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The article 'Unfocused Groups', while raising some pertinent issues, seems to have gone a tad too far in being un-charitable. Some funny incidents picked from some groups, carry the risk of lampooning the methodology and carrying it to the threshold of being discarded. The article also seems lopsided in holding the research fraternity largely responsible for this. Just because some TV ads don't work (and conclusively so), or are so 'off' it that you can't help laughing at their absurdity, doesn't make a case for TV as a medium or the advertising industry that creates the ads as a profession to be maligned!

Focus groups are a fantastic tool because they make use of a simple truth — that a discussion about a subject allows participants to dig deep into their own selves, have conversations, to agree and disagree. The dynamics that come into play, and as a result, the rich understanding and insights, cannot be replaced by other methodologies. The issues with focus groups are not about the methodology, as about how they are conducted, the process getting corrupted and not being rigorous. But this is true with other research tools as well or indeed with anything in life! A poor way of doing something shouldn't lead to the conclusion that the 'something' itself is damned. *'Naach na jaane aangan tedha'* (if you don't know to dance, the floor is crooked) goes a Hindi idiom that one gets reminded of.

What we need to figure out is why focus group researches in India leave so much to be desired. What has caused this decline in quality? The root cause lies in extremely low budgets provided for focus groups, and these not having changed over time. It is possibly the biggest threat to the integrity of this important research tool — and possibly even to other methodologies. Coupled with extremely tight timelines, it compels the

## Unfocused But Why?

A couple of hardcore research veterans offer a counterpoint to our story on research and suggest a possible workaround to make focus groups perform better

### BRAND EQUITY

Between respondents who know too much and researchers who know too little, marketers and agencies believe its robust time for focus groups, one of the most popular consumer research techniques

## Unfocused Groups



entire value chain to make compromises. The low budgets have, unwittingly, led to a vicious circle — it has incentivised doing focus groups where other methodologies should have been used, contributing in part to unavailability of 'research virgin' respondents, 'thin' and 'superficial' researches being

done and asked for at short notice. The ultimate sufferers are the research users, marketers and brands that are making use of outputs that at times are not complete and superficial, from something that could provide deep and rich insights.

Of course, there are some issues that have to do with the

times we live in. More consumers (especially among the upper socio economic classes and the affluent) are time poor; reluctant to travel distances, leading 'un-uniform' individual schedules that make converging groups at a specific time difficult. We need research methodologies and tools to address these very real issues. The reference to some alternative techniques address some part of the issue but are not real alternatives to focus groups since the biggest asset is the dynamics that come into play. And they don't address issues about time. A new tool is private online communities, used in many developed markets. A private online community is a set of consumers pre-recruited, with whom you interact, converse and dialogue online, on a private website. Consumers are available 24 X 7. At a time when speed is of essence research is turned around quickly. With a community you can conduct the equivalent of a focus group — the biggest advantage being members respond at a time and from a place convenient to them, within a specified time period but without having to be available at a 'specified time'. And, the critical group dynamics is retained since members respond to what others say. We worked with a UK based company and operated a community of opinionators (men and women) for Beauty and Wellness in India. We learnt that it offers speed and is effective and efficient. In a large country like India with regional differences and where geographical representation is needed to understand consumers, private online communities save on time and cost. They allow access to consumers as and when needed, and that too without consumers, researchers and research users having to travel. It is applicable to upper socio economic classes today, but then they are the ones with greater issues of access.

(The authors are founders of Mumbai-based research agency Market Vistas)