

Focus Group Geography and the Myth of Three Cities

By Janet Barnhart, Ph.D.



Is there something magical about traveling to three cities for focus groups? In the current economic environment, it makes sense to question ingrained industry folk ways. Here are some thoughts to guide decisions on focus group travel, based on numerous three-city pilgrimages over a dozen years of moderating.

Myth: Three cities provide a representative cross-section of the intended audience.

Reality: Focus group “samples” are not representative, no matter how many respondents or cities are involved.

Focus groups and other in-depth interviewing are qualitative. The number of respondents is generally small. Interviewing approaches are flexible and open-ended rather than uniform. That’s because qualitative research aims to generate and explore rather than to evaluate and project. The most important part of focus group planning is recruiting the right respondents, and that rarely has to do with where they live.

A typical case: focus groups indicate a high level of interest in certain product attributes, but they are not representative of the wider audience. Advertising based on the groups falls flat. A quantitative study would have better served the goal of learning what attributes really correlate with purchase interest.

Myth: Cultural differences based on locality affect attitudes toward most products and services.

Reality: Regional “character” or heritage persists - selectively. Someone who identifies with a specific local or regional tradition may actually have beliefs, habits or attitudes that are not distinctive when it comes to a specific product.

- There may be little variation in product use or perception, or such variations may correlate closely with life stage or having a particular health condition.
- To the extent that regional loyalties or cultures persist, it is important to question whether they have a bearing on particular product or service categories.

Experience has shown, for example, that people with specific dental problems share certain situations and habits that transcend location. Their dental product usage, attitudes and coping behaviors do not vary significantly by region. A qualitative study among these consumers in three cities will likely yield similar research results, dabs of local color notwithstanding.

Myth: Focus group respondents in a given city accurately mirror the place where they live.

Reality: Americans move around a lot, so it is not a given that respondents in an area reflect that area's culture. State-to-state and regional mobility (excluding immigration from abroad) are substantial, so the likelihood that respondents will be from the area where the groups are held is far from a given.

- According to the 2000 U.S. Census, over 22 million people changed their state of residence between 1995 and 2000 alone. Of these, about half relocated to a state in a different region ("Domestic Migration Across Regions, Divisions and States: 1995-2000," Census 2000 Special Reports, U.S. Census, August 2003).
- In 32 of the 50 states, fewer than two-thirds of U.S.-born residents were born in that state. In over one-quarter of states, half or fewer were born there. ("State of Residence in 2000 by State of Birth," U.S. Census, Census 2000). Overall, only 60% of Americans born in the U.S. live in their state of birth. Individual states vary sharply. Nearly 80% of Louisianans were born in Louisiana, for example, but only 21% of current Nevadans were born in Nevada.
- Sometimes, a notable proportion of focus group respondents in a given place will be from another place. About half of groups in Atlanta, for example, may be comprised of transplanted New Yorkers. Nor is it a given that those choosing another state of residence will have adopted the "culture" of that state, much less changed their attitudes toward most products.

Myth: People in different locations provide valuable regional perspectives.

Reality: Climate or specific socio-cultural characteristics often have a direct bearing on how people use or perceive some products and services. In many cases, though, location is not critical, or even relevant, to generating useful qualitative learning.

Ask yourself whether anything important about your product or service really varies by geography. Check your sales, category and brand development indices, distribution, media and message before assuming that you'll gain the best learning from talking to consumers in New Jersey, Chicago and Los Angeles. The best choices for research locations may be different from what you'd initially expect. The goals of the research might be served equally well close to home.

An example: A household cleaning product plays a very different role in the warm, moist climate of the Southeast than in cooler, drier regions. In this case, climate makes it advisable to talk with consumers in the South and North – and develop different positioning and advertising in the two markets.

Another example: An OTC product has an almost exclusively regional user base. Because cultural heritage plays a huge role in acceptance and use of this remedy, and there are "pockets" of loyalty to and distribution of different brands. There is a need to carefully pinpoint locations for focus groups on this topic.

