

Using In-Depth Interviews and Focus Groups for Your Market Research

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Categories : [A Comprehensive Guide to Market Research](#)

In the last section, we tackled [the market research survey](#)—that fixed set of questions you send out to a segment of your market for feedback on some aspect of your business. While surveys *do* pose qualitative (open-ended) questions, they're used primarily for quantitative research. That is, they're great for arriving at a consensus through loads of consumer data... but they won't necessarily get you the deepest of insights.

Because let's be honest: *No one* pours their heart out in a survey—no matter *how* many lines you offer them to fill in.

Enter the in-depth interview and the focus group for that information. Both market research techniques give you the opportunity to be in two-way communication with consumers—in a form unrestricted by question limits—and to establish a rapport with them. *That* sets the stage for deep and rewarding insights.

The Advantages of Direct Communication in Primary Market Research

"Direct contact" can mean many things, including conversations mediated by telephone, video conferencing, and [chat platforms](#). Indeed, two great *advantages* of using these technologies for your market research are their expediency and their cost-effectiveness: You can cover a broad geographic area without anyone having to travel anywhere; and consecutive interviews can be conducted from the comfort of your own office. If you're working within a budget, telephone interviews *can be* as insightful as in-person interviews... and the recommendations we offer below are just as applicable to that form of primary research.

Of course, in-person interviews and focus groups have their distinct advantages. In the first place, once you've got someone in a room, they can't "hang up" on you: Both (or all) parties have signaled their commitment by arriving. What's more, because you're looking them directly in the eye, you'll know your interviewees aren't distracted by anything... and fully present participants are naturally going to give you the most sincere insights.

In the second place, when you get someone from your target market in a room, you have access to additional sources of information: body language, facial expressions, gestures, and so on. These non-verbal cues can sometimes reveal more about interviewees' sentiments than they'd be willing to admit (or than they can even acknowledge *to themselves*).

When the interviewer is adept at reading such non-verbal cues *and* putting interviewees at ease, these conversations lead to honest insights about emotions, opinions, and attitudes: Why did they *really* leave your business? How do they *really* use your product? What were they *actually* feeling when they moved through your purchasing funnel? What were the *real* psychic/emotional barriers?

As you can imagine, if you can get past the costs (travel, compensation, venue, moderator payment) and logistics of getting two or more people in a room for an hour or more, it'll be well worth it. Not only will you get terrific qualitative insights to pair with your quantitative data; you'll also gain [a richer understanding of your customer personas](#), their journeys, motivations, and the language they use. (Of course, you'll be looking out for "sticky" messages that you can use for future website or ad copy).

In-depth interviews and focus groups will fill in the emotional context for the numbers your surveys and [secondary research](#) give you. But remember that these are *supplements*—not *substitutes*—for those more quantitative research methods. While they'll give you rich insights into unique individuals, be careful about generalizing from the information you get from these conversations. Your interviewees are *representative* of your target population, but they're too small a sample size to draw statistical conclusions about your larger target market from. *That's* what quantitative research is for.

But for *now*? We're talking quality over quantity.

In-Depth Interviews vs. Focus Groups: Which to Use?

In-depth interviews are often described as "focus groups of one," and focus groups as "large-scale interviews." In some ways, these are fair comparisons: Both methodologies revolve around semi-structured discussions whose core questions are designed to go *deep*, to help the business understand some problem. In both cases, respondents are respectfully treated as "experts" who can "teach" the business about its market's feelings, perceptions, opinions, and hesitations.

But to state the obvious, dynamics change the moment a party of two becomes a party of three or more: Suddenly there are new interpersonal negotiations, sociocultural categorizings, hierarchies, and contentions. From a *business* perspective, you'll have cost, time, and possibly location to account for. These may very well be factors in your decision, but so should the following:

When to use in-depth interviews

In-depth, one-on-one interviews can happen just about anywhere: at your business, at *their* home, or at a neutral location such as a rented venue. They can happen on the street while people are exiting a physical space—on their way out of a retail establishment, for example. They can happen in "captive audience" situations—during a conference, a workshop, or a public event.

This locational flexibility is one of the reasons in-depth interviews are among the most prevalent forms of primary research. Here are some of the reasons why you'd choose one over a focus group:

