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# WHEN SHOULD I USE FOCUS GROUPS?

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## THE YIN AND THE YANG OF RESEARCH

The best way to understand when to use qualitative research is to compare it with its complementary 'other', quantitative research.

- **QUANTITATIVE** research is a tool for measurement.  
It generally involves a large number of people (a representative, sizeable sample of a target population) who complete a questionnaire. The survey captures and aggregates the individual responses through statistical and numerical measurement. The results provide quantifiable 'hard' data that can be extrapolated out across the target population. Quantitative research is more about measuring than meaning.
- **QUALITATIVE** research is a tool for understanding and insight.  
It generally involves small samples of people (representatives of specific target groups) taking part in group discussions, moderated by a researcher. The results are analysed, usually thematically, providing 'soft' insights into the 'why' and 'how' of people's feelings, choices, behaviours. Qualitative research is about meaning, not measuring.

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## NO ONE TOOL IS BEST.

A lot has been written about the pros and cons of quantitative and qualitative research, but it's not a case of 'quant versus qual'. They do complement each other – offering different perspectives that together, give you both sides of the coin. An over-reliance on one over the other may create an imbalance in your understanding of your audiences.

It's important to bear in mind that no research method is perfect. You need to understand their relative strengths and weaknesses before commissioning or embarking on a programme of research.

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## THE PROS AND CONS OF FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups are ultimately about gaining insights that will enable you to understand your 'people' better.

- If you need to know, investigate or understand what people think or feel, or what they do and don't do ...
  - If you want to explore something qualitatively from the subjective perspective of your stakeholders ...
  - If you want to better empathise with your audience's needs and experiences and connect with them more deeply ...
- ... then it is highly likely you will need to conduct or commission qualitative research.

If, however, you want to predict future needs or behaviour, measure, count or quantify, focus groups are almost certainly NOT what you need.

Why? Because participants cannot accurately predict what they will actually do or want. None of us have a crystal ball and we cannot foresee potential external factors that might influence our future behaviors. Similarly, we cannot foresee what we might need because we're not there yet and we don't know what is possible/available:

*"If I asked my customers what they wanted, they would have asked for a faster horse".*  
Henry Ford

In addition, because of the small sample sizes involved in focus groups it is not possible to reliably extrapolate the findings across a larger population or claim statistical validation.

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## HERE'S A LIST OF THE KINDS OF THINGS FOCUS GROUPS CAN HELP YOU WITH:

- Understand what is important to your audience and why.
- Understand people's behaviours and the reasons behind them.
- Identify motivational triggers behind attendance/giving.
- Identify practical and perceptual barriers to attendance/giving.
- Explore feelings, attitudes and opinions about a product, service, brand.
- Understand audience experiences and impacts.
- Understanding the social/cultural context of a particular market or sub-set.

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- Reveal stakeholder perceptions in relation to similar or competing organisations or experience offers.
  - Bring to light audience needs and the degrees to which they are being met by your organisation.
  - Gather personal stories and evidence in relation to a specific event, initiative or engagement project as part of an evaluation process.
  - Explore the similarities and differences between different audience groups or multiple points of view.
  - Understand the reasons behind a particular state of affairs that cannot be explored quantitatively (e.g. an inexplicable shift in booking/visiting patterns).
  - Understand the intrinsic and relative appeal of, for example, a product offer or marketing execution.
  - Add colour and dimension to existing audience data/metrics by exploring the ‘why’ behind the ‘what’ (e.g. the reasons behind the results of a quantitative research).

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### **WANT TO KNOW MORE?**

Contact Lisa at The Experience Business to discuss your research needs or find out about in-house Focus Groups

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