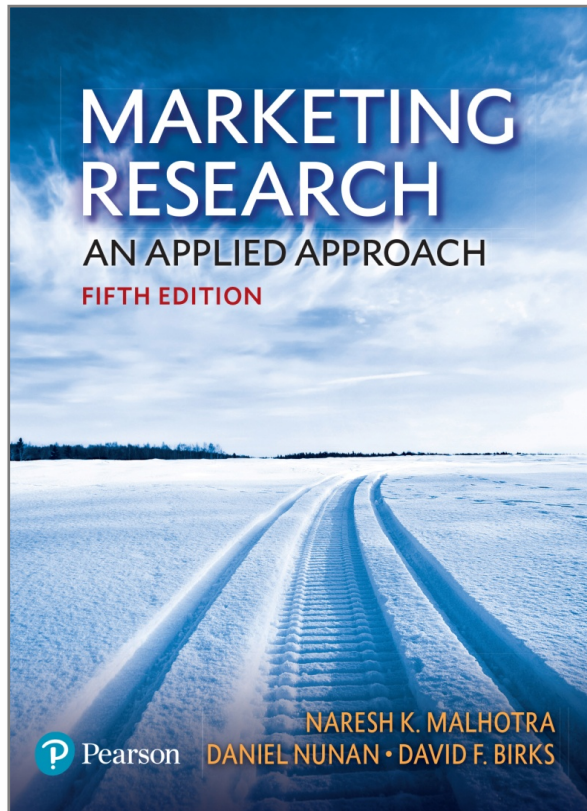


# Marketing Research

## An Applied Approach

5<sup>th</sup> edition



## Chapter 7

Qualitative research: focus group discussions

*The best moderators of focus groups are those that create a spirit of spontaneity and a passion for the issues under discussion.*

# Chapter outline

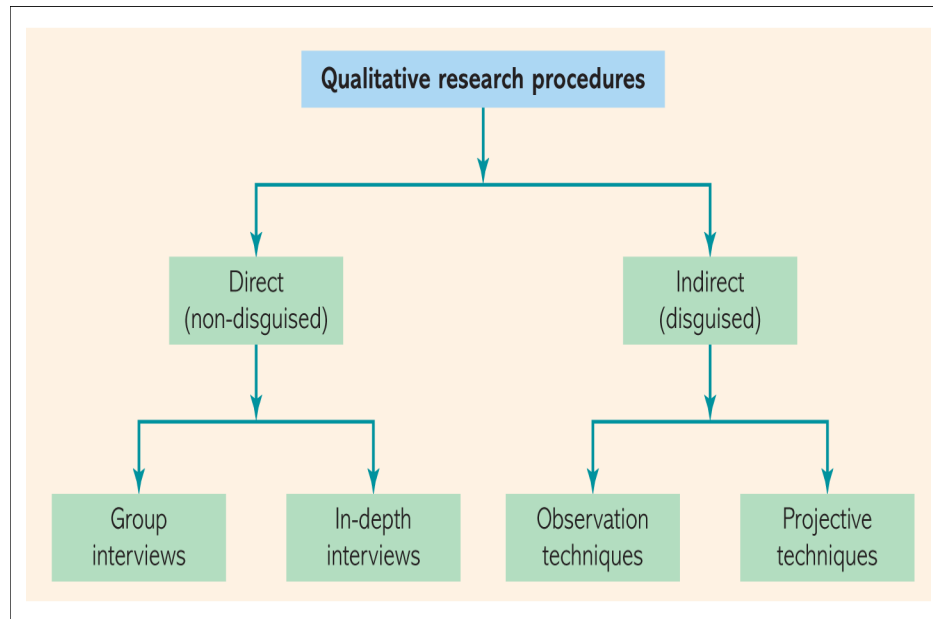
- 1) Classifying qualitative research techniques
- 2) Focus group discussions
- 3) Planning and conducting focus groups
- 4) The moderator
- 5) Other variations of focus groups
- 6) Other types of qualitative group discussions
- 7) Misconceptions about focus groups
- 8) Online focus groups.

# Overviews

We start by presenting a means of classifying qualitative research techniques.

Then the characteristics of the **focus group** are presented along with their advantages and disadvantages.

## Classifying qualitative research techniques



The qualitative techniques can be classified as either **direct** or **indirect**.

- **A DIRECT APPROACH:** is a type of qualitative research in which the **purpose** of the project is **disclosed** to the participant or are obvious given the nature of the interview [see focus groups and in-depth interview]
- **INDIRECT APPROACH:** a type of qualitative approach in which the purposes of the project are **disguised** from the participants [see observation techniques and projective techniques]



## Focus Group Discussion

- A focus group is a **discussion** conducted by a **trained moderator** in a **non-structured** and **natural manner** with a small group of participants.
- A **moderator** leads and develops **the discussion**. The main purpose of focus group is to gain insights by creating a **forum** where participants feel sufficiently comfortable and relaxed.
- In this forum, participants can reflect and portray their **feelings** and **behaviour**, at their pace and using their language, means of expression and logic.
- The value of the technique lies in discovering **unexpected findings**, often obtained from a free—flowing discussion.
- Focus groups are the most frequently used qualitative marketing research procedure, accounting for 9% of all global marketing research (2010).
- They are used in *new product development, advertising development and image studies*.

