

FOCUS GROUPS IN GLOBAL MARKETING: CONCEPT, METHODOLOGY AND IMPLICATIONS

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This paper examines the concept and use of focus groups in global marketing. It differentiates exploratory, clinical, and phenomenological approaches to focus groups; conceptualizes a focus group methodology; explicates stages of a focus group; discusses use of focus groups in practice; and addresses implications of focus groups for the management of global business. The paper has an extensive literature review about focus groups and about global business that might be of interest both to practitioners and researchers.

INTRODUCTION

For business, the reality is global. To have a global presence is compelling for management of business firms throughout the world, even though the reality of globalization may be difficult to achieve (Perlmutter 1969; Hout, Porter and Rudden 1982; Farley 1986; Henzler and Rall 1986; Root 1987; Jeannet 2000; Cherkasky 2002; Deshpande and Farley 2002; Hofstede et al. 2002; Johansson 2003; Yip 2003). While global trade growth declined recently due to global economic uncertainties, the decline of the information technology sector, and concerns of terrorism (WTO Report 2002a; Parmar 2003a), the urge to globalize remains an imperative (Globalization Index 2003) and globalization arguably has staying power (Morrison, Ricks and Roth 1991; Giddens 2000; Lazer and Shaw 2000; Ramachandran and Yip 2000; Engardio 2001; Quelch 2002; Franklin 2003). A firm, in fact, may seem incomplete if it does not have a presence in the global-business arena, even the smallest firms (Farley 1986; Moran and Riesenberger 1994; Gupta and Govindarajan 2000; Paul 2000; Tyagi 2002; Deresky 2003; Johansson 2003; Yip 2003).

The need to globalize is compelling given that world trade reportedly increased from US\$200 billion to more than US\$4 trillion over the past two decades (OSU 1997). The World Trade Organization (WTO Report 2002b) reported world merchandise trade at US\$5.47 trillion in 1999, US\$6.2 trillion in 2000, and US\$6.0 trillion in 2001. Trade volume for 2001 was to be 2 to 7 percent more than in 2000 (WTO Press Release 2001), but a global recession brought about the first decline in world merchandise trade since 1982 with a 4.5 percent decrease in volume (WTO Press Release 2002; Becker 2003). During 2002, world trade recovered from the first quarter forward (Panitchpakdi 2002) and, as of January 2003, world trade volume was approximately US\$ 5.3 trillion (Trade Report 2003a), with U. S. exports at US\$ 81.9 billion in January 2003. (Trade Report 2003b). These reports arguably affirm the potential of global business.

Globalization, a concept popularized by Levitt (1983), encourages business firms to enter host-country markets throughout the world. Entry is encouraged both in the processes of production and of marketing. Hill (2003) described globalization of production as the placing of production facilities around the globe, often in least-cost locations, to exploit national differences in cost and in the quality of factors of production. Globalization of marketing requires a unified marketing approach worldwide. Kehoe and Whitten (1999) summarized the concept of globalization of marketing for product companies as:

one world, one product, one brand, and one marketing approach, and for service companies as: one world, one service delivery approach, one service mark, and one marketing approach. In each of these situations, globalization creates an orientation within a company of making little or no distinctions between national markets (Toyne and Walters 1993; Johansson 2003; Yip 2003). This implies that firms seek opportunities for greater product and marketing standardization in the conduct of global operations in order to realize cost savings, economies of scale, and implementation simplification in entering host-country markets (Waheeduzzaman 2002; Hill 2003; Yip 2003).

