

An Anthropological Approach to Ignite Traditional Focus Groups - A Review of Refocusing Focus Groups: A Practical Guide

**Maryann McCabe
University of Rochester**

If we were living during the California Gold Rush, this book would be a desired nugget for the business professional interested in learning about focus groups and *eureka* would form on the lips of the reader. Although this is not the mid-19th century when the Gold Rush occurred, *Refocusing Focus Groups* by Robert J. Morais (Paramount Market Publishing, Ithaca, NY) comes at just the right time when an anthropological perspective has gained recognition in the business community as a valuable tool for market research. An introduction for people new to focus groups, the book provides nuggets of insight into the use and flexibility of focus groups for understanding consumers and positioning brands. Short and succinct, the book is worth its weight in gold.

The author, a cultural anthropologist with expertise in marketing research and strategy, tells us what we need to know as observers of focus groups. The book reflects keen awareness of the business needs of corporate clients and their purpose in studying consumer behavior. It assumes a collaborative relationship between the researcher and the marketing and advertising professionals sponsoring the research. One of the book's many contributions is indicating when a focus group is an appropriate method to pursue compared to other methods like observation, ethnography, one-on-one interviews, online interaction, and quantitative research.

The subtitle of the book sets the tone for readers. Chapters are laid out corresponding to what happens before, during and after focus groups are conducted. The book answers upfront research design questions facing clients concerning how many groups to have for a given project and how many people to have in each group. Answers are based on the intent of qualitative research to delve deeply into consumer beliefs, values, and practices. Fewer groups and fewer people may yield the rich conversation that provides what is needed. This *less is more* principle also applies to the design of a moderator's guide. Exploring a few key questions with consumers may be better than rushing through a thousand questions. To this end, the author provides a number of projective techniques that can increase our ability to explore the cultural logic underlying behavior with products and brands.

Another asset of the book is its focus on reflexivity, an issue that has shaped knowledge production in anthropology and the social sciences generally in recent years (Clifford and Marcus 1986). As observers of focus groups, we have our own knowledge and assumptions about relationships between consumers and specific products and brands. This input usually

comes from one's experience in the world and from company intelligence. The book encourages us to be aware of our views so that they do not interfere with listening to what persons in the focus group are really saying. The author correlates the reflexive self with a sense of being naïve because it is what allows us to listen and gain fresh insight.

The book's greatest strength lies in its emphasis on interpreting the meaning of products in the everyday life of people. The author points out that cultural analysis goes beyond what people say in focus groups in order to identify categories of meaning that motivate purchase and use of brands. From this kind of analysis come new ideas for positioning and advertising. For business people desiring a fuller explanation of cultural analysis than this practical guide can be expected to provide, the authors refer readers to the lengthier book that has become a bible for an anthropological approach to market research (Sunderland and Denny 2007).

Despite the importance of such weighty issues as reflexivity and interpretation, *Refocusing Focus Groups* offers an easy and entertaining read. The writing is crisp, free of jargon (from the speak of both anthropology and business), and full of good humor. Advice on back-room behavior during focus groups, while serious and sagacious, is written with a wit that would draw a laugh from anyone, yet orients interactions between researcher and clients to useful dialogue. Critical to the success of the book, I think, is the use of lucid case examples from the author's experience that bring points home.

After reading the book, focus groups will seem what anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls *common sense* (Geertz 1983). This is because *Refocusing Focus Groups* gives such a quick grasp of how to use focus groups that the new learning seems common sense. Like the Forty-Niners flocking to California in search of gold, readers can expect to find new and exciting ways to mine focus groups for gaining consumer knowledge. Clever graphics accompanying the text make the learning process fun since they inspire readers to become engaged in figuring out associations between image and text for themselves and thus doing business anthropology.

REFERENCES

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