

Moving on from failing focus groups

 By [Chris Moerdyk: @chrismoerdyk](#)

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Over the past three decades I have observed countless focus groups and for the life of me I cannot remember a single one from which I emerged thinking that it had delivered trustworthy data.

Come to think of it, for years now whenever the subject of whether or not to hold a focus group has come up I have spent pretty much all of my time trying to talk my clients out of them.

Human foibles

I am not alone in my disdain of this marketing practice - there are many others who feel that the format is not conducive to getting human beings to speak their minds honestly or divulge their inner feelings.

There is a wealth of evidence to suggest that focus group participants not only lie, but often allow their egos to develop responses that make them look good in front of their peers.

In his book *How Customers Think*, Prof Gerald Zaltman of the Harvard Business School, said: "The correlation between stated intent and actual behaviour is usually low and negative."

He added that 80% of new products or services fail within six months when they've been vetted through focus groups. Hollywood films and TV pilots - virtually all of which are screened by focus groups - routinely fail in the marketplace.

"Unconscious thoughts are the most accurate predictors of what people will actually do," Zaltman said.

"In the space of five or 10 minutes in a focus group, which is the average airtime per person, you can't possibly get at one person's unconscious thinking."

Many detractors

There are many, like Prof Zaltman, who believe that one bunch of complete strangers being led in conversation by another complete stranger is completely contradictory to the laws of nature in terms of seeking the truth. It pretty much ends up with participants trying to justify themselves and ending up contradicting themselves or just plain saying what they think the moderator wants to hear. After all, that's the guy providing the tea and cakes as well as, in some case, a nice little fee.

All of this is, however, completely academic. Because these days, one only has to go onto the myriad independent online

forums that have sprung up for most well-known brands to get a far more accurate picture of what consumers think.

Admittedly you will initially just get the criticism, but if one goes beyond the people who are just plain unhappy with a product or service and look at those who are responding to them, you get a very clear picture of brand loyalty and the reason for that brand loyalty.

Four by forums

For example, just have a look at the numerous off-road and 4x4 forums and you will get a very precise picture of what it is that makes owners of brands such as Land Rover and Toyota so fiercely loyal. The information you get there you would never ever get out of a focus group.

It is beyond me why so few companies are not putting human resources and technology into monitoring online forums. There is a wealth of honest information if you know how to look for it and I daresay it is a lot cheaper than setting up a focus group.

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Apart from being a corporate marketing analyst, advisor and media commentator, Chris Moerdyk is a former chairman of Bizcommunity. He was head of strategic planning and public affairs for BMW South Africa and spent 16 years in the creative and client service departments of ad agencies, ending up as resident director of Lindsay Smithers-FCB in KwaZulu-Natal. Email Chris on moerdyk@gmail.com and follow him on Twitter at [@chrismoerdyk](https://twitter.com/chrismoerdyk).
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