

HOW TO GET  
MORE VALUE FROM  
YOUR QUALITATIVE  
RESEARCH.



HINTS FOR  
OBSERVING.

**Lohs**  
RESEARCH GROUP

Whether you are a seasoned viewer of qualitative research or have little or no experience, this article is intended to enhance the value you receive when observing focus groups or in-depth interviews.



### **What can I do prior to the sessions?**

For research to be effective, there needs to be consensus on why it is being conducted. Notice whether you have “personal agenda” items that are not consistent with the stated research objectives, and either set them aside or discuss them with your internal market research manager.

If appropriate, be involved in research planning meetings. Share information that will help others to thoroughly understand the relevant issues.

### **What should I be aware of upon arriving at the research facility?**

Try to arrive 45 minutes before the group is scheduled to start. By doing so, you’ll reduce the chance of running into research participants in the reception area. Research participants can become anxious if they notice that “corporate types” are arriving to “observe” them. This is particularly true if the respondents are working-class consumers and the clients arrive in business attire.

Research participants will be arriving at the facility shortly before the start of the sessions. If you do encounter participants upon arrival, help maintain corporate anonymity when you identify yourself to the focus group facility staff. Don’t state the name of your company or agency, or say that you are there “to watch the focus groups.” Rather, give your name and say that you are there to meet with the moderator.

Oftentimes, the research participants do not know the identity of the corporate sponsor. They are not told so that they will be more candid in their comments. In some cases, the research would be seriously compromised if the respondents had prior knowledge of the corporate sponsor.

### **What do I need to know about the research facility?**

If you wish to arrive more than an hour before the first session begins, or remain more than an hour following the last session, confirm with the moderator that the facility staff finds this agreeable.

The facility is responsible for assuring client confidentiality. Research projects for other companies may be taking place at the same time as yours. Therefore, clients are asked to remain in the viewing rooms and not wander around the facility.

When the lights in it are turned off, the observation room allows viewers to watch the research proceedings without being seen. (For reasons of ethics, however, moderators tell respondents that they are being observed.) But when the door in the observation room is opened, light from the corridor shines in. Therefore, minimize the number of times the door is opened during the session.

The observation room is not completely soundproof. Therefore, keep the sounds (e.g., talking, coughing, clanging silverware while eating) to a minimum. This is particularly important as the evening wears on, when the mood in the “back room” sometimes becomes less subdued.

If you have viewed qualitative research at more than one research facility, you may have noted that some are not as modern and attractive as others. However, the mark of a good facility is that it does a fine job of recruiting respondents.

### **What’s the best use of my time immediately before the sessions?**

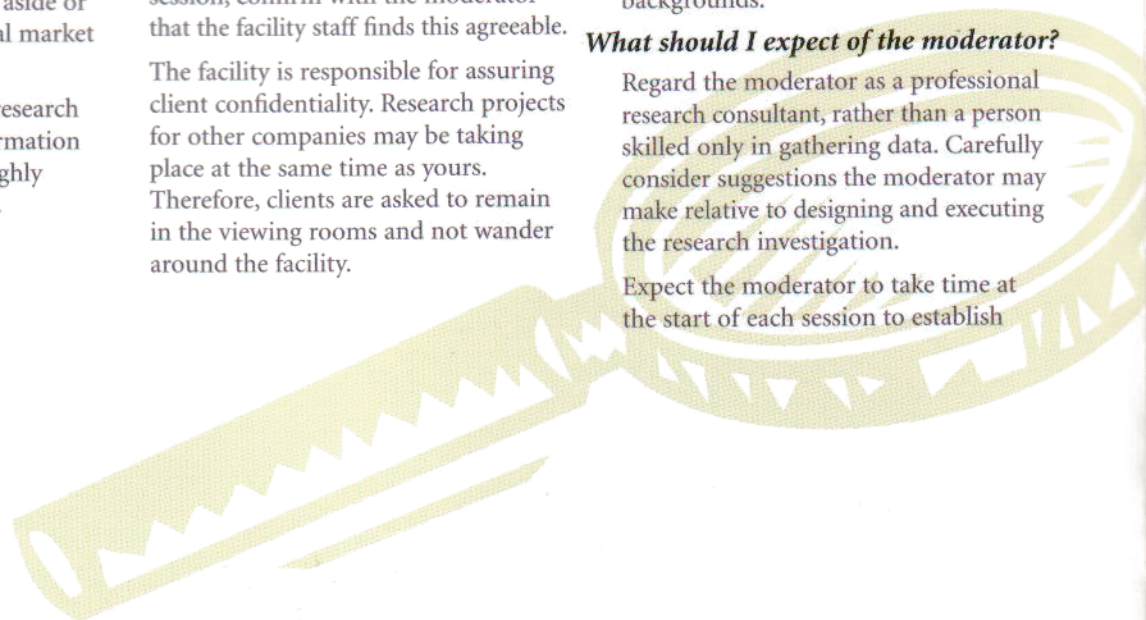
Review the moderator’s discussion guide, if you have not already, to be aware of the discussion flow that is planned.