# Characteristics

The major characteristics of a focus group are summarised in the following table

<i>Key benefit</i>	Group members 'feed' off each other and creatively reveal ideas that the researcher may not have thought of or dared to tackle
<i>Key drawback</i>	Group members may feel intimidated or shy and may not reveal anything of significance
<i>Group size</i>	6-10
<i>Group composition</i>	Homogeneous, participants pre-screened by questionnaire or through known characteristics
<i>Physical setting</i>	Relaxed, informal atmosphere, 'comfortable' from the perspective of the participants
<i>Stimulating discussion</i>	Use of storyboards, mood boards, products, advertisements, films, music, websites, brochures
<i>Time duration</i>	1.5 to 6 hours
<i>Recording</i>	Use of audiocassettes, videotapes and notes from observations
<i>Moderator</i>	Observational, interpersonal and communication skills

## Characteristics



- **The Key benefit:** lies in the amount of **creative discussions** and **other activities** that may be stimulated. The stimuli may come from other group members and/or from the moderator.
- **The key drawback** [*inconveniente chiave*]: lies in how intimidating the group scenario may be to certain individuals. Many individual may be shy and unable to express themselves freely in a group.



- **Group size:** a focus group is made of **6-10 persons** [groups of fewer than six are unlikely to generate the momentum; groups of more than 10 may be too crowded and may not be conducive to a cohesive and natural discussion].
- **Group composition:** a focus group should be **homogeneous** in terms of demographic and socio-economic characteristics.
  - *Common demographic characteristics* for determining group composition are: gender, race or ethnicity, age, house-hold location, education level, occupation, income and marital status or family composition.
  - Selecting participants using these characteristics can help increase *compatibility* but does not guarantee it; their backgrounds should be carefully balanced with their experiences.
  - *Participants* who have already *taken part* in numerous focus groups should not be included [they are the so-called professional participants and their participation leads to serious validity problems].

## Characteristics



- **Physical setting:** a relaxed, informal atmosphere helps group members to forget they are being questioned and observed. Settings may be the *home of a friend* within a particular community, a *works canteen* [mensa], a *village hall*, a room in a leisure centre, a *meeting room* in a hotel or a *purpose-built discussion group room*. Light refreshments should be served before the session and made available throughout; these become part of the context of relaxation.

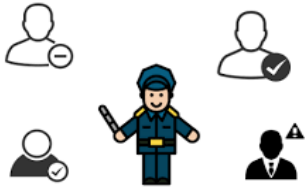
- **Stimulating discussion:** use of storyboards, mood boards, advertisements, films, music, websites, brochures
- **Time duration:** from **one** to **six** hours. When a focus group lasts up to six hours, participants may be performing a series of projective techniques such as building “mood boards” or “role planning”.



- **Recording:** focus groups are recorder. Video recording has the advantage of capturing facial expressions and body movements, but it can increase the costs significantly. When focus groups are conducted in purpose-built studios, decision makers as “clients” observe the session from an adjacent room using a two-way mirror or thorough video transmission.
- **The moderator:** its role is vital in the success of the focus group.



## Characteristics



- The moderator must establish rapport with the participants and keep the discussion flowing, including the **probing** of participants to elicit insight.
- Probing differs from questioning in that **the probes** and the **nature of probing** are **more spontaneous** and involves **comments** such as:
  - Would you explain further?
  - Can you give me an example of what you mean?
  - Would you say more?
  - Is there anything else?
  - Please describe what you mean
  - I do not understand
- Sometimes the moderator may put a probe question to the *whole group* such as:
  - Who else has something?
  - What about the rest of you?
  - I see people nodding their heads; tell me about it
  - We want to hear all the different points of view. Who else has something that might be a bit different?
- The moderator has a central role in the **analysis** and **interpretation of** the data. He/she should possess skill, experience, knowledge of the discussion topic and an understanding of the nature of group dynamics.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xjHZsEcSqwo>

## Advantages of focus group

Focus groups offer several advantages that are summarized by the **10 Ss**:

1. **Synergy**: putting a group of people together will produce a **wider range of information** insight and data than will individual responses secured privately.
2. **Snowballing**: a bandwagon effect operated in a group discussion in that one person's comment triggers a **chain reaction** from the other participants.
3. **Stimulation**: after a brief introductory period, the participants want to express their ideas and expose their feelings as the level of **engagement** on the topic increases in the group.
4. **Security**: because the participants' feelings may be similar to those of other group members, they feel **comfortable** and are therefore willing to "open up" and reveal thoughts where they may have been reluctant if they were on their own.
5. **Spontaneity**: since participants are not required to answer specific questions, their responses are usually **spontaneous** and unconventional.

