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Focus groups are an effective research tool but they have undergone little development over the years.

Dr Ken Hudson says it's time to take a different approach.

A fresh focus

Let's face it. There has been almost no innovation in focus group research for the past 20 years. A small group of people in a desired target market talk to a moderator about a pre-arranged set of problems or issues that are of interest to marketers who watch proceedings behind a two-way mirror or closed circuit television screen. This has been, for the most part, a reasonably effective way of unlocking consumer attitudes, preferences and insights.

However, it is at this insight stage where I believe the process breaks down. A consumer insight (e.g. teenagers want more fun in the products they purchase) by itself is of latent value. It must be transformed into an actionable idea or workable concept for its full value to be released. This is where the main problem exists. Researchers are adept at teasing out consumer insights but they are not as skilled in unlocking new, breakthrough ideas. As a researcher colleague mentioned to me, "ideas flowing from an insight are usually the last thing we do in the back of a taxi on the way to the client".

The client is also not the best person to breathe life into an insight because they are trapped by their own mindset (e.g. what we have

done before, what I believe will be approved etc.). Thus the client and the researcher are in the frustrating position of holding something of value (i.e. a new insight) but often being unable to create a breakthrough application. They also know their competitors have probably uncovered the same insight and so a race begins to become the first to make commercial sense of it.

It is because of this blockage that I have developed a new process called a co-creating focus group. In my process, the existing insight becomes the starting, not end, point. Marketers and end consumers are placed together in the same room and co-create new ideas based on an existing consumer insight. They work in small teams and are given a creative thinking tool to help them develop a fresh perspective. The range of ideas is then evaluated by both the marketers and end consumers and the best ideas are transformed into workable concepts.

A comparison of traditional focus group research and the co-creating process is set in the box to the right.

As you can see there are significant differences between the two approaches. I am not arguing, however, to replace focus groups. They are a legitimate way of better

understanding consumers. The co-creating process is a powerful additional process to bring those hard-earned insights to life.

In the co-creating process artificial barriers between marketing people and end customers are broken down. Participants tend to concentrate on the challenges at hand rather than what they believe people want to hear. And there is a high degree of interaction and collaboration that produces more powerful ideas.

The co-creating workshops can be slightly uncomfortable for some management, including marketing managers, because consumers directly inform them which ideas they like and don't like. In the

workshops, marketing people are often pushed out of their comfort zone, e.g. "Why are your products so boring?" asked one teenage participant in a confectionery brand co-creating workshop. In this process you cannot hide behind a report, two-way mirror or a moderator's interpretation. Yet this is the gold for marketing people looking for a real edge. Consumer insights can be copied but the game in town today is what to do with these insights. The co-creating process represents a genuine step in building a closer connection between customers and marketing managers. It is, I believe, a new era in focus group research. ■

FOCUS GROUPS:

- Aims to develop insights
- Led by a moderator
- Respondents
- Shorter
- Size - eight respondents
- Uses a discussion guide
- Uses existing stimulus
- Uses existing stimulus level of emergence
- Limited inter-group interactions
- Four to six groups per project

CO-CREATING PROCESS:

- Aims to develop concepts
- Led by an idea leader
- Participants (screened for creative thinking abilities)
- Longer (up to four hours)
- Sizes - up to 20 participants
- Uses effective idea tools
- Uses existing insights but higher
- High level of interactions within the group (community feeling)
- Two groups (but more expensive per group)