

One solution we discussed was to begin recruitment in an Ecuadoran village by identifying a recognized social leader among the target group of interest, describing the purpose and nature of the research in some detail, and gaining his or her trust. This individual would then act as a recruitment intermediary--helping researchers to identify and solicit participants without revealing the details of the study.

Facilities

A typical focus group conducted in the United States occurs at a research facility specifically designed for that purpose. Participants are seated around a "focus group" table (although arguments about the optimal shape continue), are observed through a one-way mirror by observers and notetakers, recorded on audiotapes (now almost invariably with simultaneous back-up tapes), and frequently videotaped through the one-way

mirror. Moreover, a host of additional audiovisual aids (audio- and videotape recorders and monitors) are available for presenting stimulus materials to participants. While marketing researchers in the United States have come to take these facilities and audiovisual accoutrements of focus groups for granted, their Ecuadoran counterparts are often faced with the prospect of conducting groups without any of these amenities.

At the core, all that is required to conduct a successful focus group discussion is a moderator, a notetaker (although an audiotape recorder is of tremendous benefit) and a quiet setting large enough to accommodate all participating respondents and researchers. Beyond these basics, our discussion focused on two questions: 1) where the notetaker should sit so as to be as unobtrusive as possible, and 2) which role--moderator or notetaker--should be played by the more senior researcher if tape recording is not possible.

Regarding the first question, we agreed that the notetaker should not be seated at the table with the moderator and other participants; that the notetaker should not, under any circumstances, interrupt or participate in the group; that the presence of other observers should be discouraged; and, if there were to be observers present, they should remain as unobtrusive as possible.

The second question was more difficult to answer. For groups conducted in the United States, it is actually quite common to have three researchers present. One middle- or senior-level researcher moderates the group, one junior-level researcher takes notes from behind the one-way mirror, and another senior-level researcher, also behind the mirror, observes the discussion. The benefit of having this third senior research observer present is that he or she can attend to the content and meaning of the groups' responses, and, unlike the moderator, need not attend to the "process" requirements of running the discussion (e.g. controlling the potential "dominating" or "hostile" participant). The absence of a tape recorder makes the role of notetaker extremely important. The moderator, simply as a function of the moderating role, does not always attend to all the meaningful content of the group discussion. The notetaker must be relied upon to ensure that all important comments and reactions are documented. Based on our discussion of these issues, we agreed that, ideally, two senior-level researchers--one to moderate and one to take notes--should be involved in running the focus groups when tape recording is not possible.

LOGIC: ENCOURAGING THE INTERPRETIVE LEAP OF FAITH

Although the logistical problems of conducting focus groups in Ecuador presented both a challenge and a learning experience for trainer and seminar participants alike, they paled before the problems encountered in conveying the logic and principles that underlie the analysis of focus group data.

In part the problem is simply inherent to the task. Analysis of focus groups is quite unlike analysis of quantitative data; it borrows more from literary, historical, and even psychoanalytic techniques than from statistical sampling procedures or from the standard analytic techniques of the social sciences. Essentially, the process encompasses three phases: 1) Breakdown of responses-- the researcher reviews the content of the discussions (listens to tapes/reads notes), groups findings according to key areas of interest, and identifies the different positions that emerged in each topic area and the strength or the degree to which each position was held by the group members; 2) Initial Synthesis-- the researcher identifies the "constants" as well as the differences and divergences which emerged regarding each topic area and interprets these constants/differences in the context of other group findings; and 3) Global Synthesis-- the researcher draws out themes or patterns which emerged in the group and that cut across the topic areas. Based on this "global synthesis," the researcher addresses the major objectives of the research with key insights, recommendations, or hypotheses to guide the communication decisions/actions which are to be taken.

Beyond this basic description of the analytic process, however, this consultant resorted to metaphor and example to convey something of the "art" of getting the greatest possible benefits of the focus group method. Some examples were as follows:

- "Beware the dog barking in the night." In focus group analysis, what people do not say can be as important as what they do say. Just as Sherlock Holmes was led to suspect an individual whose familiarity with the watch dog resulted in the hound's "non-barking behavior," focus group participants' avoidance of a topic or lack of reaction can "speak volumes" to the skilled analyst. An example, in fact, occurred during the "practice focus group" the seminar participants had conducted among themselves on the topic of "A Woman as President of Ecuador." During the entire two-hour discussion, none of the participants (predominantly women) reacted with anger to the

consensually-held view that there were no short-term prospects for women as presidential candidates. The absence of this emotion was a valuable piece of data.

