

**Exploratory Labs:
An Interactive and Collaborative Approach
to Qualitative Market Research**

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Traditional focus groups often fail to deliver as much value as they should to the people who need it most – the decision makers in business units. This is, in part, because decision makers are too far removed from the research process. When research is conducted and reported on by a moderator, teams don't have the same visceral reaction they get with direct customer contact. Worse, they sometimes disagree with and reject the moderator's findings.

This paper outlines a different approach to qualitative research that involves client teams in the research, brings the research to life for your entire organization, and helps business units more actively utilize your research. Exploratory Labs differ from traditional focus groups in two key ways.

- **Interactivity.** Members of the client team participate in focus discussions. This allows your experts to ask questions directly and to extract deeper, more heartfelt insights than they get when hiding behind the one-way mirror. Further, research participants appreciate the direct interaction with client teams; they tend to be more relaxed, open up, and speak more candidly than in the traditional format.
- **Collaboration.** The research moderator works in collaboration with the client team to analyze research results and jointly develop the final report. This approach takes advantage of the client team's expertise and diversity to ensure a thorough and accurate analysis. In addition, collaborative report development creates ownership of the output, increasing the likelihood that the research will produce actionable results.

In addition to a detailed discussion of interactivity and collaboration, this paper outlines some of the key support elements that make this approach possible, including longer discussion sessions, a wide range of creative exercises, and more comfortable research settings.

Exploratory Focus Labs – Overview

Focus group research is a highly developed tool that has been employed in market research for many years. Over the years, researchers have developed a variety of norms and standards for focus group methodology that includes sterile research environments and separation of the research subjects from the research team.

We believe that traditional focus group methods are insufficient and actually inhibit the ability to get at issues in depth or to study problems with deep and complex answers. We have developed and utilize an interactive and collaborative approach to exploratory research that we call “Exploratory Focus Labs.” The approach differs from conventional methods in several dimensions.

- Interactive discussion groups – members of the client team join the discussion groups
- Comfortable, non-sterile, research settings
- Collaborative report development – clients join in and own the analysis
- Use of numerous creative exercises in each session – the approach uses longer session times (at least 3 ½ hours) allowing time for a mix of classical focus group exercises as well as stimulating brainstorming techniques.

This approach results in a much deeper and genuine level of learning than is possible with the classical approach. This paper describes the Exploratory Focus Lab approach and its application in detail.

The Exploratory Focus Labs Approach

Exploratory Focus Labs are similar to focus groups but have been developed to overcome deficiencies in traditional focus group methods. The approach has been designed to relax participants, involve clients in discussion directly with participants, and allow enough time to explore research topics in greater depth.

	Focus Groups	Exploratory Focus Labs
Interactivity	<p>Clients sit behind a one-way mirror and do not interact with research subjects</p> <p>Clients must pass in notes to have the moderator ask their questions</p>	<p>2-4 members of the client team join the moderator and research subjects for an interactive discussion</p> <p>Clients can interject questions immediately and directly</p>
Session Length	1 to 2 hours	3 1/2 to 4 hours*
Setting	<p>Conference table</p> <p>An absolutely sterile room so as not to "taint" research, often without any decoration at all</p>	<p>Comfortable, living room style settings</p> <p>Colorful pictures on walls to stimulate participants</p> <p>Toys and puzzles to help subjects relax</p> <p>Food and refreshments readily available</p>
Report	Moderator writes and owns the research report	Moderator and research team collaborate on report development
Discussion Guide	Many classical research techniques available	In addition to classical research techniques, longer sessions allow for more creative exercises such as role plays and brainstorming excursions

*In some instances, this methodology has been extended up to 3 days for deep immersions.

The Advantages of Interactivity

By including members of the client's research team in the discussion room, you get to a deeper and more genuine level of understanding. The client team nearly always has a deeper knowledge of the subject matter than the moderator does, even when the moderator specializes in a given field. Questions that do not even occur to the moderator, that might otherwise go unasked, can be explored when clients are in the room.

In interactive sessions, clients are able to interject questions immediately rather than pass notes in from the observation room. This makes for a much more natural conversation and helps to reduce the chance that a response has been misunderstood. Clients can also work with the moderator to shut down non-productive lines of questioning or continue discussions the moderator might otherwise have terminated.

An additional benefit of having clients in the room to focus on content-related issues is that the moderator can focus a little more attention on the interpersonal dynamics in the room to ensure a balanced discussion. While not completely relieved of the need to focus on and understand the discussion, the support of the client team does allow the moderator to make sure that all research subjects participate on an equal level, quieting dominant personalities and drawing out shy or subdued participants.

Summary of Advantages of Interactivity

- Client experts can ask timely questions directly, resulting in a more natural conversation and openness on behalf of participants
- Clients can ask questions that a moderator might miss
- Clients can help shut down unproductive lines of questioning
- Moderators can devote more attention to interpersonal dynamics in the room
- The research delivers a deeper and more genuine level of understanding

Supporting Elements of the Format: Session Length, Setting, & Creative Exercises

When conducting exploratory research, particularly with complex subject matter, two-hour discussions are simply too short. Moderators need to jump right into the discussion and there is little time to get to know the participants. Shorter sessions also make it difficult to use creative exercises that require set up time or complex instructions.

We use three-and-a-half to four-hour discussion groups; the extra time provides many advantages. First, we are able to spend the first fifteen minutes or so introducing each other in a relaxing and even playful manner, which relaxes the participants, builds trust, and helps them open up sooner and more candidly. Second, the longer format gives the moderator time to use energizing, creative, and lively exercises. It also allows time for more complex exercises, paper prototype or product demonstrations, and hands-on operation or use of products.

In addition to all the classical exercises that focus group moderators use, the longer session length allows moderators to effectively utilize more time-consuming techniques, for example, role playing. In one recent discussion, all eight participants were asked to personify an inanimate object in a tool shed. They were asked to take on the personality of items such as wheelbarrows and tools chests, and then to have a discussion amongst themselves. The ensuing discussion was energizing, lively, and insightful, uncovering issues that had not been discussed to that point in the session. However, to properly set up, execute, and debrief such an exercise can easily take a half hour.

Longer sessions also allow moderators to introduce a variety of creative exercises into each session. For example, we find that brainstorming techniques put consumers into a playful and wishful mindset. Typically, these brainstorming techniques are used later in the discussion after more conventional techniques have been exhausted. While we do not generally see consumers or customers offer elegant or even useful solutions to problems, the brainstorming process very often opens participants up and unearths new insights about unmet desires or needs. It is, of course, the purpose of the research to unearth these insights; it's the responsibility of the consulting team and client organization to act upon these new insights and create innovative solutions.

Another important element of this approach is the setting. Four hours seems like a long time to sit in a room full of strangers. By removing the conference table, creating a living room style setting, offering little toys or puzzles, and providing refreshments in the discussion room, we help participants relax. A comfortable setting makes longer discussion sessions possible.

It is important to understand that all the elements of this format are required to succeed. Long sessions are difficult to endure around a conference table. Including clients in the discussion makes it even more difficult to get through a discussion guide in a two-hour session. Creative and playful exercises take time, but make the longer sessions seem to go quickly.

Some researchers are concerned that participants cannot be engaged for an entire four hours. In fact, this format and its supporting elements have been designed to make a four-hour session seem fast and fun, enabling the client team to have more time to get at issues in depth. According to one client, "One thing that strikes me about your approach is that participants always like the format. People who are hesitant about using this approach, who are concerned about the time commitment, should know participants truly appreciate having the sponsoring company in the room, enjoy the activities, and say the time went much faster than they imagined it would."

Summary of Supporting Elements of the Format

- Longer session times allow for relaxed conversations, more creative exercises, and time to get at issues in depth
- Comfortable session settings make it easier for participant to endure longer sessions and relax participants to help them speak more candidly
- Creative exercises, made possible by longer session times, unearth insights that traditional focus groups might otherwise miss

Interactivity – Issues Addressed

In traditional focus group research, the client's research team is separated from the moderator and research subjects to avoid tainting the research. The technique of putting clients behind a one-way mirror was originally developed to avoid leading questions, keep client agendas from guiding the discussion, and to enable participants to speak more candidly. Researchers occasionally express concerns that the interactive approach does not address these issues. Let's examine each of these issues more closely.

Issue #1: Clients who are not trained researchers are likely to ask leading questions.

It is true that untrained individuals are likely to ask leading lines of questioning, particularly when testing a hypothesis they believe to be true. But, steps can be taken to avoid clients asking leading questions or, worse, selling a point of view.

Prior to entering the session room, we always take the client team through a brief orientation session in which we provide behavioral guidelines including coaching on how to ask questions properly. Further, if a client does frame a question improperly, the moderator is usually able to interrupt and reframe the question without "leading the witness."

We find that the risk of having clients ask leading questions is worth the reward of having the client team's experts ask the timely question that the moderator might have missed.

Issue #2: Clients who have agendas or are too close to the subject matter are not likely to be objective in their questioning.

There will often be members of the client's team who, with the best of intentions, enter into the research process with an agenda. Perhaps it is a strongly held belief in taking a certain approach to go to market, or a feeling that one product feature should win out over another. Whether using traditional or interactive discussion methods, these agendas exist; they simply manifest themselves differently.

In the traditional method, a person with an agenda cannot ask the question he or she wants, is unable to test his or her hypotheses, and is often not likely to believe in or support the final research report. The end result is that this person is likely to dig in his or her heels, ignore the research results, and continue fighting for his or her agenda after the research report is released.

With interactive discussion groups, there is a risk that a person with an agenda could taint the research with leading or selling lines of questioning. However, with proper coaching prior to the discussion group and moderator intervention when leading or selling questions arise, this possibility is minimized. And, the interactive approach allows this person to test his or her hypotheses directly. That, combined with collaborative report development wherein client teams discuss and debate the research analysis, leads to greater likelihood that all hypotheses will be tested and all members of the research team will be accepting of the research results.

Interactivity – Issues Addressed (cont.)

Issue #3: Participants will be more willing to speak openly and honestly if they are not in the presence of the client team.

We believe this is untrue and, in fact, our experience is precisely the opposite. Participants are usually quite aware that they are being observed by some mysterious party behind the one-way mirror. Because they don't know who is "back there," they become uptight and distrusting. They hold back.

When the client team sits face-to-face with participants, they see the client company as a group of people who care about what they have to say. They very quickly relax and open up. At the end of nearly every discussion group, at least one research participant will comment that he or she appreciated the clients being in the room because it demonstrates that the clients care about what he or she has to say.

Collaborative Report Development

Many research moderators develop research reports in isolation. They review tapes, analyze discussions, and deliver a report generally a week or so after the discussions occur. With such an approach, researchers are often confronted with internal teams who are not entirely accepting of the research results.

We believe it is critical to engage the client team in analyzing research results and developing research reports. Following each discussion session, we debrief the client team and record the team's insights. We pull these insights together, along with our own moderator's observations, usually in the form of a PowerPoint document. Then, we meet with the client team to review the report and resolve any inconsistencies or disagreements.

The collaborative report development approach capitalizes on the client team's unique industry knowledge and expertise; we use the client team's expertise and multiple perspectives to ensure a thorough and accurate analysis. Further, collaborative report development ensures internal support for research results, increasing the likelihood that the research will produce actionable results.

Applications - Following are a few examples of successful application of the methodology.

Client Organization	Research Objectives and Outcomes
Computer hardware and software	<p><u>Objective:</u> Understand the ways Internet gurus think and talk about Internet usage and application development</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> A complete lexicon of terminology related to Internet capabilities, applications, and development tools; used to drive a quantitative research project involving 120,000 interviews in 7 countries</p>
Computer hardware and software	<p><u>Objective:</u> To understand which purchase selection criteria are most important to IT decision makers in a particular product category</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> A detailed report that defined all purchase decision criteria in decision makers words, listed the criteria in order of importance to decision makers, and made recommendations for the client organization to act upon this new understanding of purchase selection criteria.</p>
Document management equipment and services	<p><u>Objective:</u> To identify & prioritize features of importance to end users</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> A prioritized list of the features and benefits needed by decision makers in a format specified by the engineering group for use in the product development process</p>
Medical devices	<p><u>Objective:</u> Develop design specifications for a new medical device</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> A prioritized list of critical product attributes including design aesthetics, features and functions</p>
Beverages & novelty desserts	<p><u>Objective:</u> To create healthful products with a real point of difference that will appeal to children and their moms</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> Conducted interactive exploratory labs with children aged 7-16 and, separately, their moms; developed numerous new beverage and dessert products</p>
Quasi-governmental research agency	<p><u>Objective:</u> To increase the diversity of the American engineering workforce</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> Better understanding of the influences on minority and female high school students leading to seven new initiatives to reduce barriers to these students pursuing engineering careers</p>
Alcoholic beverages	<p><u>Objective:</u> To develop a new pipeline of alcoholic spirits with a meaningful point of difference</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> Over fifty new product concepts created, seventeen currently under various levels of market development</p>
Banking	<p><u>Objective:</u> To create a suite of new services for affluent customers and small businesses</p> <p><u>Outcome:</u> Better understanding of these targets from consumers as well as front-line banking associates led to the successful creation of a new portfolio of products and services</p>

What Participants Say

"I've done a couple other focus groups and this is my favorite one. The format of sitting around together and brainstorming – I kind of feel like I'm on your team."

"It almost gave it more of a human feeling to have these guys in the room with us. They were sweating, they were smiling, so you knew they felt it all. You could see it in their faces."

"'Four hours,' I thought, 'I can't sit that long.' But it flew by."

"I liked the clients being in the meeting; I liked the interaction. I also liked the visual fun with the superheroes and that kind of stuff."

"I liked that it was comfortable – you weren't stuck around a conference table. You have couches and snacks and props."

"I've seen these groups, I've even done these groups from the other side of the mirror... You're one of the best moderators I've ever seen."

About the Author

Frank Hines is a management consultant with over 30 years experience in international marketing, market research, strategy, product development, and innovation. He is an experienced focus group moderator and an expert in a broad array of qualitative research approaches. He has conducted research for a wide range of world-class clients including Bacardi, Dell, IBM, John Hancock, Kraft, McNeil, Pfizer, Pitney Bowes, Reebok, and Starbucks. Frank holds a BSME from Worcester Polytechnic Institute and an MBA (Magna Cum Laude) from Babson College.