While standardization as a concept is appealing, it has significant limitations (Jain 1989; Ohmae 1989; Harvey 1993; Dru 1997; Tai 1997; Laroche et al. 2001; Waheeduzzaman 2002). Arguably, the world is becoming smaller due to advances in communication and in transportation technologies. Using the Internet, an individual is but a click away from any country or region of the world, whether accessed by computer, a personal digital assistant, a cellular phone, a smartphone, or emergent wireless technologies (Stull 1997; Long, Tomak and Whinston 2003; Page 2003; Segan 2003). However, even though individuals have more information about other places and peoples, there still exists among peoples in the world individual differences in culture, idiom, language, preferences, and tastes. Hence, rather than standardization as a sole market-entry approach, products and services and the advertising thereof often must be adapted to host-country markets (Kacker 1975; Medina and Duffy 1998; Kehoe and Whitten 1999; Keegan and Green 2000; Onkvisit and Shaw 2002; Raymond, Mittelstaedt and Hopkins 2002; Johansson 2003; Yip 2003). Adaptation requires that information be gathered and analyzed about host-country consumers, gathered efficiently and easily through focus groups.

Expectations are that emerging nations will provide nearly half of the market potential for western goods and services by 2010 and three of eight middle-class consumers will reside in developing nations (Rosenweig 1998). This implies that gathering accurate, reliable, and timely data from people in host-country markets will be critically important in

the future. An entrant firm must develop a knowledge base about culture and cultural metaphors in host-country markets to insure that cultural barriers do not impede market entries (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Hofstede 1980; Kogut and Singh 1988; Hofstede 1994; Aulakh, Kotabe and Sahay 1996; Gomez-Mejia and Palich 1997; Swift 1999; Evans, Treadgold and Mavondo 2000; Brouthers and Brouthers 2001; Gannon 2001; Shenkar 2001; Evans and Mavondo 2002; Hennart and Zeng 2002; Einhorn, Roberts and Crockett 2003) as well as to facilitate adaptation to a host country by home-country employees (Hofstede 1993; Jun, Gentry and Hyun 2001; Deresky 2003). Additionally, an entrant firm must acquire information on subcultures that may exist within a host country (Hall 1976; Hall and Hall 1987; Lenartowicz and Roth 2001).

INFORMATION FROM GLOBAL CONSUMERS

There obviously is a significant amount of information about potential consumers needed as a firm enters a host-country market, whether in a developed or a developing country, information such as reflected in the following questions. What do consumers in a host country think of a firm's product or service? How do they feel about the company? What is the company's image? How should the company organize itself for marketing in the country? How should it position a product or service within a host country? What are consumer reactions in a host country to advertising planned by the firm? Are there any attributes of the product or service that should be adapted for a host-country market, and which adaptations are critical for a country and which are preferred but not critical? What are the meanings of colors, shapes, and sizes of products in different countries of the world?

An area of significant difference across countries lies in language. Words may have different meanings across countries due to differences in lexicon, phoneme, and syntax, thereby inhibiting survey research and confounding its analysis (Hall 1959; Deutscher 1968; Gannon 2001; Ferraro 2002). Research by Hoecklin (1995) illustrates how interpretation of a given word may differ across

cultures. A survey questionnaire asked, "How important is security?" That simple question was difficult for respondents in host countries to answer and difficult for the researcher to analyze results because people in different cultures had differing understandings of the concept of security.

Another subtlety in use of language is that in some cultures men and women may use different words having the same meaning. An example of the use of such word pairs, called doublets, in the West Indies men use "kunobu" and women use "kuyu" as the word for rain (Ferraro 2002). When coupled with euphemisms and local slang, language in a host country may be a significant obstacle to a successful market entry.

Similarly, a brand name, appropriate in a home country, may translate inappropriately in a host country or be perceived differently (Tagliabue 2003) from in the home country. In addition, given a product's origin, its perception by consumers may be different based on its country of origin versus its country of manufacturer (Bilkey and Nes 1982; Han and Terpstra 1988; Carpenter and Nakamoto 1990; Wall and Heslop 1991; Tse and Gorn 1993; Samiee 1994; Bandyopadhyay, Yelkur, DaCosta and Coelho 2001; Rudell 2001; Carvalho 2002; Olsen and Olsson 2002). Consumer perception of a product's origin is an important factor for consideration as a firm weighs whether to move production from its home country (country of origin) to another country (country of manufacturer).