## Advantages of focus group

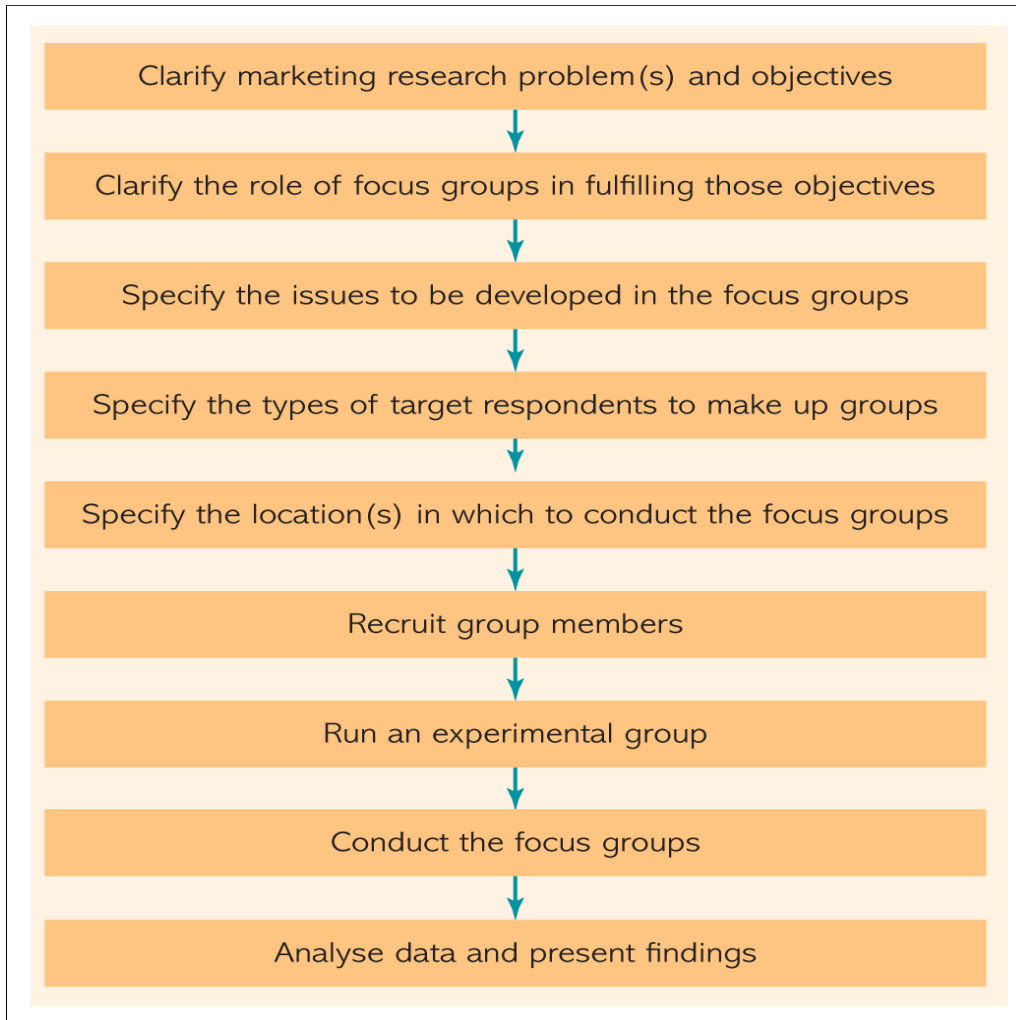
6. **Serendipity**: ideas are more likely to arise **unexpectedly** in a group than in an individual interview. These ideas may concern issues that the moderator had not thought of. The dynamics of the group can allow these issues to develop and be discussed.
7. **Specialisation**: because a number of participants are involved simultaneously, the use of a highly trained, but expensive, interviewer is justified.
8. **Scientific scrutiny** [controllo scientifico]: the group discussion allows close scrutiny of the data-collection process in that observers can witness [prendere parte] the session and it can be recorded for later analysis.
9. **Structure**: the group discussion allows for **flexibility** in the topics covered and the **depth** with which they are treated.
10. **Speed**: since a number of individuals are being interviewed at the same time, **data collection** and analysis can proceed relatively quickly. This advantage has become even more important with the development of online focus groups.

## Disadvantages of focus group

Focus groups offer several disadvantages that are summarized by the **5 Ms**:

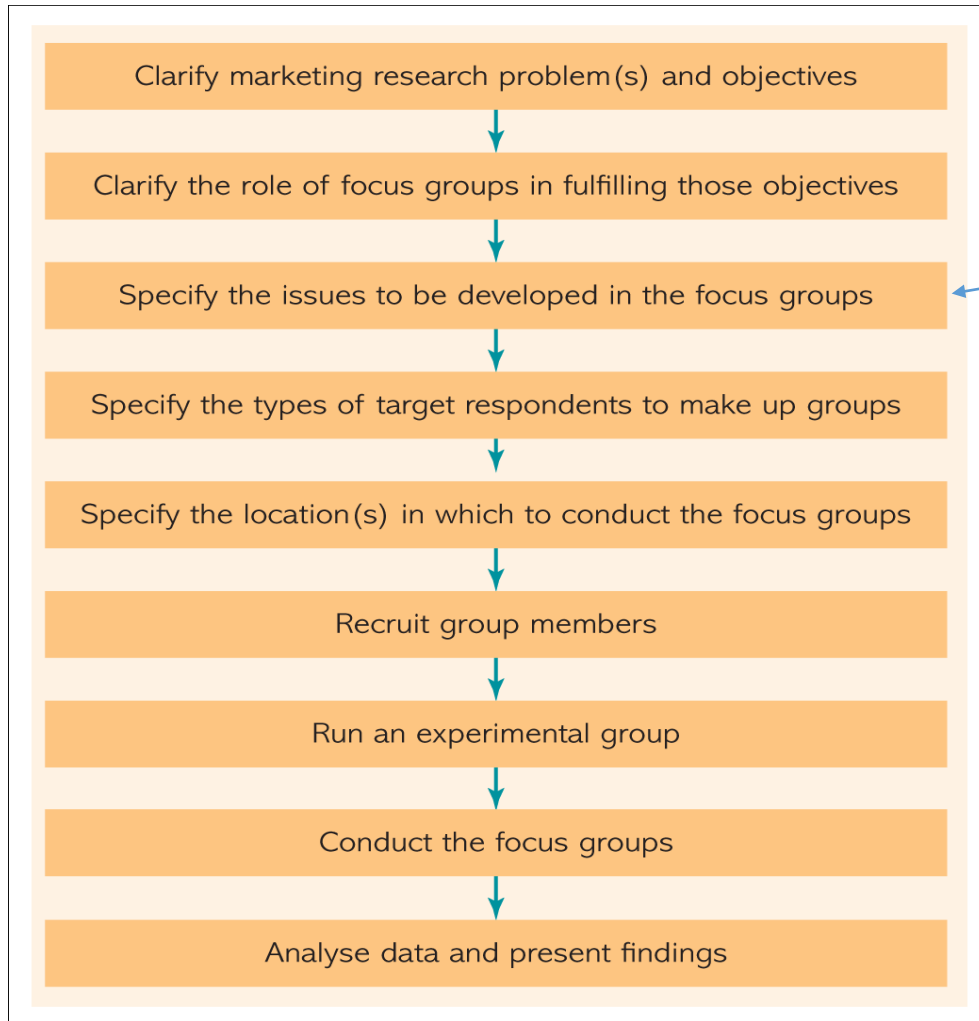
- **Misjudgment**: Focus group results can be more easily misjudged [giudicati male] than the results of other data-collection techniques. As a qualitative technique focus groups can evolve through a line of questioning and probing. The specific **direction** of questioning and the ultimate **interpretation of findings** can be susceptible to the *bias of the moderator* and other researchers working on a project.
- **Moderation**: focus group can be **difficult** to moderate. Much depends upon the “chemistry” of the focus group in terms of how group members get on with each other and draw ideas and explanation from each other. Even moderators with many years of experience may not connect with particular groups of participants or topics and get into difficulty with group members who disrupt the discussion.
- **Messiness** [confusione]: the unstructured nature of the responses makes coding, analysis and interpretation **difficult** in comparison with the far more structured approach of quantitative techniques.
- **Misrepresentation**. Focus group results concentrate on evaluating distinct target groups, describing them and contrasting them to other groups or types of participants. Trying to **generalize** too much wider groups, in the same manner as with a quantitative survey based on a representative sample can be very misleading.
- **Meeting**. Even when participants are agree to take part in a focus group, there are problems in getting them together at the same time (managers may have problems to be together at the same time in the same place)

## Planning and conducting focus groups



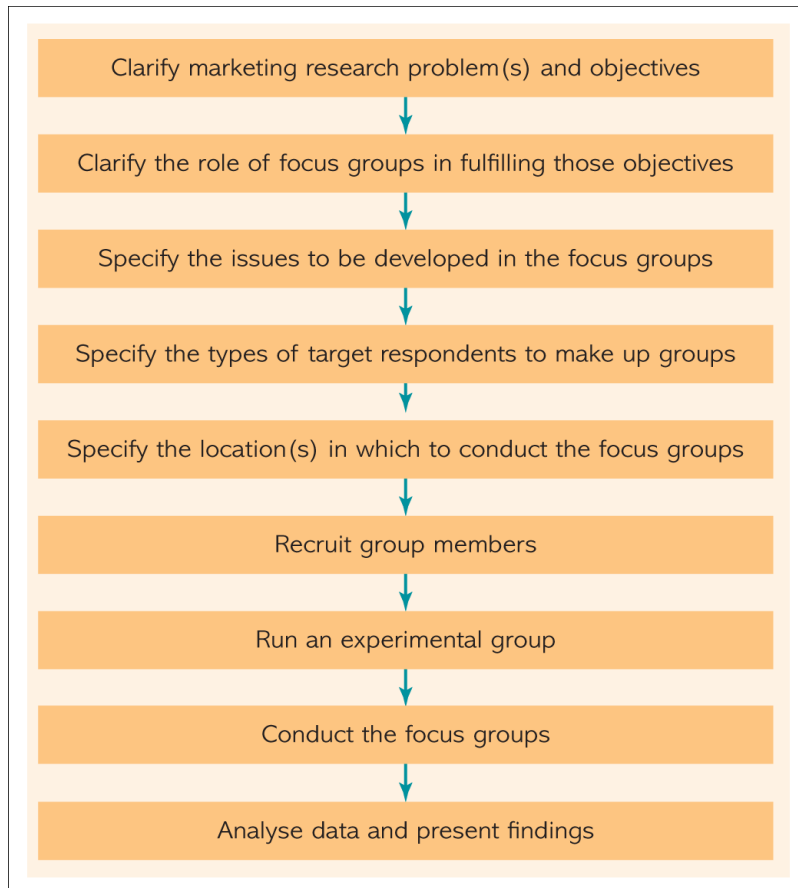
- (1) Planning begins with an examination of the **marketing research problem(s) and objectives**. It is vital to ensure that the whole process is founded upon a clear awareness of the *gaps* in the knowledge of marketing decision makers. Given the problem definition, the **objectives of using focus groups** should be clarified.
- (2) Specify **a list of issues** that are to be tackled in the focus group. It is elaborated a **topic guide**: a list of topics, questions, and probes that are used by a moderator to help manage a focus group discussion.