You may wish to review lists of information about the respondents culled from the telephone screeners, or, if available, the screeners themselves. Then, when the sessions begin, you will be familiar with the respondents’ backgrounds.

### **What should I expect of the moderator?**

Regard the moderator as a professional research consultant, rather than a person skilled only in gathering data. Carefully consider suggestions the moderator may make relative to designing and executing the research investigation.

Expect the moderator to take time at the start of each session to establish



“ground rules” with the respondents. These ground rules let the respondents know what is expected of them and set the stage for a productive session. The opening moments of the session may not seem to be directly related to the research objectives.

Allow the moderator time to establish rapport with the respondents. It is only when respondents feel secure and relaxed with the moderator and with one another that they express themselves openly.

The moderator may not always closely follow the discussion guide. Allow him/her the flexibility to pursue your research objectives in a way that is appropriate to the dynamics of each particular group.

Moderators may “play dumb” about the client company or may not correct respondents’ misunderstandings about the company or its products or services. This is because their job is to identify perceptions, not to inform and educate.

Focus group research is not “serial interviewing” where all respondents contribute equally to the discussion. Rather, moderators encourage a natural social structure to evolve, in which some group members play more active roles and others are followers.

Nonetheless, you should expect the moderator to actively prompt all respondents to contribute to the discussion.

#### ***What can I do during the sessions to maximize my learning?***

Be a positive, active listener. Start with a “clean slate,” setting aside your own point of view. Attempt to follow the respondents’ logic by linking individual respondents’ backgrounds and comments with their opinions and reactions.

Avoid the tendency to view respondents as not representative of your customers or target market, and thereby dismiss their opinions. Respondents are carefully chosen in keeping with the research objectives.

Model your listening style on that of the moderator. By design, moderators treat respondents with “unconditional positive regard,” so respondents will feel secure in expressing their true feelings. Although it may be frustrating when a respondent says things that are offensive to the client company, you stand to learn much by being non-judgmental.