- "Listen to what people mean, not just what they say." Many unfortunate men or women "know" they've lost the affections of their partners, not from the lack of the partners' protestations of love (according to Shakespeare, in fact, they may hear such protestations more often!) but from the way in which the protestations are expressed. The advantage of focus groups over quantitative methods is that they provide the skilled analyst with the context--nonverbal cues, other participants' reactions, and so forth--with which to make more insightful interpretations of what is actually said. The author noted as one example a study conducted among American taxpayers in which focus group participants made it clear during the general discussion that they felt taxes were a "serious subject" and that humor would not be the appropriate tone for public service announcements about services available to taxpayers. They then proceeded to react quite positively to a humorous concept for just such a television spot. The analysis? Taxpayers (perhaps worldwide) are generally quite anxious about taxes. The tested concept sympathetically exaggerated that anxiety to the point that people could laugh at it. There was really no contradiction in the group's reactions at the "meaning" level--they wanted communication on tax form preparation that showed sensitivity to their feelings.
- "In focus group analysis, counting doesn't count!" Focus group findings cannot be projected to a larger population. Beyond the absence of statistical sampling procedures, individuals' reactions are always influenced to some extent by group dynamics. An analysis which focuses on the "how many" rather than the "why" misses the point of focus group research. As an example, the author described focus groups among American adults in which almost all participants claimed to be quite familiar with the nature and impact of cholesterol in their diet. Under the surface of this "familiarity count," however, there was tremendous confusion and uncertainty about the nature and consequences of cholesterol.

Although market researchers in the United States have often lamented the inherent subjectivity and potential for bias in qualitative analysis, the reaction of the Ecuadoran seminar participants went well beyond skepticism; they were mystified. Why? After all, these were all extremely intelligent people, well-trained in social science research and experienced in health communication programs. One speculation--and that is all it can be at this point--is that qualitative research in general, and focus group research in particular, requires a researcher to play a fundamentally different role than many are accustomed to in the process of bringing "consumer feedback" into the health message creation process.

Quantitative methods require the researcher to describe responses accurately and to draw out the implications of those descriptions. They afford the researcher the comfort of detachment; if the methods are followed correctly, anyone can follow the data to the same conclusions. In focus group research, no such detachment is possible--at least not if the analysis is to be fully realized. The researcher's own powers of analysis, cultural sensitivity, and ability to synthesize subtle differences of opinion and expression, lie at the basis of the research "results." The researcher, in essence, becomes through his or her interpretation an integral part of the analysis itself. To begin with, then, the researcher must be both as objective as possible, and yet take a "leap of faith" in his or her analytic abilities.

Since a focus group analyst's interpretive skills depend, in large measure, upon his or her intimate understanding of the cultural context from which the "raw data" of focus group responses spring, the seminar participants' apparent problems with taking such a "leap of faith" in their own analytic abilities carries more than a little irony and frustration. The "exercise" focus group topic--"A Woman as President of Ecuador"--was rife with nuances of meaning specific to Ecuador's social and political history which were quite beyond the grasp of the American instructor. But once the seminar participants perceived their task as "research analysis," they were reluctant or seemingly unable to express or discuss analytic insights based on their own cultural sensitivities.

One wonders if a better approach to training researchers for focus group analysis might involve a bit of subterfuge: seminar participants might be asked to play the role of journalists or writers, and asked for a commentary on a group discussion.

In fact, such a role-playing exercise represents, in the author's estimation, an essential suggestion of "what I would do differently" if another training opportunity presents itself. One possibility would be to divide participants into two analysis teams.

One team would be instructed simply to follow the procedures described above to analyze the findings of the mock focus group. The second team would also be told to follow these analytic steps, but, in addition, would be told (without the first team's knowledge) not to think of themselves as "researchers" while conducting this analysis, but rather to think of themselves as "news commentators." The role of news commentator would be described as going beyond that of a "reporter"--of someone who makes a balanced presentation of the facts. The commentator's analysis would have to weave the facts together with his or her prior insights and understanding of the social context in which they were expressed. Moreover, the commentator's analysis would have to bring these various facts together in support of an explicitly stated point of view--a clearly expressed perspective on what the facts mean.

Once both teams have completed their analyses, the discussion would focus on both the differences between the two teams' analyses (hopefully, the second team's analysis would be more on target) and the differences in their experiences of engaging in the analytic process.

In sum, the requirements of training health communicators in developing countries to do qualitative research may be subtly different from the requirements of training them to conduct quantitative research. We may need to develop an "intermediate training step" in our transfer of such technology. This step would be one which first attempts to instill confidence in the researcher who is learning to take a "leap of faith" in his or her interpretive abilities, and then supplies the specific techniques involved in "leaping well."