Myth: Regional differences apply about equally to those in all circumstances and walks of life.

Reality: Factors such as one's profession can figure much more prominently than any other.

Physicians tend to be a very homogeneous group because of the high degree of uniformity of their training. In study after study among doctors in different regions, qualitative learning about how they treat a particular health condition or devise patient regimens have not varied according to region. While doctors do consider their patients' socio-economic resources, they do not tend to vary in their medical approach by region.

People in technical professions, such as engineers also do not tend to vary according to region. The challenges they face have to do with accomplishing technological performance within budget ...and these issues tend to require remarkably similar approaches regardless of geography.

Myth: It's best to choose markets where brands are at a similar stage of development.

Reality: It often makes sense to select markets where a brand or product is at a different stage of development. When researching a product innovation, for example, it makes sense to do research in an "advanced" market where that innovation has taken root successfully. If there is a demonstrable basic similarity in consumer attitudes and behavior in a category, it may even be advisable, in some cases, to do research cross-culturally!

To use a dramatic example - a client wanted to obtain feedback on new packaging that was already established in the UK. Extensive learning, both qualitative and quantitative, had indicated that consumer attitudes, usage and product perceptions were strikingly similar in the two countries. There was a desire to learn what the key benefit of this packaging was. It was efficient to conduct qualitative interviews in the UK among users of this package to learn what feature and benefit was most motivating, based on experience. This UK research informed U.S. creative development, leading to a successful launch. The UK approach provided insights based on long-term experience that was transferable across national lines. While this case may seem unusual, the lesson learned is to consider seeing the perspective of consumers in "advanced" vs. less developed markets, as appropriate.

Myth: The best way to make focus groups efficient and get geographically diverse "sample" is to cut out the travel completely and do them online!

Reality: Online focus groups cannot replace the immediacy of being there. The ability to directly observe nonverbal nuances provides a critical advantage over watching or listening remotely. The spontaneous interplay among respondents, between respondents and moderator, and between moderator and clients is stilted rather than fluid when online technology intervenes – not least because of the anonymity and electronic walls between the participants.

Exceptions might be follow-up interviews among respondents to a quantitative survey. It may make sense to recontact a portion of respondents who gave answers that were different or more intensely positive or negative than expected. This use of online qualitative would elucidate findings rather than substitute an impersonal interviewing method for one where human contact matters.

Beyond the Three Cities: How to Choose Locations for Focus Groups

- First, are focus groups the best approach? If a representative sample is required and projectable results are desired, consider a quantitative study. Quantitative approaches may address the issues more definitively ...and more cost-effectively. The perception that quant research is less cost or

- time efficient is not necessarily true. In some cases, it may be possible to employ some qualitative internet techniques to get more insight into the results - without travel.
- Consider market and category dynamics. There may be good reasons to travel to certain locations, but these locations may be different from the usual choices. For example, it may make more sense to go to areas where sales are heavy vs. light.
 - Consider climate, socio-cultural factors and other aspects related to the type of area where your product is sold.
 - Consider the markets' stage of development - whether "advanced" markets can teach important lessons for introductions in early-stage markets.
 - Consider whether the audience you are trying to reach really varies by location. For groups among professionals, such as physicians or engineers, location is not likely to be relevant.
 - If you have reason to believe that cultural distinctiveness or regional loyalties play an important role in the marketing of your product or service, screen for respondents who hold these qualities. Look for characteristics such as where they grew up, length of time living in an area, attitudinal questions about affinity with the area, and optimally with specific beliefs or preferences that bear on your product or service.
 - If regional differences are not likely to affect research outcomes, focus on using high quality facilities in a narrower geographic range.
 - It may be hard, but resist the urge to pick cities for frequent flier miles!
 - Bottom line: devoting more attention to focus group geography is likely to save time and money, reduce your company's carbon footprint and yield deeper, more useful learning.

Disclaimer: This article does not reflect the opinions or positions of the Marketing Research Association.

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