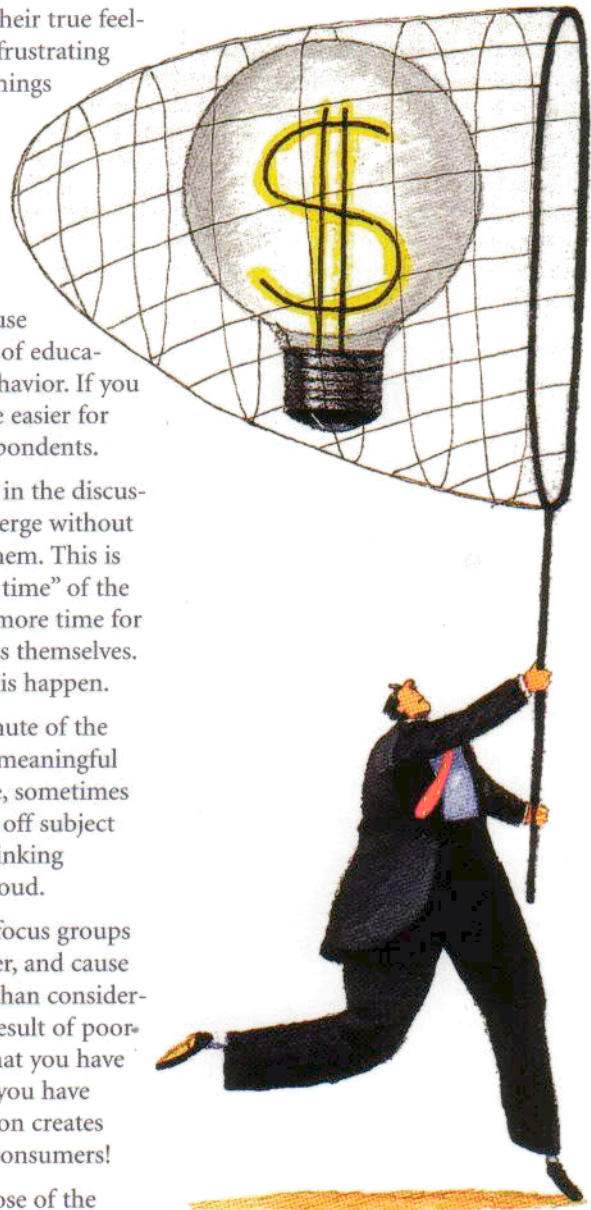
An occasional back room behavior is poking fun at certain respondents because of their appearance, level of education/sophistication, or behavior. If you avoid doing this, it will be easier for you to learn from the respondents.

The answers to questions in the discussion guide sometimes emerge without moderators ever asking them. This is good! It reduces the “talk time” of the moderator and provides more time for the respondents to express themselves. Listen carefully to hear this happen.

Expect that not every minute of the focus group will provide meaningful information. For example, sometimes respondents appear to be off subject when they actually are thinking through their opinions aloud.

At times, respondents in focus groups may influence one another, and cause shifts in attitude. Rather than considering this to be a negative result of poor-moderating, be pleased that you have made a valuable finding: you have identified what information creates changes in the minds of consumers!

Remember that the purpose of the research is not to get respondents to like the product or service. The purpose is to find out what the respondents really think and feel.



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Use pre-arranged breaks when the moderator comes to the viewing room to let him/her know what additional questions need to be asked rather than sending in notes. The best times for these breaks are at about the mid-point and approximately 10 minutes before the end of the session. If these breaks are pre-planned, the session can continue without interruption in data gathering: the moderator can assign respondents to do a task (e.g., a paper-and-pencil exercise) when he/she is out of the room momentarily.

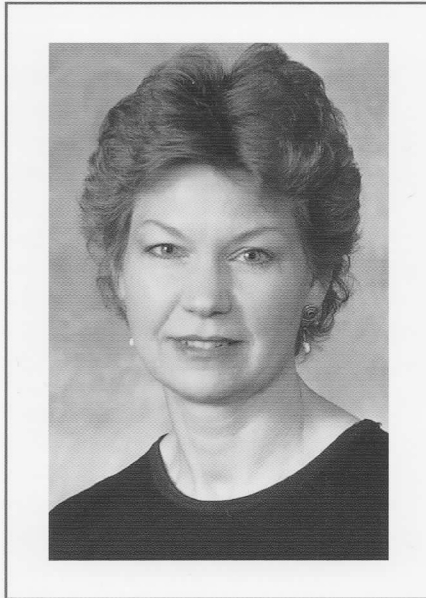
Consider routing these additional questions through one person in the back room. This will take less time and ensure consistency with the research objectives. Your internal market research manager is the best person to coordinate the questions.

Sending in a note breaks the flow of the discussion, and respondents are reminded of the presence of observers. It sometimes takes precious moments to re-start the flow.

### ***What is helpful to remember after the sessions?***

Keep in mind that meaningful research findings come through a synthesis of many comments from a number of respondents, and following at least several sessions. Each individual focus group or in-depth interview should make a contribution to the final learning, but no single session should be expected to provide "the answer."

Whether you attend a moderator's debriefing, attend his/her presentation of the findings, or read the report, remember that many moderators are able to offer informed, independent thinking regarding your marketing issues. Moderators have extensive research experience with a wide range of companies, and offer an objective perspective.



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