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Seeking qualified buyers

In-store recruiting offers an alternative to standard techniques

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We've all been there. Sitting behind the one-way mirror, watching a focus group fail to achieve its objectives. Was it because the moderator was bad? No. Because the objectives were not clear-cut? No. Because the refreshments in the viewing room were not to our liking? Hardly. The failure is often due to the presence of unqualified participants, especially those with an obvious lack of recent category/product usage. Or sometimes there appear what seem to be professional respondents who knew how to get past the screening criteria.

In any event, there are people who may contribute nothing (or worse) to the session. This doesn't reflect well on the researcher, moderator, recruiter, or anyone else. What's a researcher to do?

Consider first how these respondents were chosen. Usually they are recruited via phone, letter or, more recently, e-mail or the Internet. You may have been on the receiving end of some of this "recruitment" yourself. Have you ever been called by somebody doing market research where your inclination was just to say yes to nearly anything, without closely listening to the questions (especially if dinner is coming to a boil . . . or getting cold)? At the mall, a hurried shopper might rely on agreement and positive expressions to rush their way through the inconvenient interruption of recruitment while on their way to purchase a new business suit, pair of shoes, or whatever.

What can be done to avoid recruiting unqualified respondents? How about going to where your target market is, and then talking to respondents in the act of shopping/buying your product? This is a good place to screen and recruit them. Then you will know immediately that 100 percent of the people recruited are in your target market. There won't be people sitting around the focus group table not knowing what the moderator is talking about. You know their experience is relevant to the topic at hand!

This type of recruiting means going to: nursery schools to find moms with kids; health clubs to find people with active lifestyles; the home improvement center to find do-it-yourselfers; supermarkets to find primary food shoppers; or community centers to find senior citizens. Going to your respondents' "home turf" provides you with a better opportunity to find verified or qualified focus group participants.

Recently a Clorox project required the input of people who use a specific, low-incidence cleaning product. When the field researcher was first told about the product, she was a bit confused as to what the product actually was, but she was nearly certain she had used it in the past. However, when she went to the store and actually saw the product on the shelf, the researcher realized that she had never encountered this product before. Her first assumption was wrong. She had assumed it was a variation of an age-old product with minor adjustments or enhancements. Much to her surprise the product she was hired to study was part of an altogether new category of cleaning devices.

If the researcher could experience this type of confusion on first exposure to the product concept, what about consumers? What if a consumer had been called and asked if they were a user of this product? They might easily say yes, when in fact they are not qualified. If the researcher's own experience was any indication, many people could have easily ended up sitting in that focus room, not knowing what was being discussed, and certainly not able to provide any useful information for the client. How much value would the manufacturer glean from a study sample which was largely comprised of consumers exposed to the product for the first time — when the study design (and moderator's guide) were prepared to capture feedback from product users?

How do we keep confused respondents out of our groups? One method, as discussed, is to observe shoppers at the point of sale, intercept them when they buy the client's product, screen them in the store aisle and then invite those who are completely qualified to participate in a focus group. So, in this particular case, everybody in the groups had made a recent purchase.

In another example, a research firm recruited consumers in the stores of a mass merchandiser. But this time, rather than recruit only those seen purchasing a particular product, they spoke with people who were seen shopping a particular category. Then the shoppers were shown the test product and screened for purchase interest. Those who were qualified at this point were invited to participate in a focus group. As further preparation they were given a test product to take home and evaluate during the week prior to their focus group. When these people arrived at the session, not only were they quality respondents but they were also very recent users who didn't have any difficulty recalling their experience with the product; and they were able to give much valuable insight.

Quality respondents

Researchers know the power and effectiveness of focus groups. They also know that for focus groups or IDIs that really hit their mark, you need quality respondents. You will find them in their natural setting. Those on the other end of a phone line, or those who represent the shrinking subset that wanders the mall may or may not qualify. Quality respondents are best found where your products are being sold. With some careful screening and preparation, you can improve the results of your focus groups by talking to people who buy your products and really care about giving you feedback and ideas.

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