## Planning and conducting focus groups



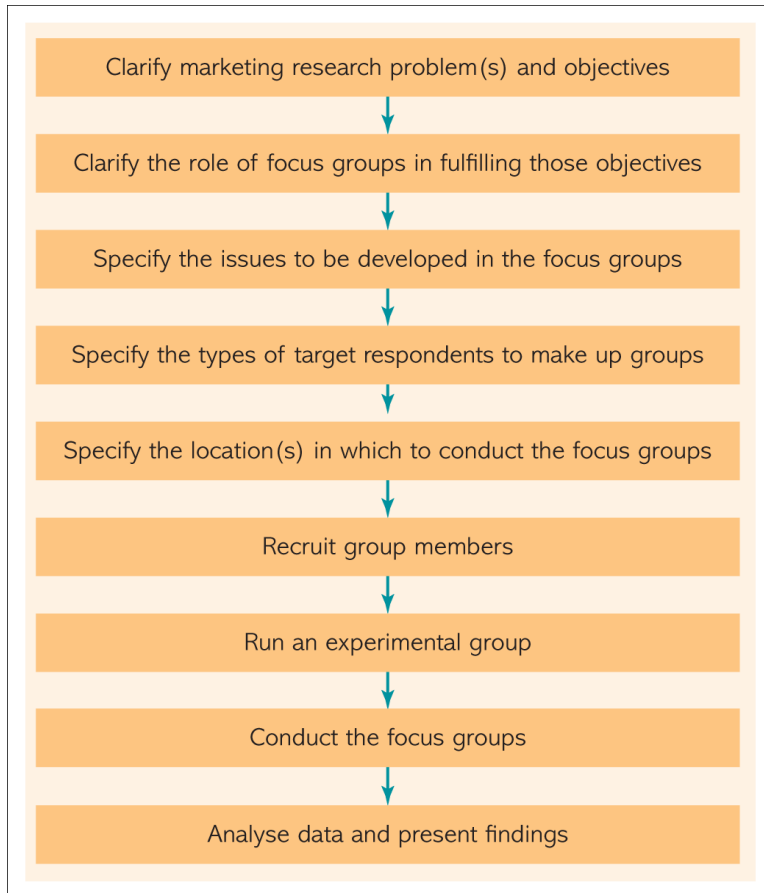
- The moderator opens the discussion with a general **introductory question** to make participants comfortable with the subject and the purpose of the research.
- Then, the discussion moves on to one or two **transition questions** which move the discussions towards the key questions and issues. Transition questions can ask participants to go into more depth about their experiences and uses of a product, making the connection between the participant and the topic under investigation.
- The moderator can then move on to the **key issues** that can advance as the moderator tunes into the dynamics of the group.
- The emphasis should be upon an evolution and **learning process** rather than administering process based on a set of questions.

## Planning and conducting focus groups



- (3) The types of **group members** to take part in the discussions are then specified. Aspects that can be considered are: product familiarity and knowledge, usage behaviour, attitudes towards and participation in focus groups and standard demographic characteristics. It could be prepared a questionnaire to screen potential participant during the recruitment.
- (4) It is necessary to specify the **location** in which to conduct the focus group.
- (5) Then the actual recruitment of group members progresses. **Recruitment** may take place on a face-to-face basis through street interviews or through database details by phone and e-mail. Attendance can be rewarded with cash or a gift.

## Planning and conducting focus groups



(6) **Run an experimental group.** The first focus group to be run should be seen as an experimental group. All aspects of running the group should be evaluated.

(7) Then, the **focus groups can be run.**

The **number of focus groups** that should be conducted on a single subject depends on the following factors:

- The extent to which comparisons between different types of participants are sought
- The variety of types of individual that make up a target market: more focus groups may be needed.
- The geographic widespread of participants
- The paradigm that underpins the planning, administration and analysis of the focus group
- The time and budget available.





## Moderator

The moderator is an individual who **conducts a focus group** discussion by setting the purpose of the discussion, questioning, probing and handling the process of discussion

- **Kindness with firmness.** The moderator must quickly develop an **empathy** with group members. From this the moderator should show kindness to make participants feel welcome, combined with a **firmness** to stop particular individuals taking over the discussion.
- **Permissiveness.** The moderator must be **permissive** allowing the flow of discussion to develop as the group sees fit. However, the moderator must be alert to signs that the group's cordiality or purpose is disintegrating.
- **Involvement.** The moderator must encourage and stimulate intense **personal involvement**. In certain circumstances this may be becoming involved in the actual discussion itself. This can happen if there is not a tendency for "group speak".



## Moderator

- **Encouragement.** The moderator must encourage unresponsive members to participate.
- **Flexibility.** The moderator must be able to improvise and modify the planned outline amid the distractions of the group process.
- **Sensitivity.** The moderator must be sensitive enough to **guide the group discussion** at an intellectual as well as emotional level. The moderator must also be attuned to mood changes and issues that fire up enthusiastic responses or conversely cause the discussion to dry up.
- **Observation:** as the group progresses, **notes** must be made of ideas or questions to come back to, interpretations of particular silences or **bouts of laughter**, and how group members are interacting with each other.

## Other variations of focus group

There are possible variations of the standard focus group procedure.

