

Working with Opinion Polls and Focus Groups – A Practitioner’s View

Focus groups and opinion polls are the two major ways in which we learn public attitudes and opinions. They are different to one another and complementary.

Opinion Polls

Opinion polls have the advantage of being statistically valid. However you will need to question more than one thousand respondents and they will need to be demographically representative of the stakeholders you wish to question – for example you may need 51 per cent women, 49 per cent men, 26 per cent retired, 31 per cent teenagers and so on. Polls are cumbersome, slow and costly.

The other problem with polls is that they attract shallow sorts of answers, usually from ‘yes or no’ questions or simple multiple-choice questions. In polls, because of the restrictive and simplistic types of questions you can ask over a phone or on a street corner, it will be difficult to learn what your respondents are thinking. If you conduct a poll, and give people a choice between three options, they will give you an answer, but you may never learn that virtually all of them preferred an option you neglected to mention.

You can engage local marketing consultants, but ideally these should be consultants not just with commercial market research experience, but also with experience and skills in social impact assessment.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are fast, cheap, easy, reliable and they provide valuable in-depth information. Their drawback is that they have no statistical reliability, because you will only talk to a ten people at most.

With a focus group, first select between six and eight nearly identical stakeholders. Do not mix men and women. Usually do not mix old and young, white-collar and blue-collar. In other words, use people who are likely to be comfortable talking to one another as equals. If you have different types of people to sample, hold more focus groups. Invite them to a nice neutral place and pay their transport costs if need be. A hotel or a private room in a restaurant is appropriate. Provide some pleasant snacks and comfortable seats. Give each participant a small gift for volunteering two hours of his or her time.

There will be two people conducting each focus group, a discussion leader and a note-taker. The discussion leader asks questions most of which were prepared beforehand, elaborates where necessary and makes sure that every participant has the opportunity to participate. The discussion leader never expresses a personal opinion, and in any explanation or clarification attempts to avoid any judgmental statements. We are not there to educate the participants: we are there to educate ourselves.

The note-taker records the consensus on each question, if there is one, plus any interesting individual answers.

You can tape record or videotape focus groups, if you ask permission beforehand, making it clear that nothing will be broadcast and that no individual will be identified or quoted. You can have additional spectators if you wish, providing that they are few in number and kept out of the way. If they jump in with questions, except at the very end, it will distract people and the conversation will suffer. Do not hold focus groups in government or company buildings if that may prejudice answers, and do not bring government officials or senior managers into focus groups for that will skew the answers.

If you do two focus groups with a similar stakeholder audience, and get similar results, you can depend on those results being largely the same throughout the entire stakeholder group. If you surveyed two groups of teenaged cola drinkers in London, you could be comfortably certain that you would get the same answers from all of the rest of them across the city. Two focus group samples are almost always a sufficient indicator of the opinions of the whole group. Nonetheless you are not allowed to claim statistical results from focus groups.

Source: Stephen J Masty (Adam Smith Institute), personal communication
