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THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

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ABSTRACT

Focus groups have become a popular method of research for firms in the private sector who want to learn more about the attitudes and feelings their potential and actual customers have about the firm's products and services. The technique has also been useful in determining a company's image and possible new products and services that various companies might develop. Focus groups can provide the same kinds of information to practitioners in the field of recreation and parks, regardless of whether it is a public or private sector operation. This paper describes why the focus group technique has become so popular, the various steps that are involved in conducting a focus group, and some traps that might be avoided if it is to be used successfully.

THE FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW: AN UNTAPPED RESOURCE

What does the Kissing Barbie Doll, Life Savers, Molson Beer and Pepsi Light have to do with the field of recreation and parks? These products were the result of, or have benefited from, a marketing technique that has the potential to help recreation practitioners improve their services and programs, and to possibly discover new areas in which to expand. The technique is called "focus groups". While some aspects of it have been used by recreation and park professionals before, there

is a great deal more we can learn from the experiences of individuals who have employed the technique in the private sector.

Recreation and park managers share many of the same information needs as managers in the private sector. Both groups want to know "who" their consumers are and what makes them act in one way and not another. Both sets of managers want to know what kinds of products and services their potential clients will consume. The marketing literature provides a number of answers to these questions. Marketing techniques such as the product life cycle (4), Importance-Performance analysis (7, 10), and market share analysis (19) have already been successfully adapted to the field of recreation and parks. Focus group analysis provides another method for finding out who our potential and actual clientele are. This paper will describe the advantages and disadvantages of focus groups and some possible problems encountered when using the technique.

WHAT ARE FOCUS GROUPS?

Although focus groups have been used since World War II, there is still no single accepted definition or methodology.(1) However, most focus groups usually involve a small group of people being led through an open-ended discussion by a group moderator, whose primary responsibility is to focus the discussion on the relevant subject area in a non-directive manner.

During the 1950's, focus groups developed as an alternative to large sample polling techniques which provided voluminous data but little insight into behavioral issues: that is, the "why" behind the numbers.(1) The technique drew initially from group therapy methodology which was being used by psychiatrists during this period, and was based on the assumption that individuals would be more willing to talk with others who shared the same problem or had a common background.

The technique has become quite popular in the private sector (9). One estimate puts the revenue generated by focus group research at approximately \$390 million per year, with the research being conducted at over 700 facilities around the country.(12)

ADVANTAGES OF FOCUS GROUPS

The focus group technique is considered to have a number of advantages over alternative methods of gathering similar types of information. The main advantage of the focus group is its flexibility. For example, if during the session the group raises an interesting topic that had not been considered before, the moderator can concentrate on that topic, rather than follow a rigid schedule. Also, the researcher can react to other kinds of feedback from the participants such as body language and facial expressions. What-if types of questions can be posed during a focus group session, such as "if the price of the day camp were raised by "x" amount of money, what would your reaction be?"

Another benefit of focus groups is that the method promotes multiple interactions which can stimulate panelists to think of things in a new and direct way. According to Keown, "the principle advantage of focus groups is synergism; that is, group interaction generally produces more and better data than would individual interviews".(15, p. 60)

The technique also provides an immediacy that is often not possible with quantitative data collection. It allows the moderator to observe "how" a particular response is made; that is, what the participants body language and facial expressions are throughout the focus group session. For example, a response relating to how well one liked a particular park, which was accompanied by a yawn may be interpreted quite differently than the same remarks delivered in an enthusiastic manner.(9)

COSTS OF CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

Although the focus group can be costly in time and money, it is considered to be a relatively low cost form of research when compared to other alternative techniques. Costs can vary widely, and usually include the moderator's fee, the cost of recording the session, the analysis of the session results, and the possible rental of a place to conduct the session. Average costs of a focus group conducted in the private sector run between \$1,000 and \$1,500.(15)

Incentives are required for panelists since they may be required to spend not only a number of hours in traveling to and from the focus group session, but also time in the session. However, participants in recreation programs would most likely be willing to waive these fees if the goal of the session was to provide input into planning decisions that would benefit them. Since the private sector pays \$25 to \$150 per participant, the waiving of these fees would result in a substantial cost reduction.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE GOALS OF FOCUS GROUPS?

Focus groups have been used in all stages of marketing products and services. The following are a few of its applications that have relevance for the recreation and parks field.

