

Technique Tip 2: arguing in groups

My Tip this week: get your groups arguing. Read on and you'll see why.

If you have a set of alternatives to evaluate its likely there are two main question you'll want to answer: which is strongest and why?

There are any number of ways in which one thing may be stronger than others, but we know that **liking** is a key attribute of preferences that lead to purchase. In many years of market testing Unilever have established this attribute's importance. They have also shown that '*likelihood to purchase*' is strongly correlated with buying in the real world – so you want to ask your respondents: 'which do you like best?' and 'which would make you most likely to buy?' Of course you'll do this in the words that work best for you but my advice is to keep it simple!

Next we come to the question of 'why?' If yours is a qualitative project, almost certainly some degree of diagnostics will be expected of you. Here the science and the state of our knowledge suggests that our respondents are much less likely to know why they chose one thing over another than they think!

<http://www.spring.org.uk/2007/11/10-piercing-insights-into-human-nature.php>

Of the ten seminal papers on the site linked above, 1,2 6 & 7 are relevant to this issue of our lack of awareness of our own 'reasons'. Today, Behavioural Economics has emphasised that much of what we give as 'reasons' for our choices is simply confabulation: we make something up to explain ourselves, so that we appear rational, sensible, adult.

So, what should we do? The answer to this kind of methodological question is often to be found by questioning your own daily practices. How do you and your family reach decisions about preferences in daily life? In my family it is almost always by discussion and argument, in which one side presents its arguments against the other and we argue it out. We try to stop short of outright fights!

In my experience modern focus groups might do a lot of discussing - if there's time, - but almost never any argument. Thus they do not reflect or mirror the processes used in daily life for reaching decisions. This is for two main reasons:

1. There is a fear of argument and dissent in groups – a worry that this activity would make the respondents uncomfortable – and more importantly, might make the moderator and the clients uncomfortable too.
2. Rhetoric, or the skill of argument is unfashionable in this empirical age. We are not taught how to argue in a civilised manner – and thus argument often appears uncivilised!

So, if most groups don't argue, we must find a way to use argument – and everyday life is actually packed full of it – in our groups or interviews.

How do you do that? My experience suggests that *making it into a game* is the best way. To do this you divide your group up into 3 teams, two trios and a pair (for a standard 8 member group – vary numbers if you have different size groups). Each trio chooses a different route from among those you are evaluating and has five minutes to come up with a 'pitch' to the other group members on why this route works best for them. The pitch must be no longer than a couple of minutes. Then, once the first trio has done its pitch, the second trio goes on, pitching another preferred route using their arguments.

The point of this is that in order to 'pitch' something, **people have to grapple with the original, turn it into their own words, extract what is of value from it and also what it means to them. It is these two elements - meaning and value - that will give you the best diagnostics. They also have to practice condensation, another crucial ingredient of evaluation work - forcing us to summarise virtues.**

The remaining pair + the moderator form an audience and can just comment on their experience of the pitches. If you want to make it tougher you can ask the audience each time to give each pitch a score out of ten. That score can be linked to some attribute if you wish, like 'true to the brand', 'strength of appeal', whatever your client is trying to understand about the value of the routes.

Try this out in your next focus groups.

Here is the pdf: