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Determining Focus Group Specifications
How to Make the Difficult Tradeoffs

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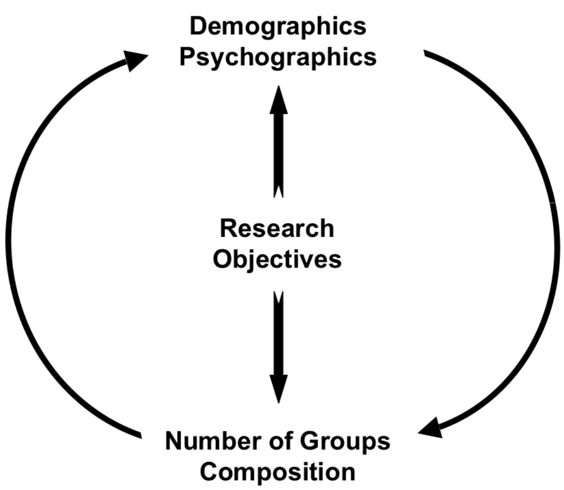
The most important step in planning focus group research is deciding whom to recruit. Researchers need to talk to enough of the right people to achieve their research objectives. Often projects are constrained by budget and time limitations, complicating recruiting decisions. In any case, there are always four variables to consider in determining focus group specifications:

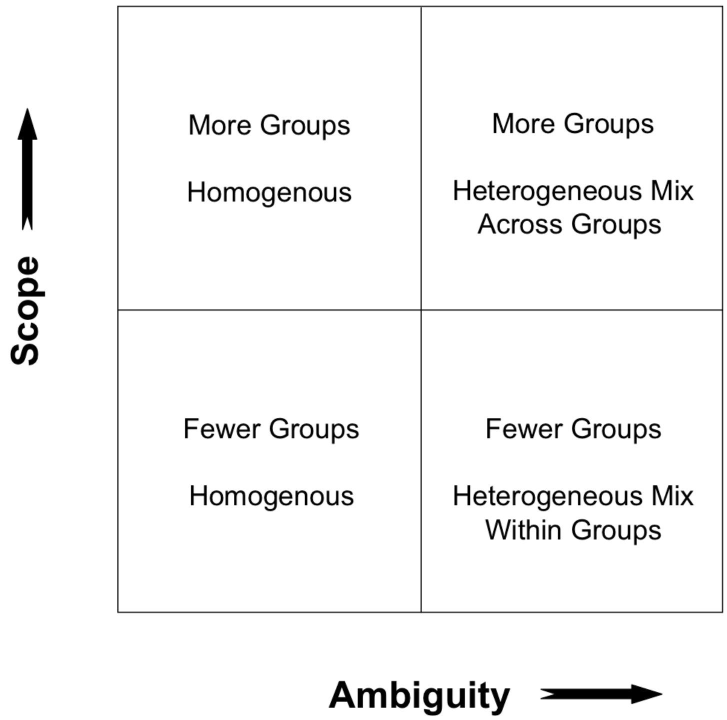
- The demographic profiles of the groups
- The psychographic profiles of the groups
- The number of groups to conduct
- The basic composition of the groups (homogeneous versus heterogeneous)



Research objectives drive the demographic and psychographic profiles of the people we would like to recruit. However, budget and time limitations often make it impossible to talk to all the people one would like. So, we go back to the research objectives to determine the optimal number and composition of groups, and then make decisions on how to narrow the demographic and psychographic profiles to focus on. In this paper, I recommend thinking about research objectives in terms of Scope and Ambiguity to decide on the appropriate number and composition of groups. Then I provide a few ideas on how to think about demographics and psychographics if you need to make tradeoffs between the universe of people you would like to recruit and the number of folks you can recruit.

Determining the Number and Composition of Groups – Framework

The framework below uses two broad criteria, Scope and Ambiguity, to guide decisions around the number and composition of focus groups needed to meet a given research objective.



Scope. Scope relates to the complexity of the research objectives, the number of concepts or hypotheses to be tested, and, to an extent, the importance of the research. (While every project is important, some projects do have higher visibility or greater strategic value than others and justify a higher investment). As the diagram shows, the greater the scope of the research, the higher the number groups that should be used (up to a point of diminishing returns).