Focus groups are effective for determining "direction" of feelings or the mood of a particular group. This could be useful in the initial planning stages of a bond campaign to determine the chances of the campaign's success and to uncover possible problems that would need to be addressed.

This was the case in a campaign to pass a controversial school levy in Columbus, Ohio. The same levy had been defeated five times in the past 13 years. The use of focus groups was instrumental in helping the campaign organizers to "target their messages to groups that their research told them were persuadable".(16, p. 28) The results of the focus groups were also used to refine these messages during the

successful campaign.(16)

Focus groups are particularly well suited to explore consumer reactions during the initial introduction of a product, service or advertising campaign. For example, it might have proved beneficial to use focus groups during the introductory phase of the "Life Be In It" campaign to determine what kind of message was being portrayed and how the campaign might have been improved.

Focus groups can also be used to generate background information for more extensive research efforts.(3, 6, 9) For example, a park manager might be considering a large scale survey of his or her service area. The use of focus groups could uncover concerns or issues that need to be included in the survey.

Focus groups are good at determining the "image" of something.(8) This attribute could be extremely useful in determining how an agency is perceived by various groups within its service area. This objective proved to be very important in a study recently sponsored by the North Carolina Division of Travel and Tourism. The advertising agency which conducted the study for the state was primarily interested in particular target group's images of North Carolina as a vacation destination.

Focus groups can be helpful to recreation and park departments in discovering new markets and generating ideas for new services or facilities.(2, 20) This would be especially helpful in our field where we tend to offer those programs which are most familiar to us and/or which we have offered in the past.

CONDUCTING A FOCUS GROUP

The preparation stage is crucial to the success of a focus group. The moderator must have a clear understanding of what the sponsor of the research wants. For success, this step requires not only a good working relationship between moderator and sponsor, but also a good understanding of the agency's objectives.

The choice of a moderator is not an easy one because few individuals have received formal training in this type of research technique.(13) The main criteria for choosing a moderator would be the individual's knowledge of the topic area, past experience conducting focus groups, and the moderator's ability to control a discussion without stifling spontaneous response.(18) Although little formal training is offered in schools, there are training seminars offered by marketing firms for those who want to conduct focus groups.(13) A number of marketing firms also exist that conduct this type of research on a daily basis.(12)

Usually there are no predefined questions established prior to the focus group session. A series of broad topics are agreed upon which form the "focus" of the study, and it is up to the moderator to guide the discussion so that useful information is generated. For example, a director of a recreation department might be interested in the following information relating to a proposed neighborhood park; 1) how does the

target market perceive a neighborhood park, 2) would the park be used and, if so, how, and 3) what are possible side effects that have not been considered. Sentence completions and word associations are two techniques often used to start the discussion.

The next step in conducting a focus group is the selection of group members. It appears that the best results can be achieved if the groups are socially and intellectually homogeneous.(1) For example, Rubicon and Young, a marketing firm that conducts over 600 focus groups per year, seldom mixes men and women. Usually the agency would want participants that have some knowledge of the program or service that is being discussed. However, it may be just as important to conduct focus groups composed of individuals that have never participated in the agency's programs, in order to find out why this is the case.

The jury still seems to be out as to the efficacy of having participants take part in more than one focus group. In some cities where focus groups are conducted on a regular basis, some individuals take part in so many focus group sessions that they have been termed "focus groupies".(12) However, Green (9) feels that first timers, i.e. those never having participated in a focus groups before, are the most spontaneous.

The consensus seems to be that the ideal group size is between 6 and 10 depending on the moderator's personality and style. It appears that as the group gets larger, more verbalizations are directed toward the focus group leader rather than to other group members.(11) However, focus groups have been conducted with as few as four member "mini" groups, at times composed of individuals from the same family. In fact, family groups have proven quite useful in learning about products that were geared to family consumption.(9) This mini group technique has direct application to many recreational activities which involve the participation of the whole family through collective decision-making.

The focus group sessions should be recorded on film and/or tape. Several alternative methods have been tried, from filming in plain sight of the group to having the camera behind a one-way mirror or from having the tape recorders on a table in front of the group to hiding the microphones in a plant. The important concern is whether or not the participants are told the session is being taped. A careful explanation of why the session is being taped, i.e. for in-depth analysis after the session is over and not for entertainment at a cocktail party, seems to be the best approach. The equipment should also be kept as innocuous as possible.

