

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING MARKETS FOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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Pittsburgh or Portland? Los Angeles or Las Vegas? San Antonio or San Diego?

Where should you hold your next focus groups?

If you're a local car dealer in Omaha, the answer is pretty obvious. But what if you're doing research for a national organization? Or, for that matter, a multi-national one? Should your next groups be in Lisbon or Lucerne?

Choosing focus group markets is more art than science. The typical project has four to 12 groups, spread over two to six markets (although some can grow much larger than this). Quite a few factors should go into the selection of markets.

One of those factors is diversity. Too often, market selection comes down to which three of the ten largest markets in the U.S. will be chosen for the project. However, many Americans don't live in highly urban areas. Doing groups in Albuquerque or Chattanooga may not be as convenient as doing them in New York or San Francisco (particularly where travel is concerned), but it would be a mistake to keep going to the same major markets over and over and over again. People in downtown Chicago really do tend to think differently or have a different way of looking at the world around them than do people in smaller towns.

Also important is what *type* of diversity is appropriate to each project. Groups about technology may require different parameters for market selection than groups about politics.

And even within a market, there is strategy to selecting which location to use. There will likely be a difference between the kinds of people who will be recruited to downtown facilities versus suburban facilities, for example.

Mixing and matching markets within a project can be helpful. For a nationwide advertising or direct marketing campaign, as an illustration, we might recommend one urban facility, one suburban, and one smaller market. We would also recommend some diversity by region. Depending on the specific subject matter and recruiting needs, a

sample market selection might be Birmingham (South, smaller market), downtown Boston (Northeast, major market), and suburban Denver (West, major market).

This is particularly important in international groups. Europe is more than just Germany, France, and England. The French do not adequately represent thoughts and feelings that exist throughout the rest of southern Europe – there are tremendous differences between France and Portugal, Greece, Italy, or Spain.

There are a number of common mistakes in market selection. One of the most common is wanting to choose markets that are “representative.” The trouble is, focus groups themselves are not “representative.” The ten people you have around the conference table in Chicago do not represent the entire Midwest. They don’t even represent Illinois, or Chicago.

As a qualitative methodology, focus groups are not really “representative” of anything. Diversity is important, but it will not lead to any kind of representative samples, so stop worrying about whether Cincinnati or Indianapolis is more “representative” of the Midwest.

Another mistake is failing to recognize the impact a large company has in its home market. Microsoft is a major presence in Seattle. The Big Three automotive manufacturers have a huge impact on Detroit. The Southern Baptist Convention has a significant impact on its home market of Nashville. Going to the home market of a company that is in the local news a lot and/or has a major impact on local employment can be a mistake. Is someone who has two uncles dependent on GM for their paychecks going to give an entirely fair evaluation of an imported vehicle? Not likely.

A third common mistake is going only to where there is a large pool of the desired type of respondent – a “stereotype” market. Seniors live all over the world – groups among the 65-plus population don’t automatically mean at least one Florida market must be included.

If you’re going to do groups among African-Americans, does that limit you to markets such as Memphis, Detroit, or Atlanta, that have very large Black populations? It shouldn’t. African-Americans live in Sacramento, San Diego, and Cincinnati, too. The Boston MSA is only 6% Black, but there are still about 325,000 African-Americans living in Boston.

The strategic question is whether you need to go to a market that has enough of a Black population to allow the groups to be recruited, or whether you need to go to a market that has a strong Black culture – those are very different issues.

A fourth mistake is not understanding how the product or topic relates to people in local markets. Hand lotion is used in Minneapolis and in Phoenix, but the motivations for using hand lotion are likely to be very different. Pickup trucks are often working vehicles in a place like Austin or Jacksonville, but more likely to be a style statement in Los

Angeles. Religious groups will tend to be filled with Lutherans in Minneapolis, Baptists in Atlanta, and Catholics in Pittsburgh. Just because a product or topic is of national interest doesn't mean it has the same impact in each part of the country, and failing to recognize regional or local differences can have a disastrous impact on qualitative research.

Finally, it's important to know what's going on in the local market at the time of the groups. If the University of North Carolina is playing an important basketball game against archrival Duke on the night of your Charlotte groups, you're probably in trouble. Local facilities should be able to guide and advise you on this issue.

In fact, there are many issues on which local facilities should be able to guide and advise you, beyond where's the best place to order dinner. Good local focus group facilities know their markets. Depend on them for input as to whether the recruit you want is feasible, what's the best way to find the people you're looking for, and how to get more diversity of perspective into the project (such as recruiting from more rural areas on the outskirts of the city).

Qualitative markets are too often chosen for the wrong reasons – because there are great golf courses in Phoenix, it'll be nice in Seattle that time of year, or the client has a sister in Tampa she wants to visit.

Even when those external issues don't come into play, there is too often limited strategic thought that goes into selecting markets. Don't fall into the trap of returning to the same markets over and over, only selecting "stereotype" markets for recruiting (e.g. Tampa for seniors or San Diego for Latinos), or only focusing on the biggest cities for your qualitative research. Branch out and think carefully about what mix of markets will be the most ideal for each project.



“It is by logic we prove, but by intuition we discover.”
LEONARDO DA VINCI



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