

You CAN Handle The Truth: ***Focus Group Research Can Save Your Business***

I'll never forget the first time I heard those infamous words come out of Jack Nicholson's mouth when he looked at Tom Cruise in *A Few Good Men* and arrogantly proclaimed, "You can't handle the truth." I think that statement was so compelling not only because of the tenacity that Nicholson delivered it with, but because on some level that is what people often believe. I am here to tell you that you can handle the truth and in fact the truth can be what saves your business in the current economic environment that you are operating in. An extremely effective way of getting the truth from your customers is conducting a focus group.

Focus groups are essentially a round-table discussion where a moderator asks questions and a group of 8-12 participants discuss their answers and opinions freely. However, it is important to create the right dynamic in order for this to work effectively and efficiently. Here are the basic rules that we discuss with clients when we are hired to conduct focus groups:

- **People are more comfortable during a meal (*this is especially true in the south*).** The fact of the matter is that we are more likely to kick back, relax and say what's on our mind if you put a fabulous meal in front of us.
- **Never conduct a focus group at your place of business.** Go elsewhere. Anywhere, but where you do business. If you want people to open up and be honest you need to make sure you are on neutral ground.
- **Know the plan going in.** Sit down and really think about what you want your goals and objectives to be. Conducting a session without a purpose based in what you want to learn is kind of like building a house without a house plan.
- **Make sure the moderator can be a completely neutral third party.** The participants need to feel the moderator's non-bias presence, so that they will open up. If you send in the President or Marketing Director you will not get the most truthful answers, therefore your research will be useless.
- **Don't ask the moderator to disclose who said what.** A professional moderator should agree to give you a transcript, but it should be absent of directly attributable sources. Again, assuring participants that they can be honest helps ensure a successful session.

Susan Shaw with the University of West Florida's Marketing Communications department has been a marketing professional for over 25 years and has conducted hundreds of focus groups during her career. Shaw notes that to conduct a successful focus group the most important thing you can concentrate on is putting the right people in the room.

"When I set out to conduct a focus group the most important thing that I keep in mind is organizing a dynamic group. The participants can either make or break your focus group," Shaw said. She continued by saying that many business owners don't want to hear or are not willing to believe the findings. After all, what is the use in having this information if you are not going to use it?

So, yes I am going on record as saying that Nicholson was totally off base. You can handle the truth and as you can see from the tips and techniques discussed in this article you can use the truth to your advantage and grow your business. Ultimately this is about listening to the people who make your cash register ring. Don't operate your business in a vacuum—problems never solve themselves. After conducting a focus group, the information can be used to enhance your customer relations, improve products, re-brand your company, create advertising campaigns or solve a host of other business related problems.

Every business can benefit from talking to the people who impact their bottom line. So the question is are you ready to know the truth about your business? If you are, contact us. We'd love to help.



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