- **When you're gathering sensitive feedback.** "Sensitive" might mean anything from disclosing personal information (finances or health issues) to more *generally* uncomfortable topics (birth control or personal hygiene products). If your research concerns topics that people might not feel comfortable discussing in a group, in-depth interviews should be your choice. (What's more, if you're looking for critique in a culture that tends to be more "polite" or less prone to debate, you might get more honest responses in a one-on-one inquiry.)
- **When participants are competitors.** Can you imagine hosting a focus group made up of competitors who are reluctant to share information for fear of losing whatever competitive advantage they might have? Unsurprisingly, these sorts of environments don't foster open communication. You want participants who are willing to *disclose* information; so if they're from the same vertical industry, you'd do best to meet with them separately.
- **When you're concerned about group hierarchy.** Any time a focus group might present an inherent imbalance of power (bringing both workers and their supervisors into the same room, for example) you risk making some participants feel less at ease about sharing their views. Choose the one-on-one strategy for these situations.
- **When you want feedback on isolated user experiences.** Knowing how users perform individual activities, or what their individual experiences with products are, doesn't require groupthink. Indeed, anytime you want to know anything about individual user experience (usability testing, decision processes, personal responses to ad campaigns, how much progress a client has made toward a goal, etc), one-on-one interviews are your best bet. They'll get you honest, insightful feedback untainted by other participants' responses.

When to use focus groups

There are plenty of advantages to getting a number of people (typically 6-10) together in a room so they can discuss a topic relevant to your business. More minds means more insight, information, and ideas. Memories get jogged; comments from one end of the table trigger ideas on the other

end; solutions get fully developed through energetic collaboration. And since no one is *required* to answer every question, participants jump into the conversation spontaneously, when they have something insightful to say on *that* topic.

Here are some circumstances in which it makes sense to choose a focus group:

- **When you need to brainstorm ideas.** Focus groups are a terrific strategy for broad, exploratory topics, such as imagining new product features or working through ideas for your next ad campaign. Anytime you're early on in the exploratory phase of a concept or topic (the *what if...?* phase), choose a focus group to assist with idea-generation and discovery.
- **When you're about to go live.** This might mean just before you launch that ad campaign, or before that concept goes to market, or before you turn that prototype into The Real Deal and release it into the world. This is *especially* the case if you relied on secondary research to create that ad, concept, or prototype. The *numbers* might back you up... but you also want subjective, affective "data" describing *why* those numbers work. Refine before you release.
- **When you want multiple perspectives, or to explore disparate views.** You might be at a point in your decision-making process where two very different options seem feasible, and you want to hear representatives from your target market debate the pros and cons of each. Let your market generate the arguments *for* you. They might make a case for something you'd never considered before.
- **When you want to better understand the complexities of your target market.** While a single interviewee might give you great insights, they won't be representative of your target market. Granted, focus groups won't be *either*... but they *will* offer a broader range of representation. Collectively, the group can also help you understand the motivations behind more complex behaviors. Did your market say they wanted a product—but now they're not buying? Focus groups can help you explore the apparent disconnect between declared desire and action.
- **When you want to know more about your brand perception.** Focus groups are great for brand insights. After all, it's *consumers* who create your brand perception through shared experience (what they imagine about your business and how they speak about it); it's not something your business *makes*. So go directly to the source for this intelligence.
- **When you want to evaluate reactions.** Have a new campaign ad to run by consumers? A new food product to test? These *aren't* the "isolated user experiences" we discussed above; and the feedback is best collected through group discussion.

If you're still unsure which method is best for *your* market research question, ask yourself: "How (or *what*) will group dynamics contribute to my findings?"

Preparing for Your In-Depth Interview or Focus Group

Whichever method you choose, the event will take some pre-planning. Here's what to consider:

Clarify your goal and structure

Never go into market research without a clear idea of your question, and what its answer will mean for your business. A [SWOT analysis](#) can help you home in on your business's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats so you can narrow down your research to a *single* topic. Remember: You're going for depth—not breadth—here. What's *the* problem you're gathering information on? The clearer your answer, the more useful your questions will ultimately be.

Your goal will also help you decide whether a *structured* or *unstructured* interview will be more effective. Granted, if you're hosting a focus group, your "interviewer" will be more a moderator than anything: They're there to get participants discussing amongst themselves, rather than to adhere to a predefined list of questions. Focus groups are, by nature, more unstructured.

With in-depth interviews, however, you'll make a conscious choice between these two types. In *unstructured* interviews, the interviewer arrives with a series of well-thought-out *issues* to address; but the *questions* take shape during the conversation. *Structured* interviews, on the other hand, are a bit like verbal surveys. Standardizing the Q&A in this way—asking the *same* questions in the *same* order, every time—ensures more consistent data between interviews.

Choose an appropriate location and time

You've got a nearly unlimited range of possibilities (including online "locations") here. Consider your needs: A facility with access to cameras so you can record the interview? One-way mirrors for observers? The location you choose should be easy to get to, easy to park near, and the room should feel intimate and provide as few distractions as possible. If you're hosting a focus group, all participants should be able to sit facing each other.

Then consider your participants. If you're a B2B company, you might hold your focus group at a downtown location during work hours, setting the space up board-room style. If you're hosting consumers, evening may work best, you may choose a more suburban venue, and the setup might look less formal. If your demographic involves consumers of a lower socio-economic status, consider a venue along public transportation routes. Consider religious holidays. You get the point. You know your personas better than we do. Imagine the venue *they'd* want.