Ambiguity. Ambiguity relates to the purpose or nature of the research and can be measured by the range of expected outcomes and the degree to which you believe you can predict those outcomes. Concept testing, for example, is not an ambiguous form of research – we expect to learn which concepts are preferred, what consumers like and dislike about each concept, and how we might improve concepts. On the other hand, exploratory research to fuel innovation efforts is highly ambiguous. The target populations may be broad and the range of expected outcomes can be high, difficult to predict, and difficult to prioritize. When ambiguity is low, I recommend groups that are relatively homogenous. When ambiguity is high, I generally go with a more heterogeneous mix – conducting a set of groups each of which has a different target population or even mixing mix up the recruit within a given group.

Homogenous or Heterogeneous?

Many researchers believe focus groups should be as homogeneous in composition as possible. They feel homogeneity helps minimize conflict that might inhibit group members and, thus, makes it easier to unearth personal opinions and experiences.

> "When you are unsure about whether potential participants in a focus group will be truly compatible, it may be necessary to start with the limited goal of avoiding conflict. The sharing of ideas and experiences is at the heart of focus groups, and this requires a climate of mutual respect. At a minimum, the composition of each group should minimize suspicion and open disagreement."1

There are some rare cases where I do take extra care to minimize differences to avoid conflict of the sort that causes participants to be less than completely candid. Examples include situations where respondents are children or where the topic is a sensitive issue such as personal hygiene, dieting, or medical conditions. However, I think these are largely exceptions. In general, I don't believe respondents have to be identical for a "climate of mutual respect" to exist. A skilled moderator should be able to create such a climate even when there are considerable differences.

There is a different type of conflict that I believe moderators should try to create in focus groups - – let's call it "constructive conflict" – and having a diverse group of people is one way to create it. Conflicting opinions often point to critical issues with multiple solutions; they offer a range of ideas rather than one idea. In innovation, more insights are better; a range of issues is also a range of opportunities. So long as differences of opinion are elicited in a way that is constructive and respectful of others' opinions, conflicting views can lead to a wider range of ideas in a shorter timeframe.

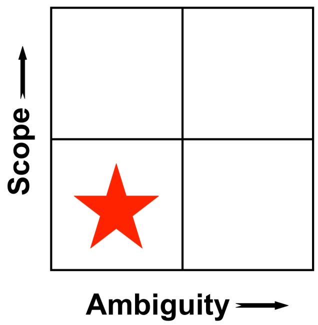
> "Homogeneous groups minimize the likelihood of intragroup disagreements and conflicts that may issue from gender, age, social status, and ethnic differences. But focus group samples that incorporate ... market segment heterogeneity are likely to get to the heart of matter more quickly."2

In the previous section, I described situations where I would recommend using homogeneous groups. In those cases, I feel it is important to be somewhat homogenous; respondents should be similar along at least one and usually numerous dimensions. Uniform group composition does deliver insights that are representative of (but not projective to) a particular population, so focusing on a homogeneous target makes sense. But, even in homogeneous groups, a little diversity can be helpful in getting "to the heart of the matter more quickly."

When ambiguity is high, I prefer to introduce significant diversity. Sometimes I do this by specifying a mix of groups, each with a different "somewhat homogenous" population. And, especially when the project is highly exploratory in nature, I will recommend highly heterogeneous groups.

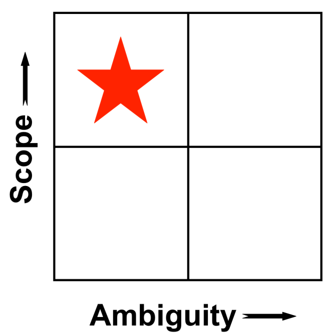
Determining the Number and Composition of Groups – Examples

The following examples illustrate the kinds of projects that fit into each quadrant of the Scope / Ambiguity matrix. These examples are based on actual projects but have been disguised to protect client confidentiality.



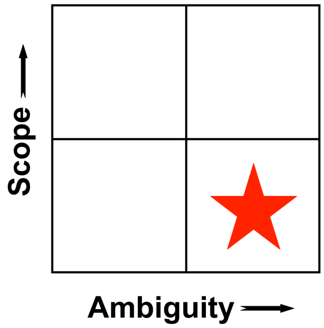
Research Objective. To test a new set of print ads and the packaging execution for a dietary supplement and determine if it properly communicates the brand positioning.

Concept testing is generally low in ambiguity and in this case there were just a couple of ads and packaging ideas. Further, there was a single well-defined target market – women, aged 35-50, who were 10-25 pounds overweight and had dieted in the past. This project clearly called for a small number of homogeneous groups.



