

GETTING ANSWERS WITH A NEW FOCUS

NIALL MCCAFFREY ON HOW THE SOCIALLY DISTANCED MODERATOR IS COPING WITH THE NEW REALITY IMPOSED ON QUALITATIVE STUDIES

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The last time that I moderated a focus group in-person was in early March in the Ormonde Hotel in Kilkenny. Leaving that already deserted hotel, I wondered when I'd be back again, talking to respondents face-to-face, in a circle, over cups of tea and a tray of sandwiches. Five months on, it is more difficult than ever to tell when the demand for face-to-face groups are likely to re-emerge.

Feedback from other markets suggests that a return to groups is proving challenging for both respondents and moderators. While we are all becoming more familiar with masks, perspex screens and social distancing in retail and work environments, these measures, for now at least, appear to upset much of the comfort and engagement that moderators work hard to build in a focus group setting.

Moderating a discussion group is like a 90-minute juggling act with many moving parts – Cirque Du Soleil with PowerPoint slides may be a stretch, but you get the idea. The welcome. The introduction. The battle with the respondent who talks too much. The cajoling of the respondent who doesn't talk at all. The management of those last-minute stimulus changes from the creative agency.

The cameo as a temporary voice-over artist. The drive to keep the energy in the room going as the clock ticks past the hour. All the while, asking those key questions and listening for the responses that unlock understanding for the viewing client. With the focus group request to "switch your mobiles to silent" being replaced by "you are on mute", we can see how the move to online has changed things.

Firstly, and most importantly, the shift to online has only become possible because Covid-19 restrictions triggered the widespread use of video calls for both work and personal communications. The tech has been around for over a decade, but pre-pandemic online groups were like hen's teeth. Our Omnipoll research found that 86 per cent of Irish adults have taken part in a video call since March.

Any awkwardness that prevented video discussion occurring in years gone by has largely been removed. The type of respondents that can be recruited for focus groups has also changed hugely. The net result is that groups are not as 'urban centric' as they once were. We are no longer restricted to speaking to participants who can make it to an evening session in a central location.

We can now reach into remote parts of the West of Ireland as easily as we can into North Dublin. There are the inevitable technical issues. The respondent who doesn't make it online. The dad who is getting help from their son or daughter to connect.

The mum in the queue for coffee before they sit in the car. The obligatory crashing of a laptop that forces people hurriedly onto their mobile.

Yet despite the technical issues and the lack of physical presence, oddly discussions can feel more natural. We now reach into people's worlds in a new way. Rather than asking them to come to our viewing facilities, they sit on their sofa with cups of coffee and their bookshelves in the background. We get a glimpse into people's lives that we would never be privy to in a typical face-to-face group.

Simple things, like having to ask someone to turn down the Mass on the radio during a discussion can help us to better understand the person at the other end of the connection. This new world is a little tougher on the moderator. Two back-to-back

groups online can feel a lot more draining than two groups in a viewing facility. Overseas clients have often said how chatty Irish people are in groups.

Many of the actions for an Irish moderator are about guidance and control. With online, that natural discourse is disrupted. The moderator must drive more from the conversation. Juggling skills are taken to the next level. Managing live survey tools, whiteboards, screen-sharing and video files add to the complexity. Online groups feel a little like six or seven in-depth interviews linked by tech.

Conventional wisdom suggests that it is the group dynamic that shapes successful discussion groups. The dynamic of being able to place respondents in their own homes, with a degree of separation that helps them to hold onto their views and still keep an element of interactivity, works well.



REALITY OF QUESTIONING PEOPLE VIRTUALLY

A return to face-to-face discussions in the short term is unlikely as we wait for the next normal to emerge. Yet despite the technical issues and the lack of physical presence, Niall McCaffrey says discussions can feel more natural. As people sit on their sofa with a cup of coffee, researchers can get a glimpse into people's lives that they would never be privy to in a typical face-to-face group.