All of these cultural issues in a market entry take on increased urgency in today's global environment, an environment in which mistakes in market-entry strategy may be detrimental to the continued viability of a firm. The issues and questions presented in the paragraphs above are examples of issues and questions that are suited ideally for a focus group interview approach. These also are issues and questions with which a focus group interview may be ill designed or misused, and, as a result, the information gathered might be misleading and/or of insignificant value to management in a global-entry mode.

CONCEPT OF A FOCUS GROUP

The rationale of a focus group methodology is that it offers an opportunity for respondents to share openly their opinions about a research object in a group interview venue (Morgan and Spanish 1984; Morgan 1988; Patton 1990; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Stewart and Shamdasani 1990; Frey and Fontana 1991; Carey 1994; Creswell 1994; Morgan 1997a; Edmunds 1999; Gummesson 1999; Greenbaum 2000; Bloor et al. 2001; Sayre 2001; Wade 2002). The sociologist Robert King Merton is acknowledged as likely being first to conceive of a focus group as a means to gather qualitative data, specifically to measure reactions to radio programming (Report 2003). Merton, Fiske and Kendall (1956) used the term "focus group" in describing a situation of a researcher asking specific questions of a small group of subjects. Such a group convenes to discuss a research object or a topic of interest, for example, discussing plans for advertising copy in a host country.

Focus group participants generally number about eight to twelve (Cox, Higginbotham and Burton 1976; Morgan 1988; Denzin and Lincoln 1994; McQuarrie 1996; Morgan 1997b; Edmunds 1999; Greenbaum 1998a and 1998b; Greenbaum 1999). A group more than twelve subjects may limit, rather than enhance, participants' interaction, while fewer than eight participants may not produce enough interactions to generate useful results. A focus group interview does not use a structured questionnaire, thereby allowing respondents to relax and to take a considered view of a research object. This, in turn, provides a more in-depth interview than is possible in a survey-research approach, thereby enabling, according to Levy (1994), an understanding of the subjects and "their outlooks, their feelings, the dynamic interplay of their feelings and ideas, their attitudes and opinions, and their resulting actions."

Calder (1977) identified three focus group approaches – exploratory, clinical, and phenomenological. These approaches vary in use depending upon the type of information sought by management, the role of the moderator, and the degree of group interaction. Underpinning each approach is the objective of

focusing discussion on a relevant topic area or focus object in a nondirective manner.

Exploratory Focus Group

An exploratory focus group has among its purposes to generate ideas, test constructs, and develop hypotheses (Fontana and Frey 1994; Morgan 1997a), as in a situation of developing and testing a questionnaire instrument. The group setting provides a convenient means of within-group personal interviewing wherein participants state what they like and dislike about a questionnaire, or discuss what they like or dislike about a product's design, or share their feelings about a proposed advertising theme. While the participants hear each answer, the interaction, in an exploratory focus group, tends to involve one individual at a time with the moderator rather than interaction with group members. As a result, interaction between participants in an exploratory focus group is not as active as in the other approaches to focus groups (Krueger 1997b).

Clinical Focus Group

In a clinical focus group, interaction among group members is more active than in an exploratory focus group. The moderator of the group is not part of the interaction but is an objective observer. It is important that the moderator establishes rapport among participants (Axelrod 1976; Krueger 1997c; Morgan 1997a; Morgan 1997b; Greenbaum 1998a; Greenbaum 1999; Greenbaum 2000). The moderator might begin a clinical focus group by asking members to introduce each other. Then, for example, ask group members to explain to each other (not to the moderator) why they purchased or plan to purchase a particular product. The object of the discussion is to encourage the participants to talk freely with each other and to begin to make relatively unguarded comments concerning the topic selected for focus discussion. The role of the moderator is critical. He or she has an intended direction for the group and must, adroitly and gently, without becoming a factor in the interaction, guide the group through nondirective comments and nonverbal responses (Jorgensen 1989; Krueger 1997c; Greenbaum 1998a; Greenbaum 2000; Mariampolski 2001; Parmar 2003b).

