

Do you know what to do when you get the “Aha” from focus groups?

By: Robert J. Kaden

I've seen it many, many times. It can be downright intoxicating. Sometimes it's so overwhelming that it ends up costing your company untold millions.

You're watching a focus group and the light bulb goes on: Worse yet, you're reading a brilliantly written focus group report—and then there is clarity. “Aha.” you say to yourself. “That's it. That's what I should do.”

Whether it comes as a result of an “Aha” or “Eureka” moment, or if it's just a flash of insight, treat such reactions from your focus group studies like the plague.

Despite my strong cautions to the contrary, a catalog client once decided to change their entire product mix because women in their focus groups said they didn't offer enough high-priced clothes. A home improvement warehouse eliminated its fast checkout lane for professional contractors when the contractors said they'd wait with everyone else if they could get a 10% discount on their purchases. A snack food manufacturer heard women say they wanted more healthy snacks and would pay more to get snacks with all-natural ingredients. The results of all these moves were unmitigated disasters.

It critically important to remember that, in focus groups, what people might say and how they then might behave can be at polar opposites. Many marketers will forget this fact when they are faced with overwhelming consensus from a focus group study. So, take this as fair warning—if you are inclined toward committing meaningful sums of company money to drastically different but compelling ideas that emerge from focus groups, breathe deeply for five minutes and then lie down until the urge goes away.

Focus groups should be used develop insights and hypotheses. They can help better define problems or issues, to explore alternative solutions and to provide fodder for more effectively deliberating on “what could be.” They are **not** a tool for determining wholesales changes that should be made to your products or marketing programs or whether a product or service that you feel will blow the socks of competition will really do so.

I've given this speech to clients thousands of times and somehow it never gets through. This is what I tell them. “It doesn't matter if respondents in your focus group jump up and down and toss money at you because they are so excited

about doing business with your company. And it doesn't matter if they sit there yawning, doodling or stone-faced because they are bored by the conversation.

What matters are issues that you uncover that might lead to greater success or identify eminently preventable failures. Invariably, though, clients will start counting their profits if focus groups love their ideas, or be totally depressed if they don't.

So, what should you do if you get an "Aha" from your focus groups? My advice is to feel good, assume you're on the right track and then proceed cautiously. My advice if you don't get the response you want is to assume you need to change your track before proceeding cautiously. In other words, don't plough blindly ahead with an idea that seems great and, conversely, don't kill an idea that could blossom with some intelligent tweaking.

Focus groups are not projectible. For that matter, no qualitative research is. That means you can't generalize the results. You can't assume that what you hear from 20, 30 or 40 people in Des Moines will hold true for millions of people everywhere. What you do learn from focus groups are the potential barriers to success or the considerations to take into account in order to avoid failure.

I believe the problem stems from the fact that focus groups are the most intoxicating of all the marketing research techniques. They provide a direct, uninhibited, uncensored link with customers and prospects. There is an opportunity to observe first-hand what customers and prospects look like, to hear their tone of voice and to scrutinize their body language and facial expressions. But if you bet your company, job or marketing budget on what your groups say—and it works out—don't be fooled into considering yourself smart. All you can do is consider yourself downright lucky.

That is, focus groups are a bit like Las Vegas. On some days you may win but they don't build multi-billion dollar casinos in Vegas because gamblers win the majority of time.

It's great when you get sudden insights from focus groups. That's the idea. That's what should happen. But it's only a signal that you may have found something good. The next step should be a well-constructed, projectible survey that lets you know with certainty if you are on the right track or have simply uncovered the proverbial red herring.

I am often asked if doing focus groups is better than doing nothing at all. A client said, "I'm going ahead with or without research. I can afford to conduct a couple of groups but if you tell me they won't help, then I'll just go ahead because I have a gut feeling this will work."

If funds for research are limited, should an economical focus group study be conducted? The answer is, "Absolutely." In such instances, groups can provide a strong warning signal that what you think is a great new marketing, advertising or new product idea could be a waste of time and money. Focus groups can, indeed, send a strong stop sign. In such cases, "disaster checks" provide value.

But, that's it. Euphemistically speaking, focus groups should never be used on "bet your career" decisions. They exist to let you explore options and develop new alternatives. They are no more, and no less, than a tool for motivating your creative juices.

So, again, the next time you get a big "Aha" from a focus group, there really is nothing more to do than listen to that small inner voice that says, "Don't you dare believe that...just go ahead and research the idea further."

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