- **Two-way focus group.** This allows **one target group** to listen to and learn from a related group. [In one application, *physicians* viewed a discussing the treatment patients desire. A focus group of these physicians was held to *focus group of arthritis patients* determinate their reactions].
  - **Dual-moderator group.** This focus group discussion is conducted by *two moderators*. One moderator is responsible for the **smooth flow** [flusso regolare] of the session and the other ensures that **specific issues** are discussed.
  - **Duelling-moderator group.** There are two moderators, but they deliberately take **opposite positions** on the issues to be discussed. This allows the researcher to explore both sides of controversial issues.
- **Participant-moderator group.** The moderator asks **selected participants** to play the role of moderator temporarily to improve group dynamics.
  - **Client-participant group.** **Client personnel** are identified and made part of the discussion group. Their primary role is to offer clarifications that will make the group process more effective.
  - **Mini-group.** These groups consist of a moderator and only **four or five participants**. This happens when the issues of interest require more extensive probing.
  - **Telephone focus groups.** These are conducted using a **telephone conferencing system** with the same number of participants as conventional focus groups but typically within a narrower time frame, no more than an hour. These can work well in gaining access to widely dispersed experts in a range of professions or specialists.



## Brainstorming

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dful8bs574A>

**Traditional brainstorming** has been very used in the context of management and marketing. Its principles are the following ones:

- Think of as many ideas as you can and say them out loud
- Leave the evaluation until later
- Build on and combine others' idea
- Be as imaginative as possible
- The wilder the ideas the better

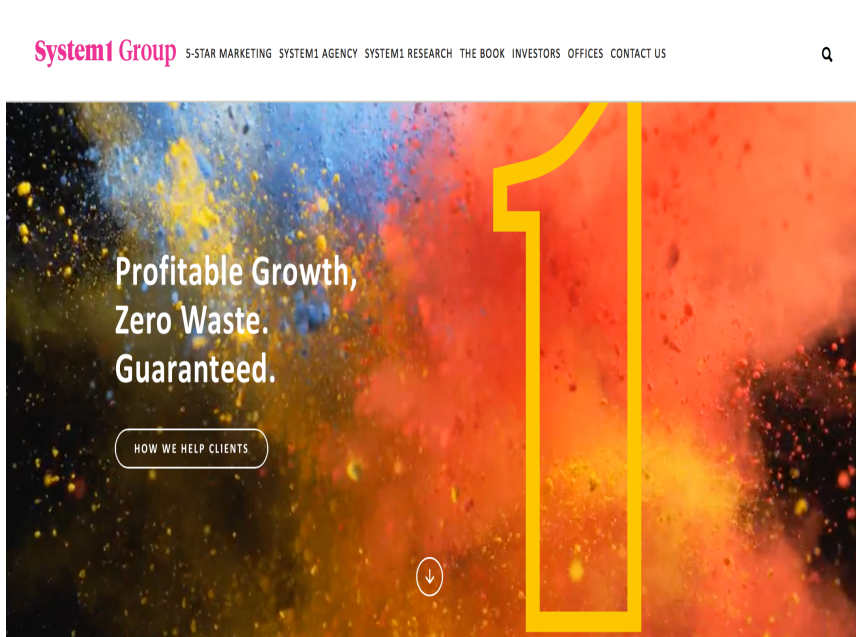
The group moderator seeks to foster an atmosphere of creativity, tapping into [andando dentro] the intuition of participants, generating novel ideas and connections between ideas.

Two problems mark a traditional brainstorming:

- **Production blocking**: happens when a **group member** has an idea, but someone else is talking. When it is finally his or her turn, they have forgotten the idea or think it is **redundant** or not that good.
- **Evaluation apprehension**: happens when participants **become anxious** about what others think of their thoughts. Ideas may be censored as there is a fear of being labelled as odd [diversi]. When participants feel this apprehension they do not produce as many new and potentially useful ideas but keep themselves to themselves.

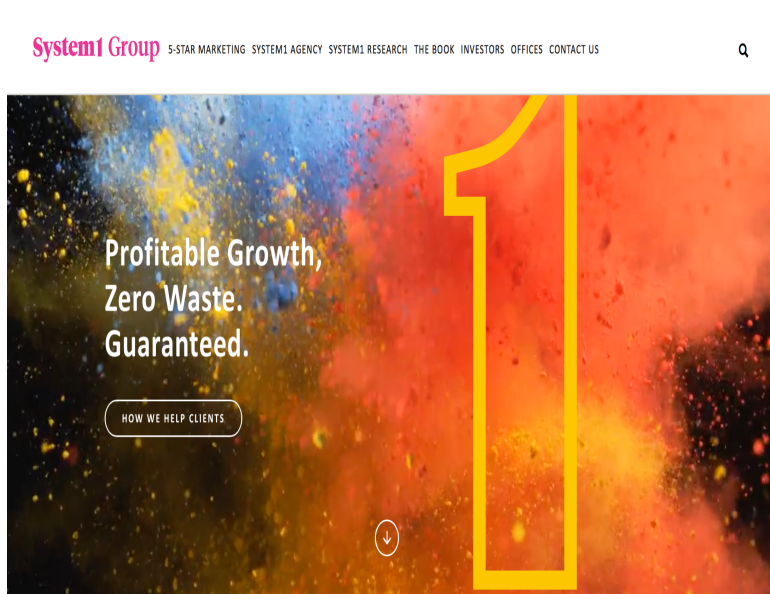
# BrainJuicer online brainstorming

The research agency BrainJuicer ([www.brain-juicer.com](http://www.brain-juicer.com)) has created a four-stage approach to online brainstorming:



- (1) Identify creative consumers' via an online *creativity test*.
- (2) *Brief* [dare istruzioni] *50 creative consumers* online to create 500 new ideas for a certain product/category and collect the new ideas digitally.
- (3) *Categorise* the output, select the most promising 50 ideas from the total.
- (4) After this the *client team* focuses on *what it is good at*: harvesting [raccolta], articulating sound and appealing concepts.

