



Focusing in on your work

Focus groups are an opportunity for us to meet with readers and advertisers one-on-one. They give us the chance to chat with those readers and advertisers and learn—directly from them—what matters most to them about our newspaper.

I know of no survey that can do that. Moreover, surveys don't give us the option of stopping in the middle of a conversation and doing a 180-degree shift, allowing readers to question us about what we do and why we do it.

During a recent round of focus groups, I realized once again that our readers and advertisers really want us to succeed on two levels:

1. Readers rely on us for honest, complete and balanced reporting of what's going on in their town.
2. Advertisers want us to be a popular, well-read newspaper so they can be sure they're reaching all of their target audience.

Focus groups are a conversation with our readers and advertisers that help us to succeed—and to respond to their needs on both levels.

Here are some suggestions for focus groups:

IDENTIFY WHAT IT IS you want to learn—even before you begin listing questions you want to ask. Do you want to know about reaction to your opinion page? Do you want to know about the quality



A focus group can help you bring your work into...well...focus.

of your reporting? What if your questions are about home delivery concerns?

CREATE A LIST of key questions you want answered. If you're organizing a group of sessions to consider your content, don't let the design of your newspaper...or circulation problems...or other issues onto the list. Stay on target.

DECIDE UPON the makeup of the group. Do you want a cross-section of your demographics? Do you want readers only? How about advertisers? Is gender a factor? Age?

SET UP a venue for your session. I prefer something on "neutral ground"—a nearby restaurant, a library conference room or the like. Make sure it's

comfortable and quiet, with items you may need such as a whiteboard or an easel with flip paper.

CHOOSE A GOOD FACILITATOR. You need someone who can keep the conversation going and keep the discussion on topic. Occasionally, there's someone in the group who wants to dominate the discussion—or someone else who shies away from the conversation. It's the facilitator's job to make sure the discussion doesn't get bogged down by personalities—and to ensure the steady flow of the conversation.

TAKE GOOD NOTES. Designate someone from your staff to keep a steady flow of notes. And it's OK—provided the participants approve—to record or videotape the session, too. If a tape recorder or videotape camera seems threatening to the participants, don't hesitate to turn it off. Note-taking is usually expected as part of the process.

TAKE CARE TO FOLLOW UP. Evaluate what you've learned. No, you don't have to act on it if a reader tells you she just isn't interested in sports and thinks it's a waste of time and paper. But you may want to consider increased coverage of real estate if there are suggestions that your paper just doesn't do a good job of covering the real estate boom in your town.

A focus group is an effective tool you can use when you're taking a close look at your product and your work. And your readers and advertisers will applaud your efforts to stay in touch.

Check out Ed Henninger's recently released e-book on newspaper design!

'**Henninger on Design** is a winner because it condenses all the fundamentals, the rules, the options and the how-to's of newspaper design into a manual that's easy on the eye and mind, and downright fun to use.'

Ken Blum | Black Ink Publishers' Auxiliary

Find out more about **Henninger on Design** by visiting Ed's web site: www.henningerconsulting.com

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