

FIVE MISTAKES COMMONLY MADE WHEN DISCUSSING SENSITIVE TOPICS

Do you ever leave a set of focus groups wondering if respondents were really candid or honest about their opinions? It can be especially difficult to get respondents to be totally honest when talking about personal products or sensitive issues. Avoiding the following can go a long way towards getting respondents to share their inner most thoughts, and helping marketers avoid making costly mistakes.

Direct Questioning

Direct questioning can feel abrasive, offensive, and even judgmental when the research topic is very personal or sensitive in nature. When clients, and even researchers, work in a particular category every day, it is easy to forget how embarrassing or otherwise disturbing some consumer conditions may be. It's not dissimilar to how impersonal some medical professionals come across after they have been doing the same job for many years, e.g., the intake nurse who runs through questions quickly and briskly when talking with a patient who has just been diagnosed with stage 3 cancer.

Direct questioning works well when the information sought is factual or straightforward, i.e., What products do you use for relief? Why those? How satisfied are you with these products? But when you want to know about subjects as personal as how women with a low libido feel about its potential effect on their marriage, questioning needs to be handled more delicately.

It is not unusual for respondents to be somewhat out of touch with, or have difficulty articulating, how they really feel about sensitive topics. They may try to answer questions rationally, only sharing what they feel is appropriate. For example, in research I conducted with mothers of 12-year old girls, superficial conversation suggested moms chose their daughters to have the HPV vaccine to help prevent cervical cancer. We had to go to a deeper level for it to become clear that some mothers are concerned that their daughters will think their moms are condoning premarital sex.

I was recently reminded of the power of using projective techniques when discussing personal topics. When women were asked in a straightforward manner how they feel about their annual pelvic exams, they responded matter-of-factly with a general, "It is what it is" attitude. However, when I asked them to find pictures or words in magazines to capture their feelings about the exams, respondents' choices of often invasive and violent objects such as sharks provided insights into the true level of their feelings and how the exam experience could be improved.

Sterile Environment

As if we're not already asking enough when we want respondents to bear their souls on sensitive, often embarrassing and/or heart-breaking issues, we ask them to do so around a boardroom-like table in a sterile conference room. This may be

the first time some of these respondents have sat at such a table, and they may find it foreign and intimidating.

I often use a living room style set-up utilizing sofas, comfortable chairs, and a coffee table with snacks to create a much more inviting atmosphere. In such a setting, respondents visibly relax and become more open to discussion.

Too Many Respondents

A large group of respondents makes it easy for those who really don't relish talking about the subject to hide and defer to more vocal respondents. Yet, there is a richness that can be gained from listening to group discussions and how respondents build off of each other's comments that is not always present in one-on-one interviews.

I like to limit the number of respondents to four to six per group. This size is conducive to comfortable, natural conversation and exchange that can easily include all respondents. Larger groups simply feel unnatural for sensitive topics, and take much longer to loosen up.

Stopping at the Rational vs. Exploring Emotional Benefits

We run the risk of shortchanging learning opportunities if we only ask questions that evoke rational answers. Respondents may tell us they make a purchase decision based on rational benefits when it's really because of deeper emotional benefits or fears that they may not be comfortable sharing. It's critical that a supportive, non-judgmental forum be provided and that the moderator is comfortable using techniques that help respondents communicate their true feelings and concerns.

It is particularly important to have a variety of ways to mine for insights when exploring the relationship between the consumer and brands. Consumers are often unaware of, or unwilling to admit, their emotional connection with a brand, so more subtle approaches are necessary to truly understand the relationship. Ask an Irritable Bowel Syndrome sufferer why he uses one brand of remedy over another, and answers will mainly have to do with efficacy, i.e., "It stops the diarrhea." I've found that providing the respondent tools to think about and describe the relationship helps them articulate that the relationship is more about trust, security, and the freedom to live a normal life.

Impersonal Tonality

It takes courage for respondents to talk about personal, often embarrassing, problems in front of total strangers. It is important to quickly establish that this is a safe place where the respondents will not be judged; this is a place where they will have the support of others with similar problems. When I was conducting research

with the women who had been diagnosed with an abnormally low sex drive, the emotion in the room was palpable. Relieving some of their anxiety was key or these women would have shared only a portion of what the client needed to hear. I sometimes share a story about a personal or embarrassing problem that I have had – in a different category so as not to lead. I may interject humor as appropriate to help dispel nervousness and anxiety. Finally, it is important that the moderator feels comfortable talking about the subject. If the moderator comes across as uneasy discussing the topic, respondents will be as well.

In summary, tread softly, be empathetic, and create a comfortable supportive environment. Your efforts will be rewarded with respondents eager to tell you what you need to know and they need to share.