Plan your documentation strategy

Tape recording? Video recording? Note-taking by the moderator or a third-party observer? Each of these strategies will affect the dynamics of the conversation differently, and will give you access to different information *after* the fact. (For instance, a tape recording won't help you recall *who* said what, or what their facial expression was when they said it. But it *will* get you a full transcript.) Of course, you'll need *all* participants' permission before hitting a "Record" button of any kind.

While we'd recommend digital recording, note-taking is a useful backup plan in case of malfunction, dead batteries, or static on the recording. If your interviewer *is* your note-taker, ensure that they can take notes and listen simultaneously, and record in a low-key manner. Participants who see moderators jumping to the notebook and writing furiously might be influenced to answer subsequent questions similarly (or very differently!)

Select your interviewer or moderator

Of course, anyone *in theory* could take on this role: the business owner, an associate, or someone else in your organization. But remember that the best interviewer is an *unbiased* one; and the more that's at stake for your interviewer in the outcome, the less impartial they're likely to be. This will affect group dynamics, and it won't get you the data you need. The same goes for a moderator who knows the participants: Where there's an established relationship, participants are less likely to be critical.

That said, you might decide to hire an experienced moderator—for example, someone trained in psychology who can better observe and understand complex behaviors. Trained moderators can quickly create a permissive and nurturing environment and keep an active conversation going for the time allotted (typically 30 minutes to an hour for an in-depth interview, and 1-2 hours for a focus group), with the study's objectives always at the forefront. Which isn't quite as easy as it sounds.

Well-seasoned moderators can monitor the conversation and change course on the fly. They can recognize when participants are speaking out of a psychological pressure to respond in a particular way. They're trained in drawing quieter participants out of their shells, giving time to slower thinkers, tamping down heated discussions, and tactfully curbing participants who are monopolizing the conversation. They can visualize how key pieces of information fit together, clearly identify when a topic has been sufficiently covered, and know when to skip questions that earlier comments have suggested are irrelevant to the person or group at hand. They can interpret body language, gestures, hesitations, and facial expressions. And they can do *all* this without being an expert on the subject.

If you have this person in your organization, that's remarkable: *Use them!* If not, you can find trained moderators through an online search, referrals, or by posting a query in an industry forum.

Select your participants

Your sample size will be a matter of how clear a picture you want of your target market. Naturally, the *more* participants you have, the stronger your sense of the segment will be. You'll probably want to conduct more than one in-depth interview, and you *may* also want to hold more than one focus group to ensure consistency across gatherings. At some point, you'll see common themes emerging in responses. *That's* when you'll know you're moving toward sounder conclusions.

At the risk of stating the obvious, the participants you select should be in a position to answer all of your questions. Remember, *they're* the "experts": maybe because they fit a persona with particular buying habits, or because they have relevant experience with a product ("new mothers in their '30s who live in Western Massachusetts" or "males between the ages of 18-25 who play at least 15 hours of video games a week").

Due to their commonality of experience, your focus groups will necessarily have some degree of homogeneity. That said, consider that first example: If you're looking to target *all* new mothers, maybe you'd split your groups by income (new mothers who make *less than* and *more than* \$100k), education (new mothers *with* and *without* a college degree), or relationship status (single mothers versus partnered mothers). Different demographics may provide different responses. If you foresee this, split your groups along these lines.

Participants may *already* be your customers or followers, in which case you can contact them through your [CRM](#) or by putting a call out on social media platforms. You can also find them through Facebook groups, advertisements, social events that your target audience attends, or market research companies who can find focus groups that match the target demographic you want to reach.

If you want to ensure that these prospects really *do* meet your criteria, set up a screening process before you officially invite them as an interviewee or focus group member. Try to ensure that participants aren't familiar with each other. (Familiarity affects group dynamics.) Finally, recruit more participants than you need: You'll almost inevitably get "no-shows."

Standardize your proceedings

There are a few other things you'll want to determine early on to ensure uniformity across interviews. Decide whether participants will be told who's sponsoring the study, what the purpose of the interview or focus group is, and how the data will be used to make decisions after the fact. Choosing to offer this information to *one* group or participant and not to another may lead to different responses and variations in data.

You'll should also create a guide—or at least a list of questions—that the interviewer or moderator will use to guide the discussion and ensure all topics are covered. (We've got some recommendations on the *questions* and the *structure* of the interview or focus group in the next section.) If you're hosting a focus group, establish clear session guidelines in writing. You'll share these with

participants so they know what's expected of them.

And before The Big Day, you might even consider running a pilot test to ensure your guide is a viable support.

You've got your interviewee or focus group in the room... now what? In the next section, we cover [best practices for these forms of primary research](#) to follow on the day itself.