## BrainJuicer online brainstorming



Using this process BrainJuicer was asked to generate *new-product ideas* for Unilever Deodorants, both for men (e.g. Axe) e for women (e.g. Rexona).

Halfway through the process it was decided to feed the ideas from the creative consumers into a *brainstorming workshop* and then invite some of them to participate in the workshop.

After the workshop a total of 40 ideas, 21 from Unilever resources (generated using traditional brainstorming techniques) and 19 originally from the BrainJuicer process were selected by Unilever to be evaluated by using BrainJuicer's screening tool, the *Predictive Market*.

The *Predictive Market* uses a large diverse crowd [individui] to decide on ideas with the most potential in the market place.

Participants get virtual shares in all ideas tested. They need to maximise their own wealth by **selecting one** idea that they think will be a **big failure** in the market and **one idea** that **they feel will be most successful** in the market.

Among the deodorant ideas for men, the two *winning ideas* were inspired by the BrainJuicer process. From the Unilever Deodorant results it was clear that the traditional brainstorming approach was less successful in generating fresh potent ideas than the group of creative consumers working individually online.

## Misconceptions about focus group

There has been much **debate** about the use and value of **focus group discussions**. Much of the debate has been misinformed through the development of myths and **misconceptions** [idee sbagliate] built around this technique. The misconceptions are the following ones:

### 1. **Economical** – they are low cost and quick

- In comparison with other qualitative methods, focus group are often *more expensive* than observation and individual interviewing, primarily due to more expensive *recruiting methods*.
- Important resources (the biggest ones) are involved in the technique are those of the researcher in the *planning, execution* and *analysis* of focus groups.
- Analysis can be **cheap** and **quick** if it is a case of decision makers taking away their own conclusions from the realized focus groups.
- Analysis are more **expensive** and **time-consuming** if the careful planning and execution is followed up by the assembly of data, reflective diaries and memos and full immersion in those data of the researcher.

## Misconceptions about focus group

### 2. Experts- they require professional moderators

- A professional moderator has much to offer any project.
- In many instances it is not the amount of experience that matters most in moderating.
- Sometime, a less-experienced moderator, who has *more contact with the issues* under question, more *contact with the participants* and is perhaps *more comfortable in the interview location*, can elicit better data. This is especially true when working with distinctive ethnic, linguistic or cultural groups.

### 3. Easily upset - they do not work for sensitive topics

- Focus groups can be used in projects related to sexual behaviour, substance abuse and stressful life events which have marketing or social implications.
- The moderator may **encourage** everyone in the group to share values and experiences that they all have an interest in. There may be little consequences to what they say, especially if they are meeting with strangers whom they may never meet again.
- Handled with caution, the moderator can encourage participants to reveal things they would normally keep to themselves. Researchers working with sensitive issues must make plans to encourage appropriate self-disclosures and to cope with disclosures that go beyond the boundaries of the project.



## Misconceptions about focus group

### **4. Endorsement** – they must be validated by other research methods.

- Focus group can be used as the first stage of developing questionnaire or experiments.
- Focus group can be used to validate many of the statistical findings that emerge from survey.
- Focus group can be used in isolation to produce the kind of in-depth understanding of an issue that no other technique can provide.

### **5. Exposure** – they reveal how consumers will behave.

Data generated by focus group are attitudinal and trying to predict behaviour from attitudes is most problematic. The rise in customer database and ethnographic methods has helped researchers to predict behaviour and validate the findings of focus groups.

- The quality of moderator is the *success of the discussion*. The quality of findings is directly related to the talents, preparation and attentiveness of moderator.
- *Teamwork* is vital. There must be quality recruiters, note-takers, analysts and reporters. The participants open their lives and share their experiences, preferences and beliefs.
- The most negative thing a researcher can do in a focus group is to display arrogance, condescension or superiority. It is better to sit back and let participants tell you everything you wanted to know.

## Becoming a brand

Young focus group participants may require adaptation. Young people can be self-conscious (impacciato) in revealing their view in front of others. If they are involved in focus group, it is like asking them to attend an event that can look like a school scenario.

Generating comfort and thus confidence is crucial. It is worth adding a question to the recruitment screening about the possible “subcultural” or “tribal” learning.

Girls tend to open up and share together fairly quickly. Boys need time because their group dynamics are based on clear-cut roles.

It can be worth asking them to arrive 30 minutes early and leave them time to form the sense of group. If possible it is worth trying to work with young people’s existing **friendship groups**. By working with a set of friends, it can be possible to see how deliberations and decisions are played out and negotiated.

## Online focus group

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1lBrcBeVcl>

The online focus group are also known as **e-groups**.

