

# Focus group fiasco gives research a bad name

Focus groups, the beloved method of many British marketers, are under attack in the US. An article in *New York Magazine* drew up a long list of focus groups run recently in Manhattan. They included groups for people who grew up in Long Island, victims of severe asthma, travellers who had back-packed through Mongolia, people of Italian descent, Johnnie Walker drinkers and sufferers of profuse, gland-related perspiration.

The catch was that there was one person, Will Leitch, the author of the article, who attended all these groups, but had absolutely no legitimate reason to do so because he had no experience of the topics.

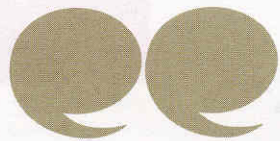
Leitch has learned how to get on the call-sheets of many of Manhattan's leading research agencies. By lying in the initial qualification interviews about his background and how many groups he had attended, he was able to earn as much as \$300 (£162) a session, up to four times a week, as a professional focus group participant.

For years, many marketers have whispered about the single biggest weakness of focus group data – the validity of those being focused upon. Finding participants can be a difficult task, and research agencies can be less than stringent in selection procedures. There is a growing army of semi-professional focus group participants, particularly among retirees, who will happily give their assent to any and all pre-screening questions to pick up some extra income.

Focus group veterans are bad for insight because they usually agree with the moderators' questions and can embellish or invent experiences to fit the bill. By doing so they will be invited back for more sessions and

more rewards. Leitch even describes the 'cardinal rule' of focus group faking: don't offer your opinion, just confirm whatever they want you to confirm.

The article could not have come at a worse time for focus group adherents. Big players such as Procter & Gamble and Unilever are steadily moving away from this technique toward more valid and insightful qualitative research methods. In particular, ethnography – the study of



**Leitch earned \$300 a session up to four times a week as a focus group participant**

real consumers with real peers in real locations, engaged in the actual purchase or consumption of products and services – is growing in influence in marketing departments around the world.

Leitch's story has caused outrage in the US. Several large research organisations, including the Market



Research Association, have drafted a press release condemning the actions of the author. Interestingly, they do not censure the agencies that compile lists of participants then use them for different clients with very different target consumers.

Even after his article appeared, Leitch continued to receive calls from agencies that had his details on their lists. He was soon back at work offering heartfelt, on-message, entirely fictional views on a variety of new products. He even overheard members of one of his focus groups discussing his article. 'The piece was funny,' recalled one of the participants. 'But man, I wish he wouldn't tell everybody.'

Fortunately, in the UK nothing like this could happen. Market research agencies do not keep directories of regular, semi-professional focus group attendees who they call on again and again. They are also extremely rigorous in ensuring that participants are who they say they are. Right?



Mark Ritson is assistant professor of marketing at London Business School

## 30 seconds on... focus groups

- Focus groups **date back to the Second World War**, when US sociologists were asked to investigate how military propaganda films were being received by audiences.
- The **business world is a heavy user of focus groups**. Politicians traditionally rely more on quantitative data to gauge support for people or policies.

- Political focus groups became more popular in the 90s, with **President Clinton and New Labour using the technique**.
- President Clinton once said that the **most powerful citizens in America** were members of focus groups.

- According to Fiona Jack, chair of the UK's Association for Qualitative Research, **rooting out regular attendees is a growing problem**. Not all recruiters check names against previous groups. Even when they do, regular attendees often give false names.