

FOCUS GROUP FACILITY NICETIES THAT GO THE EXTRA MILE

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Researchers generally select focus group facilities based on location, service, recruiting, and the physical facility. Yet among all of these major elements, there are also other things facilities do that make the lives of moderators and clients more pleasant.

Some facilities are simply more advanced than others at the details:

- Making a computer and printer readily available to clients to print last-minute changes of the discussion guide and handouts.
- Providing plenty of electrical outlets and phone plugs in the back room for our increasingly electronic society.
- Having video equipment that can be controlled by remote, so a camera operator doesn't have to take up space in the back room.
- Having rooms color-coded, so clients and researchers don't accidentally stumble into the wrong back room ("This is Crestview room? I thought it was Riverside room!").
- Having a small shelf running the length of the focus room, and/or walls that can accept thumbtacks without damage.
- Arranging with a nearby hotel to provide discounts on room rates.
- Installing discrete floor lights in the back room that identify steps or platforms (ever twist an ankle in the back room in the dark?).
- Having observation rooms with wrap-around mirrors that allow observers to get a variety of views of the group room.
- Providing websites with room shapes and dimensions, hotel recommendations, comprehensive maps and directions to the facility, and a list of zip codes in the recruiting area – meaning clients and moderators don't have to rely on faxed copies of small maps as they drive their rental cars through unfamiliar territory.

Many of these features can be found in focus facilities around the country. But in addition to these more common ideas, over the past decade or so I've been fortunate to run into some pretty clever ideas focus group facilities have devised. Here, presented with the permission of each facility, is a list of some of these.

A constant frustration is having to run back and forth to the reception desk to find out which respondents have arrived. While good facilities make sure to update clients about

new arrivals, Fieldwork Phoenix in Scottsdale has gone one better. In the back room, they have a Silent Radio board. Clients are given a sheet showing the demographics and recruiting specs of each respondent, with respondents numbered. As each respondent arrives and checks in, the receptionist programs that number into the Silent Radio system (which is simply a scrolling electronic message board). At any time, researchers can look up at the board as they're doing other things to determine which respondents have arrived and which are (hopefully!) still on their way. They also offer this at their facilities in Chicago North, Westchester, New York, and Phoenix.

Road warriors know it's inevitable that we'll forget *something* eventually. Two Atlanta facilities have done something to help with this. Atlanta Focus has quite a nice assortment of travel-size personal items – dental floss, stain remover, mouthwash, contact lens cleaner, etc. – arrayed in a basket in their client restroom. These can be used at the facility or taken back to the hotel, as needed. Jackson Associates has a similar basket in their client lounge, with fewer personal items, but some work-related items as well (blank disks, white-out, post-it notes, and such). It's more convenient to grab a blank computer disk from the basket, rather than have to ask the host or hostess to scrounge one up as the groups are about to begin.

Jackson Associates has another very nice feature – one or more automobiles can be driven into one of their respondent rooms and parked there. Sometimes in automotive research, it's critical to have people responding to an actual, full-size vehicle in front of them. At Jackson Associates, as well as Liebowitz Research in Charlotte, Focus on Dallas, and a handful of other facilities, respondents never have to leave the focus room. This also works for other large items – major appliances, furniture, or lawn tractors, for instance.

The Field House in Kansas City and Time N Talent in Phoenix have, as part of the client lounge area, pleasant outdoor patios where clients can relax between groups. Time N Talent even has closed-circuit television hooked up so clients can actually watch groups from the patio area. Wendy Walker of Time N Talent reports it's not uncommon to see clients filter out to the patio on a fall evening to monitor the groups – a nice break from days on end of staying cooped up in a dark back room.

Time N Talent also does a couple of other things to make clients feel welcome and valued. They always have fresh-baked chocolate chip cookies and/or fresh-baked bread hot and waiting for clients when they arrive (the aroma itself is a nice welcome). And as clients leave, staff encourage them to take a goodie from a “grab bag” of gifts: calendars, t-shirts, recipe books, and other items (usually with an Arizona theme). These small touches make clients feel cared for as soon as they arrive, and as the last thing they experience when leaving.

And without a doubt, no list of clever ideas can be complete without mention of the Fieldwork chain's assortment of little squeezable foam animals. Some of my clients have quite a Noah's ark of sharks, penguins, manta rays, hippos, and other critters – all clearly

emblazoned with the Fieldwork name for future reference, of course. Great promotional idea.

There are also things researchers can do to make the life of facility employees easier. We've printed up cards with our desired delivery address for tapes, along with our FedEx and UPS numbers. Now I just hand the card to the host, rather than constantly forgetting our shipping numbers and having to remember to call or e-mail in the morning.

There are undoubtedly other clever ideas that make the research life more convenient, easy, or enjoyable (and it's likely there are other, unmentioned facilities that successfully employ ideas similar to those noted above). What makes these ideas special is not just that they can be a tremendous help during a project, but that they suggest a real attention to detail and a desire to help make life a little easier. As a vendor, we try to demonstrate that attitude to our clients, and it's wonderful when focus group facilities take that same approach when we're the client.

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“It is the greatest of all mistakes to do nothing
because you can only do a little.”
SYDNEY SMITH, AUTHOR



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