- 1) Online focus group participation is by **invitation**. The participants are pre-recruited and generally come from list of individuals who have expressed an interest in particular products, services and issues. A list can derive by using *access panels*. The panels members are profiled and it is easy to know their preferences.
- 2) They receive a **time**, a **URL**, a **room name** and a **password via e-mail**. Before the focus group begins, participants receive information about the **discussion** that covers such **things** as how to express emotion when typing. Emotion indicators are standard in their use on the internet (happy versus sad faces); emotion can be expressed through words: *I am laughing* to my self, *I am embarrassed*, *I'm responding passionately* now.
- 3) When it is time for the discussion, participants move into a **web-based chat room**. In the chat room, the moderator and participants type to each other in real time. Participants are asked always to start their response with the question or issue number, so the moderator can quickly relate the response to the proper question. This makes it faster and easy to transcribe a discussion. A raw transcript is available as soon as the discussion is completed and a formatted transcript can be available within 48 hours.

## Online focus group

- Online focus group continue to emerge.
- They can have a duration over an **extended period of time**, from a few day to a few weeks.
- The research can reflect upon **responses** received and adapt subsequent questions.
- Participants can reflect in **more depth** and respond at their own convenience. They may also be given tasks such as collecting and posting visual and music or offering web links to illustrate ideas and issues.
- Such an approach can enable an in-depth discussion among 25 or more participants.
- The extended time period allows participants to react to and build upon each other's ideas in a way that is often not possible during a traditional focus group that lasts even up to six hours.

## Advantages of online focus groups

- Participants from all over the country or even the **world** can take part, and with technology advances they can physically be anywhere that they are comfortable.
- The decision maker can observe and comment on the discussion from **anywhere**.
- Unlike traditional groups, there is the opportunity to contact participants again at a later date, to revisit issues, or introduce the to modifications in material presented in the original focus group.
- The research can reach **segments** that are usually hard to interview: doctors, lawyers, professionals, working mothers and people who have busy lives.
- Moderators may also be able to carry on side conversations [portare avanti conversazioni] with individual participants probing **deeper** into interesting area.
- Participant may be less inhibited in their responses and can be more likely express their thoughts fully, especially if they have the facility to reflect and upload images, music or other forms of expression.
- The **cost** is much lower than traditional group (there is no travel, video-recording or facilities to arrange)

## Disadvantages of online focus groups

- Only individuals who have access to and **know** how to use a computer (older age groups)
- Body language, facial expressions, silences and the tone of voice cannot be observed and electronic emotions cannot capture as full a breadth of emotion as video-recording.
- **General lack of control** over the participant's environment and potential exposure to distracting external stimuli.
- Since online focus group could potentially have participants scattered all over the world, researchers and moderators have no idea what else participants may be **doing** during the discussion.
- Only **audio** and **visual stimuli** can be tested.
- Products cannot be **touched** (e.g. clothing) or smelled (e.g. perfumes).
- It may be more difficult to get clients or decision makers involved in online groups than in observing traditional groups.
- It is hard to replicate the compelling views of consumers, expressing themselves in an uninhibited manner, on what they feel about a product or service.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Online focus groups</b>	<b>Traditional focus groups</b>
<b>Group size</b>	4 to 8 participants	6 to 10 participants
<b>Group composition</b>	Anywhere in the world	Drawn from a targeted location
<b>Time duration</b>	1 to 1.5 hours – though can last over a week as participants are given tasks and come back to the discussion	1.5 to 6 hours
<b>Physical setting</b>	Researcher has little control – but the participants can be in a place that is comfortable to them, especially with the use of mobile technology	Under the control of the researcher
<b>Participant identity</b>	In some circumstances can be difficult to verify	Can be easily verified
<b>Participant attentiveness</b>	Participants can engage in other tasks – not seen by the moderator	Attentiveness can be monitored
<b>Participant recruitment</b>	Easier can be recruited online, by email, by access panel, or by traditional means	Recruited by traditional means (telephone, mail, mail panel)

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Online focus groups</b>	<b>Traditional focus groups</b>
<b>Group dynamics</b>	Limited	Synergistic, snowballing (bandwagon effect)
<b>Openness of participants</b>	Participants can be candid – may be more open with identities hidden to some extent	Participants can be candid as they build up trust of each other Difficult with sensitive topics
<b>Non-verbal communication</b>	Body language and facial expressions cannot be observed Some emotions can be expressed	Easy to observe body language and facial expressions Expression of emotions easier to monitor
<b>Use of physical stimuli</b>	Limited to those that can be displayed online – unless specific engagement tasks given to participants	A variety of stimuli (products, advertising, demonstrations) can be used
<b>Transcripts</b>	Available immediately	Time-consuming and expensive to obtain
<b>Observers' communication with moderator</b>	Observers can communicate with the moderator on a split screen	Observers can send messages to the moderator from behind two-way mirrors



<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Online focus groups</b>	<b>Traditional focus groups</b>
<b>Unique moderator skills</b>	Software familiarity, awareness of chat-room slang	Observational
<b>Turnaround time</b>	Can be set up and completed in a few days	Takes many days to organise, administer and analyse
<b>Client travel costs</b>	None	Can be expensive
<b>Client involvement</b>	Limited	High
<b>Basic focus group cost</b>	Much less expensive	More expensive due to facility rental, refreshments, video/audio taping and transcript preparation

## Questions

- What are the key benefits and drawbacks of conducting focus group discussions?
- What are the difficulties in conducting focus group with managers or professionals?
- What does a comfortable setting mean in the context of running a focus group?
- To what extent can a moderator achieve an “objective detachment” from a focus group discussion?
- Why is the focus group moderator so important to the success of a focus group discussion?
- What are the relative advantage and disadvantages of being able to observe covertly a focus group discussion?
- What is an online focus group? What are the distinct advantages and disadvantages of running online compared with traditional focus group?