

Focus-group experts: Gladwell's wrong

RE: "Focus groups should be abolished," (AA, Aug. 8).

Malcolm Gladwell threw down the gauntlet on decades of market-research tradition with the assertion that focus groups should be banned. This is akin to saying e-mail should be banned because much of it is poorly written. Mr. Gladwell's view of focus groups as random groups of people asked to make decisions on design and marketing in an artificial setting bears little resemblance to the reality of qualitative research today. After conducting hundreds of groups in the past two years, our conclusion is that it's not the technique that is flawed, but it's how it's used. Focus groups are fast and easy to execute. The flexible format makes them ideal for exploring strategic issues (who is my target?) to tactical decisions (is a red arrow more readable than a copy block?). Before the M&M's get thrown out with the candy dish, we think it's worth trying to put the focus back into focus groups.

When appropriate, conduct groups online. Respondents tend to be more comfortable in their own homes rather than a sterile focus-group facility, and observing from any Internet-enabled location increases client participation. Even hard-to-find populations can be identified and recruited, and fewer "professional" respondents are included since recruiting is not limited to those living near a facility. We have successfully recruited owners of \$2,000 exercise machines, band directors, even concession-stand volunteers. People are more likely to admit to habits or opinions that they think others would disapprove of in the anonymity of cyberspace. A classic example of this phenomenon comes from Holland, where sales data suggested a lot more people were buying pornographic magazines than the numbers implied by traditional market research. When the same survey was conducted online, the figures shot up.

Finally, make focus groups more observational. Groups where the moderator asks a series of yes/no questions is nothing more than a small-sample quantitative survey. Effort and creativity are required to encourage respondents to talk to each other so their natural responses can be observed.

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conference, but I was a little shocked to see his attack in print. For a guy with a respected newspaper background, his interpretation regarding the "point" of focus groups seems intentionally inaccurate.

Focus groups are descriptive and meant to uncover the current attitudes, emotions, beliefs and language behind peoples' behaviors. They are notoriously bad in projecting what might be. In fact, I have clients who use the intensity of a focus groups' dislike for any idea as an indication of that idea's future power.

Gladwell condemns qualitative research for not performing well against criteria it was never intended to address. His logic could easily be used to eradicate newspapers because they are not very absorbent and are particularly bad at odor control when at the bottom of a birdcage.

My interpretation of Gladwell's case study was that the research told Herman Miller exactly what they needed to know: the Aero is fantastic to sit on but freaks people out because it doesn't look like any chair they've ever seen before. Now that is an idea you can do something with!

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Gladwell opinion of focus groups uninformed

RE: "Focus groups should be abolished," (AA, Aug. 8).

Malcolm Gladwell may know a lot about tipping points and blinks, but his comments about focus groups reflect the stereotypes of the uninformed. The brief example he gives of focus groups gone wrong is full of holes.

He says that the Herman Miller chairs were scored on a scale of 0-10. Sounds quantitative to me. Those of us who do this every day (proudly, I should add) rarely use scores, and when we do they're typically gathered upfront as a way to get respondents to commit, before any discussion of the reasons why. Scores from focus groups should never be viewed as definitive, nor should "go/no go" decisions be made strictly on the basis of what is said in them.

Mr. Gladwell ignores the thousands of instances where focus groups have revealed the critical insights on the hidden red flag that

a back seat to market research of any kind.

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Inc., FastCompany Web sites 'thriving'

RE: "Reuters.com targets small biz sector," (AA, Aug. 22)

I strongly object to errors in your Aug. 22 story. The story accurately reflects that Inc.com and FastCompany.com have entered into an agreement to create a small-business resource center on Reuters.com, as well as brand channel microsites. But in no way shape or form is this a reflection that the Web sites are "struggling." The opposite is true. In the past 18 months our revenue has grown approximately 150% and we are highly profitable, with margins in excess of 30%. Our traffic has doubled in this time span. Our sites now draw more than 900,000 unique visitors a month, a fact easily verified by our Nielsen net ratings as a network of sites, which only report Web sites drawing at least 800,000 unique visitors a month. In addition to our very exciting new relationship with Reuters.com, Inc.com and FastCompany.com have in the last year established thriving relationships with Yahoo! and AOL, bringing our content to millions more readers each month. To set the record straight, our Web sites are not only thriving but continue to grow rapidly in revenue, profit and traffic.

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Editor's Note: The story did reflect that the Web sites are profitable and did not mean to imply otherwise.

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