

# Getting The Best Return On Your Focus Group Investment

By Moshe Engelberg, Ph.D., M.P.H.

*Focus groups can be an incredibly powerful tool for exercising due diligence and shaping major business decisions. Or not.*

It's one thing to "collect information" through focus groups of consumers or business professionals. It's quite another to emerge with solid insights about what to do and how to improve your business situation.

Here are four ways to avoid common pitfalls and get the greatest return on your focus group investment:

## 1. Ask the right questions.

The biggest risk with focus groups is asking the wrong questions. To avoid this blunder, you need to determine the right questions and prioritize them to maximize your results. How do you do this?

### Follow this three-step process:

1. Start by clearly stating your business objectives for this project.
2. Identify whose buy-in or involvement you need — your CEO, partners, donors, ad agency? What questions do they want answered?
3. Now focus and prioritize your objectives and information needs: What three things do you most need to know? What end result do you want from these groups?

Your moderator should translate your top priority objectives

and information needs into specific and strategic questions, and allocate enough time to get you answers.

## 2. Get real answers, not "right" answers.

How do you really get into people's hearts and minds? An expert moderator will use techniques that elicit meaningful and valid answers, not socially acceptable "right" answers. For example, when probing on sensitive issues, respondents often "shut down" or revert to answers that may sound smart but aren't true. Or they may mix up their "wants" and "needs" which could send you down the wrong path.

### Key considerations for you and your moderator:

When determining what drives people to buy your product, use your service, or act on your message, remember that influencing "wants" is very different than influencing "needs." Share your insights with the moderator.

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*How to open hearts and minds to get real answers*

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A topnotch moderator will immediately recognize warning signals of "right answers," and then employ the right methodology —such as projective questioning or "analogizing" techniques, to bypass resistance and fear of embarrassment.

The moderator should probe in ways that enable you to see

beneath the words to the underlying motivations and true answers. You deserve valid answers that reflect what's truly in the hearts and minds of your respondents —no matter how difficult or uncomfortable the topic.

### 3. Go from answers to action.

Now imagine you have the answers you need to the right questions. No matter how good the research, you need to be sure the answers — and how they can improve your business situation, are obvious and clear. Otherwise, you will have wasted time and money, and added one more “study” to just sit on the shelf.

#### Three recommendations for best results:

Use your well-defined objectives and corresponding focus group questions as your outline. An experienced moderator will organize the debriefing this way too.

Present the results not as “data” — but as a business “story” — with strong examples that bring your key findings to life, and with clear recommendations that resonate with CEOs, managers, creatives, your sales force, etc.

Consider getting a “highlights” tape (digital is best) to support your business objectives and main findings, instead

of the usual “transcript” report that almost nobody really reads. An effective story is a powerful tool that makes you effective, and produces a lasting return

### 4. Your business objectives rule.

It may not be trendy, but FGBO ensures the right questions are asked in the right way of the right people, so you emerge with what you need.

**Insist on FGBO:  
Focus Groups  
By Objectives**

For example, if we're assessing the effectiveness of potential billboard ads, we don't ask people in a focus group to stare at the ads for five minutes, and then tell us what they think.

That's not how billboards work. Instead, to replicate “real life” conditions, we tell respondents to close their eyes, then open them for six seconds as we quickly move the ads by them. As a result, you gain insight into people's likely reactions in the real world, which translates into better business decisions.



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