

Looking In on Focus Groups

Focus groups are a widely used market research technique that law firms are just beginning to explore, but success requires more planning than just getting people together in a room

By SALLY J. SCHMIDT

A law firm with a significant litigation department sought several years ago to determine whether local companies would be inclined to use the services of an alternative dispute resolution practice. Before undertaking a written survey of potential clients, the firm — mid-sized and Midwestern — conducted focus groups of companies representing the "profile" client: manufacturers with a certain number of employees.

The focus groups helped the firm determine the extent of these companies' familiarity with ADR techniques, which in turn allowed the firm to design a written questionnaire that recipients could understand and would be likely to answer. The firm

Self-Study

learned that its potential clients wanted their day in court and avoided the costly mistake of developing a practice area that clients said they would not use.

In most industries, the focus group interview is a widely used market research technique. Among law firms, however, where market research is scarcely employed and frequently limited to client surveys, the focus group presents a new and largely unused information-gathering method. Yet there are many situations in which focus groups would benefit a firm.

GUIDED DISCUSSION

A focus group generally involves a group of 8 to 12 individuals who are led through a fairly unstructured discussion by a skilled moderator. The moderator's objective is to focus a loose discussion on a chosen subject.

The meeting, which usually lasts for 1-1/2 to two hours, can be held at any number of sites, including the firm's offices, a neutral location, or a market research agency. Each location has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, holding a focus group to discuss a firm's image in the firm's offices may influence the participants' responses

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because they see the space and interact with members of the firm.

The purpose of a focus group is much different than a personal interview, written survey, or any other one-on-one, highly structured questioning process. Much of the benefit of focus groups is derived from the interplay that occurs among participants during unregimented discussions. Each participant is exposed to and can react to the ideas of other group members, which often results in a greater depth or variety of information.

As a result, focus groups are appropriate for obtaining reaction to an idea or soliciting issues for a more specific follow-up survey, not for determining a particular course of action. Specifically, focus groups are best used to:

- Generate information that can help the firm design an effective and detailed survey. For example, a firm might use a focus group to develop a list of criteria clients use to evaluate the firm. The criteria might be incorporated in a follow-up written questionnaire asking a mix of clients to evaluate the firm.

- Provide background or general impressions about a firm (e.g., its strengths, weaknesses and image) or its market (e.g., its competition, opportunities and threats).

- Obtain impressions about a new service or idea, such as a new practice area or office location.

- Solicit reactions to marketing techniques, such as newsletters, brochures, advertisements or seminars.

- Elicit fresh ideas for the firm's consideration on such topics as service, telephone or communications systems, relationship management techniques or quality efforts.

There are many benefits of using focus groups as a research technique. These include:

- Group dynamics. Quite often, group interaction produces a greater number of ideas or insights than would a collection of individual responses.

- Stimulation and snowballing of ideas. The comments of one participant frequently will result in responses that others might not have raised.

- Less intimidation. Many people feel freer to participate or make comments in the perceived safety of a group.

- Accuracy of responses. Since participants are not required to answer every question, they may only speak up when they have

a strong reaction or good idea.

- Probing. The forum allows the moderator to delve into ideas or issues in order to flesh them out fully.

NOT ALWAYS APPLICABLE

As noted earlier, focus groups are not appropriate for every research or information need. For example:

- Results are not representative of a larger group. Since the participants are few and are often hand-picked, the firm cannot say, for example, that "90 percent of clients" feel a certain way.

- Expense. The greatest cost, and most important investment, of a focus group is the moderator. Experienced moderators with backgrounds in market research often charge \$7,500 a day, although consultants who have conducted focus groups may be retained for less. Other expenses will be incurred as well, including the cost of the meeting site, meals and gifts.

As a rule, focus groups of clients are less time-consuming to put together and therefore less expensive than groups involving strangers who are randomly selected and heavily screened.

- "Group think." There are times when a focus group will get on a roll, so to speak, or may be influenced by a particularly strong or vocal participant. This can be minimized with a good moderator, however.

- Lawyer concerns. Many lawyers express discomfort at the notion of getting several people together in a room to talk about the firm. They worry that one client's complaints will affect other group members' image of the firm.

This is a risk. However, clients who have gripes with a firm have them whether they voice them or not, and the firm is more able to address complaints if it hears them. In addition, clients are often just as likely to affect group members with praise of the firm as with criticism.

- Difficulty in recruiting participants. The focus group obviously requires an extensive commitment on the part of the individual participants. This commitment is easier to obtain from clients than from individuals with no connection to the firm. If recruiting strangers, the person organizing the focus group may need to make 20 calls to get one positive response. Generally, half to two-

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