To encourage unguarded comments by participants, and, hence, allow for more in-depth examination of the participants, a clinical focus group may use projective tests, free-association exercises, and/or interactive exercises to facilitate the process (O'Neill 2003). The participants, for example, might view a picture of a person talking with a company president, with the president saying, "I believe our advertising in (a particular host country) is appealing." Focus group participants then discuss how they believe the person in the picture likely would reply. In other words, the participants are projecting themselves into a situation, and, because they do not feel as vulnerable as when they talk specifically about themselves, they may speak with more candor, insight, and meaning.

Phenomenological Focus Group

In a phenomenological focus group, the moderator is a participant in the group (Jorgensen 1989; Krueger 1997c). The group interview approach is unstructured. The moderator analyzes and interprets the group while a member of the group, shares in the experiences of the group, and, from exposure as a participant/observer, arrives at conclusions concerning group participants and their opinions of or attitudes toward a focus object.

A FOCUS GROUP METHODOLOGY

Exhibit 1 presents a methodology for conducting a focus group, adapted from Lindgren and Kehoe (1981) and used by permission. The example posits six major stages of a focus group and presents sample questions that could be used in a focus group assigned the task of evaluating advertising copy for a bank entering a host-country market, across three alternative advertising approaches. While a bank is utilized as the example because of the impending expansion of U.S. banks to host countries (Miller and Parkhe 1998), the methodology may be generalized and used in other situations in global business, whether the focus object is concerned with advertising evaluation, display evaluation, product evaluation, or an evaluation of a company's host-country marketing plans.

EXHIBIT 1 A Focus Group Methodology

Introductory Stage

- ◆ Provide orientation to the focus group process, introduce participants, and establish rapport during this stage.
- ◆ The moderator should provide sufficient information to permit informed consent by each participant.

Pre-Focus Stage

- ◆ Participants are introduced to the topical area of a focus group during this stage.
- ◆ Discussion in this stage should be general and perceived as nonthreatening.
- ◆ The moderator should avoid premature evaluation of participants and their responses.
- ◆ Examples of questions to be used in this stage in a focus group for a bank entering host-country markets:
 - ✓ Which financial institutions do you use in the host country?
 - ✓ What is your attitude toward financial institutions in general?
 - ✓ What is your attitude toward specific financial institutions?

Task-Orientation Stage

- ◆ This stage orients participants to a specific task (e.g., evaluation of advertising copy).
- ◆ Questions are specific and relate directly to the focus object (e.g., advertising copy).
- ◆ The objective in this stage is to cause examination of evaluation criteria.
- ◆ Example questions:
 - ✓ How do you feel about your financial institution's advertising?
 - ✓ What do you think of financial institution advertising in general?
 - ✓ Do you feel the advertisements reflect the image of a financial institution?
 - ✓ Which financial institution has what you consider as "good" advertising?
 - ✓ Why do you consider it to be good advertising?

Focus Stage

- ◆ Entering this stage, the participants should be oriented and motivated to complete the task.
- ◆ The role of moderator is critical in this stage.
- ◆ High group interaction is important, particularly in the clinical and phenomenological focus group approaches.
- ◆ Example questions (e.g., evaluate advertising copy in three print ads; each ad is shown separately):
 - ✓ What do you think of this ad? Is it appropriate for the host country?
 - ✓ What image does it portray? Is the image host-country appropriate?
 - ✓ What is good or bad about the ad?
 - ✓ With multiple focus groups, the order of presentation of the focus object should be random.

Conclusion Stage

- ◆ In this stage, allow participants to make and verbalize their individual conclusions about the focus object.
- ◆ This is a stage of reflection and of strong group interaction. This stage may yield the best data.
- ◆ Be sure all participants fully participate and that one or a few participants do not try to conclude for the group.
- ◆ Example questions (show all three ads at the same time):
 - ✓ Which advertisement is best for use in the host country? Why?
 - ✓ Which advertisement is worst for use in the host country? Why?
 - ✓ Which advertisement would you like your financial institution to use? Why?

Debriefing Stage

- ◆ In this stage, the moderator provides rationale and identification information as specified by the client.
- ◆ This stage intends to set a basis for future cooperation by the participants

Adapted from Lindgren and Kehoe (1981). Used by permission.