Usually three or four sessions (with different participants) appear adequate. In the North Carolina travel study mentioned previously, six focus groups were held. The sponsors felt that five of the six groups yielded important information, but that more sessions would not have added to their understanding of the relevant issues.

The interview environment should be kept neutral and cozy if possible. An actual living room or facsimile would be ideal. One-way mirrors, if explained, can help keep camera equipment from being too intrusive. It appears that as the session progresses, participants focus

less and less on the mirror.

It is not always necessary to conduct focus groups with everyone physically present. One research firm conducts the focus group sessions by phone, which was necessitated by the inability to get the necessary focus group panelists together. (21)

Although the tendency is to want to keep the participants as long as possible (once they have become a captive audience), the most useful sessions are two-hours or less (6). Some of this time is needed to make the group members feel comfortable with one another. If there is a need for more time, then multiple sessions with the same group should be considered.

TRAPS TO AVOID

Although the focus group technique has considerable potential for helping recreation and park professionals learn more about their clientele, there are a number of limitations that must be addressed. By recognizing these possible traps beforehand, the practitioner can take steps to either minimize their impact or to avoid them entirely.

One problem with focus groups is the tendency to read into the results more than is justified. A reason why this may occur is that your panelists are not knowledgeable about a particular concern. For example, a focus group may have been selected based on their knowledge of a local park, but the moderator gets the group to describe their feelings about the local community center, which may have only been used infrequently by a few of the panelists.

The newness of an idea or service may also trap or affect the comments. Groups tend to be conservative and are more helpful where the panelists have some experience with the topic being considered. Thus, even though the focus group may indicate that there would not be a market for a new soccer program, this recommendation should not be the only reason to eliminate the program idea.

The order in which topics are discussed can have an influence on how the group reacts. For example, if the group has been highly critical on one issue, there is a tendency to be less critical on the next. One way to compensate for this effect would be to use a different order of topics if more than one focus group were used on a particular set of issues.

The interviewer or moderator must make a special effort to solicit negative comments since he or she may be associated with what is being discussed. Thus, the sponsor of the research should not be present if one of the objectives of the session is to generate potentially negative feedback. To ensure that both positive and negative comments are discussed, the participants are often either not told who sponsored the focus group, or are not told until after the session is over. (6)

The focus group technique is not the same as an in-depth interview, and the moderator must avoid slipping into the latter with the panelists.

In fact, one way to gauge the success of a focus group is to look at the amount of interaction between participants.

Another trap the agency must be very careful of is to avoid generalizing the findings of a focus group study. Focus groups are not intended to circumvent the need for doing quantitative research.(9) Numbers do not belong in the analysis of a focus group and a sponsor of the research should beware of any claims that "x" percentage feels a certain way. This problem cannot be emphasized too much, since a tendency exists to have a focus group vote on how it feels on a particular issue. In most cases, this vote would be meaningless. In the case of the school levy campaign mentioned previously, the mood of all the focus groups was negative as to the potential success of the campaign. Even though the researchers had cautioned against generalizing from the groups to the entire population, many campaign leaders felt the campaign would be futile, which did not prove to be the case.(16)

THE ROLE OF THE SPONSOR

One of the real benefits of the focus group is that the sponsor can become involved in the data collection process and watch the actual proceedings, usually from behind a one-way mirror. Thus, if the discussion is not going in the direction that is desired, it can be re-directed during a break in the session. If the sponsor wants to sit in on the actual session, he or she is usually not identified, so that the participants are not unduly inhibited. After the main session has been completed, the sponsor can then take over the discussion to clarify or expand on particular issues that have been raised.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the private sector has used focus groups successfully for insight into consumer behavior, this technique has been underutilized by the parks and recreation field. The potential for discovering new ways in which the recreation and park field can improve services and facilities for the public exists with the focus group technique. An excellent overview of the technique is Higginbotham and Cox's Focus Group Interviews: A Reader. This is an excellent collection of articles on focus groups that provides detailed information on how to conduct them.

Several valuable marketing tools have been successfully adapted by recreation and park practitioners. The focus group technique adds another dimension to the practitioners' ability to further understand their clientele and to better provide the services and facilities that are most desirable to them. Although we recommend this method as a marketing tool, we also advise the first-time user to get help and guidance from those who are skilled in conducting focus groups before attempting to use this technique.

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