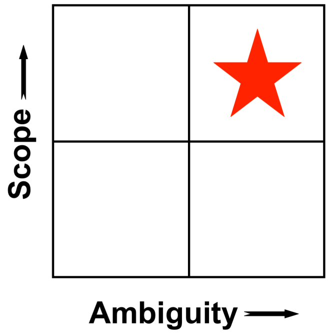
Research Objective. As part of a yearlong innovation initiative, this insurance provider created about a dozen product concepts targeted to affluent customers. The objective was to determine which of these concepts should move forward to quantitative testing.

The target market for this set of services was well defined – existing customers with a net worth in a relatively narrow band. So, it was easy to define a homogeneous set of group specifications. However, the product concepts were quite complex; it would have been difficult to share more than four in a single focus group session. Further, this was a high visibility, somewhat political project involving about 50 executives and there was no way to reduce the number of concepts to be tested. Therefore, we conducted a high number of groups with identical specifications. Each group evaluated four concepts and every concept was discussed in multiple groups.



Research Objective. As part of a larger innovation initiative, this provider of business services wanted to take a look at offering alternative payment solutions for its customers.

The team wanted to brainstorm new concepts for payment of its services as a way to make it more convenient for customers to work with and stay with them. In order to stretch the group's thinking, we assembled an eclectic group of people responsible for providing and administering prepayment systems. The group included a university administrator of pre-paid card plans for students, a marketer of magazine subscriptions, and even a provider of pre-paid funeral arrangements.



Research Objective. To provide consumer insights to drive new product development and fill the NPD pipeline with a wide range of new product concepts.The scope of this project was huge, involving marketing teams from the U.S., Europe, and Asia with the intent of filling the NPD pipeline with new ideas to develop over the coming five years. Ultimately, the teams conducted numerous brainstorming sessions and created more than 150 product concepts. The target markets for this client included virtually all consumers. A project of this sort justifies conducting a large number of focus groups as well as other immersion and research activities. In this case, we designed a heterogeneous portfolio of homogeneous groups; in all, we conducted a dozen groups, each with a different profile.

Making Demographic-Psychographic Choices

Having decided upon the number and composition of groups needed for a given project, one revisits the research objectives and sorts out the demographic and psychographic characteristics needed in each group. While the choices you make depend highly on the research objective, here are a few pointers that have served me well.

1. Polarize Age Splits with Adults. For adult groups, rather than try to cover an entire range of ages, I will often polarize age splits to make differences in age groups more obvious. For example, instead of recruiting a group from ages 30-44 and another from 45-60, I might recommend recruiting groups aged 30-39 and 51-60.

2. Use Smaller Age Ranges with Younger Kids. The differences in interests and behavior vary dramatically from year to year under the age of 18. Plus, younger children can be intimidated and led by older children. As the age of interest gets younger, I recommend smaller age ranges. So, a mix of ages13-18 is probably OK for most subjects, but I wouldn't specify a broader range than ages 7-9 for younger children.

3. Separate the Sexes. When the subject matter is sensitive (hygiene, dieting, etc.) it is usually a good idea to have more homogeneous groups, especially along the dimension of gender. And, under age 18, almost every subject is sensitive.

4. Consider Customers and Non-Customers. In most cases, marketers have as much to learn from non-customers as customers. This is especially true with B2B projects, technology-focused subjects and highly exploratory objectives.

5. Consider the Channel. Most qualitative research focuses on end customers and well it should. However, the channel (distributors, retailers, etc.) can be a rich source of insight into consumers as well as other marketing challenges and opportunities.

6. Decide Whether You Expect Geographic Differences. When there is a reasonable expectation that research results will differ across regions, it makes sense to duplicate groups across more than one city. I tend to see fewer differences in the B2B arena and with highly technical products than for consumer-packaged goods, especially food and beverage

7. Ignore Market Research 101. "Market Research 101" tells us that we should always conduct at least two of any given demographic / psychographic profile to help substantiate research conclusions. I think this is an excellent rule and try to follow it whenever possible. However, when considered against other factors (budget, time, scope, and ambiguity), it's a rule I often recommend breaking.

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.

1) Morgan, David L., Planning Focus Groups. SAGE Publications, 1998, p. 61.
2) Grover, Rajiv & Marco Vriens, The Handbook of Marketing Research. SAGE Pubs., 2006, p. 64.