Introductory Stage

Objectives of the introductory stage are introduction, orientation, establishing rapport, and obtaining informed consent. A moderator facilitates introduction of group members or they introduce themselves, participants are oriented to the focus group methodology, rapport is established, and participants receive sufficient information about the research to allow for their informed consent. Then, in the example presented here, the moderator indicates that the group will be talking about advertising by a bank entering a host-country market, but avoids, at this introductory stage, a detailed discussion about the specific types of advertising. The purpose at this stage is for the respondents generally to be aware of the subject of the focus group in order to give their informed consent to participate.

Pre-Focus Stage

The pre-focus stage introduces participants to the broad topical area of the focus group. The questions asked in this stage are general and nonthreatening in nature and tone. It is important that a moderator does not give a premature evaluation, either verbally or nonverbally, of any participant's comments. The objectives of the stage are to induce participants' comfort with the process and assuage any concerns. Examples of typical questions in a pre-focus stage are in Exhibit 1. Notice the general nature of the questions oriented toward financial institutions in general rather than specifically to financial institution advertising, which is the focus object. Data from this stage are general in nature and, as a result, may not be useful in managerial decision-making.

Task-Orientation Stage

The third stage is a task-orientation stage. The questions in this stage become more specific and relate directly to the focus object, in this example, the evaluation of advertising copy. To move the subjects toward the task of evaluating advertising copy, the questions are about bank advertising in general. The moderator, especially in an exploratory approach, points the discussion toward evaluation criteria and encourages the participants to analyze the criteria

they use personally when evaluating advertising. The purpose of the questions in this stage is to have the subjects discover criteria used in evaluating the focus object, in this case, evaluating bank advertising.

Focus Stage

By the focus stage, the most specific stage of the process, the respondents should be well oriented to the task. A moderator's role in this stage is crucial as is an understanding of the particular focus group approach in use, whether exploratory, clinical or phenomenological (Calder 1977; Greenbaum 1999; Greenbaum 2000; Foden 2003; Henderson and Langer 2003; Parmar 2003b). While it is important that the task is completed (in this example, evaluation of advertising copy for a bank entering a host-country market), it is important also, especially in the clinical and phenomenological approaches, to maintain high group interaction. A danger in this stage is that the participants become so task oriented that group interaction suffers. To ameliorate this potential malady, the moderator should require that the participants discuss copy evaluation openly with each other. This is to ensure that group interaction is not lost in the preoccupation of completing the task.

Conclusion Stage

The conclusion stage consolidates the focus discussion, allowing the participants to express conclusions concerning the focus object. In this stage, all participants are asked for a candid opinion of the focus object, rather than allowing one or a few participants to conclude for the group. Experienced moderators generally elect not hurry this stage. It is a stage of introspection and reflection and may yield the best qualitative data.

Debriefing Stage

A focus group concludes in a debriefing stage. During discussion in this stage, a moderator may provide rationale for the study and client identification information. While sometimes done summarily, this stage is important because it provides a basis for future cooperation with subjects and establishes the research on an ethical level. A focus group conducted

ethically gives a respondent, at minimum, enough information to give informed consent in the introductory stage and provides completion information in the debriefing stage about the rationale for the study and identification of the sponsor.

FOCUS GROUPS IN PRACTICE

The three focus group approaches (exploratory, clinical and phenomenological) are appropriate for qualitative research in global marketing. In practice, the approaches may interchange within a single focus group or between focus groups to facilitate the process. This is important in global settings, particularly if a focus group is in a host country whose culture is without a research tradition.

Focus group subjects in some host countries may become uncomfortable during a focus group and be unwilling to talk among themselves because such behavior either is not acceptable or is usual in their culture (Hall 1976; Scherer and Ekman 1982; Hall and Hall 1987; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Montgomery 1991; Wolcott 1992; Hofstede 1994; Robinson 1996; Gannon 2001; Farraro 2002; Stauss and Mang 2002). Hence, a focus group moderator in a global marketing venue must be flexible and willing to switch among the three focus group approaches. For example, a moderator may be directive in the early or pre-focus stage of group activity. Then, as a group develops and becomes oriented to its task, a moderator shifts to a clinical focus group approach of being an objective observer. Later, in the focus stage, the moderator may become phenomenological in orientation and be accepted as a participant in the group.

