



# One-on-ones put the quality in qualitative

Although many people immediately think of focus groups when they think of qualitative research, there is another approach that may be better suited to delving deep into issues. In-depth one-on-one interviews, conducted through various media, offer greater value than focus groups, and their benefits should be considered whenever qualitative results are needed.

One-on-one interviews can uncover the best thinking of every respondent without the drawbacks of group dynamics. In a typical focus group, a few of the respondents do most of the talking. Even if an adept moderator can help smooth out this imbalance, it's difficult to prevent group-think bias as a result of a few individuals monopolizing the conversations.

With one-on-one interviews, good or bad ideas from one respondent do not influence the thoughts of any other respondent; this alone increases the quality of the information obtained. In-depth interviewing is also designed to elicit the whys behind respondents' reactions.

Skilled interviewers are trained to probe into people's thought processes to obtain a clearer understanding of exactly what respondents mean by their answers without leading them to a particular conclusion. This kind of probing is difficult - not to mention clumsy - to accomplish systematically for each participant of a focus group.

## Twice the information

Researchers can obtain at least twice the amount of information per respondent in an in-depth interview than in a typical focus group. In a standard, eight-person, 90-minute focus group, there are nine people (eight participants plus moderator) sharing the floor. On average, therefore, each respondent is allotted 10 minutes of talk time across those 90 minutes (90 minutes divided by nine people).

The cost of a focus group of this type is about \$6,000. That number includes everything: recruiter, moderator, participant stipend, food, facility, report write-up and the cost of getting a few observers to the

*Editor's note: Mark Palmerino is a research director and partner at the Center for Strategy Research in Boston. He can be reached at 617-451-9500 or at [mbp@csr-bos.com](mailto:mbp@csr-bos.com).*

event. Divide 80 minutes of participant talk time (the moderator doesn't count) into the \$6,000 expense, and your cost per respondent minute in this case is \$75 (\$6,000/80).

However, if a typical in-depth interview runs 30 minutes and costs between \$400-\$500, (including recruiting, interviewing, participant stipend and reporting), the cost per respondent minute is in the range of \$16 to \$25. The big difference results from the amount of time the respondent spends talking, which is typically about 20 to 25 of those 30 minutes in an in-depth phone interview.

Thus, when considering the cost per respondent minute, in-depth interviews can provide much greater value.

## Rich database

In-depth interviews capture all the

relevance and salience of qualitative information of focus groups. Every word the respondent speaks can be taped, transcribed and used in multiple ways. Well-trained coders can go beyond surface answers and produce a rich database that generates analyst reports, identifies broad themes and produces a body of knowledge of the range and depth of reactions.

In-depth interviews allow a much more representative approach than a focus group setting. In fact, with the small number of focus group participants, it is even more important to carefully select the respondents so that they represent the marketplace as accurately as possible. Yet focus groups, by their very nature, are far more constrained by location and time than other media used for one-on-one interviews.

Often, the logistics of recruiting and running several focus groups in multiple locations unduly complicate and lengthen the research process. Enticing prospective participants out of their home or office to

a strange location is much more difficult, time-consuming and expensive than inviting them to take part in interesting conversational research over the phone. While it is often necessary to ply focus group participants with food and money in return for two hours of their time, these same participants will engage in a targeted 15-20-minute phone conversation often for no incentive whatsoever.

### **Optimally suited**

One-on-one interviews are ideal when looking for detailed information on topics that people are unlikely to openly talk about in front of others or when testing concepts that may be difficult to understand and participants may not want to demonstrate ignorance in a public setting. When conducting research with the following audiences, for example, one-on-ones can offer advantages over focus groups:

- investors - when researching

financial products and services, survey participants are often reluctant to discuss their financial position in front of a group;

- executive/C-level individuals - often will not consider focus group participation and have limited time to devote to research;
- employees - are often reluctant to speak freely in front of co-workers and/or management observers.

### **More value**

If the true goal of research is more insight from each respondent, then the value received from in-depth one-on-one interviews when compared to focus groups is significantly greater. One-on-one interviewing can double or triple the number of minutes that the respondent is talking. Further, the research investment is more cost-effective, since more of the research budget is used to elicit information from each and every respondent rather than for other incidental costs of hosting a focus group. | Q