While playing the separate roles of director, observer, and participant may appear to be too much activity for a moderator in a focus group, in practice it occurs often. A researcher, then, should be aware that the varying roles of the moderator, the varying degrees of group interaction, and unique techniques utilized by the moderator in the various phases of a focus group might impact data from the different focus segments.

Another way in which the three approaches to focus groups are used is in a between focus-group situation.

In such a situation, a researcher utilizes multiple focus groups of eight to twelve people each for each research question. For example, several focus groups use the exploratory approach, other groups the clinical approach, and other groups the phenomenological approach. This likely happens if, in the judgement of a researcher, one approach may not yield quality data, or in situations where a researcher is unsure of the focus-group approach that is appropriate for a host-country's culture. Of course, whatever approach or approaches are used, it is good practice to have multiple groups in each approach so as to compare data within as well as across groups.

ONLINE QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Focus groups are a valuable technique in qualitative research (Hopewell 2003) and used in online research with increasing frequency for cost-saving possibilities. The Internet offers technologies to facilitate focus groups virtually, either through video conferencing or in an online setting (Bloor et al. 2001; DeNicola and Kennedy 2001; Jarvis and Szyal 2001; Lonnie 2001; James 2002; Hopewell 2003).

FocusVision Worldwide (2003) enables Internet and videoconferencing of live international focus groups direct from a host-country location to a manager's home-country office. Examples of FocusVision Videoconferencing and FocusVision Online, a secured Internet service that enables real-time viewing of focus groups, are available on the firm's website, with a live demonstration of a focus group available at <http://www.focusvision.com/online/demo.htm>.

Another provider in delivery of live focus groups over the Internet is ActiveGroup (2003), whose live demonstration is available at http://www.activegroup.net/ag_live.cfm. ActiveGroup offers an on-demand streaming media service that allows viewing of focus groups whenever it is convenient for an individual. If a manager misses a group or elects not to watch it live, it may be viewed on-demand over a secure website http://www.activegroup.net/on_demand.cfm.

For a firm interested in appealing to children, an interesting online panel from C&R Research Services is available at <http://www.kidzeyes.com> (Kidzeyes

2003). Providing a sample of children 6 to 14 years old, Kidzeyes.com is an online children's research panel that provides customized studies as well as an opportunity to participate in a monthly omnibus study.

A concern in using online qualitative research is whether an online focus group allows enough time for interaction and reflection by participants. This concern may be addressed by using a bulletin board, a new on-line qualitative research technique (James 2002). In a bulletin board, a research topic is available on line for from several days to a month or more on a password-protected web page. Participants log on, read the discussion log, and respond at their convenience. A bulletin board allows a respondent the time necessary to use a product or service under evaluation, to reflect on the usage experience, to read and reflect upon comments of other participants, and enter their comments when ready to participate.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT

There are several important implications of focus-group methodology for a global manager to consider. These implications include:

A focus group and its resulting information are only as good as a moderator, her or his knowledge of focus-group approaches and procedures, and her or his knowledge of a host-country's culture. Ideally, a moderator should have experience in research design, interview procedure, group dynamics, be knowledgeable of the various focus-group approaches and procedures, and be familiar with the culture of the host country or countries in which a focus group is to be conducted. Care and sensitivity is necessary in selecting a moderator as well as selecting a focus group facility. A useful resource is the *Directory of Focus Group Facilities and Moderators*, published annually by the American Marketing Association in *Marketing News* (Directory 2003).

The methodology used in a focus group (Exhibit 1) is critical to its success and has implications for reliability and validity of the data. While a focus group is unstructured, it is not a loosely run group discussion. Rather, a focus group, as its members

become oriented to each other and to a focus object, evolves through a series of stages. A moderator should be aware of the stages and recognize her or his role in each stage as conditioned by the particular focus-group approach being used, whether exploratory, clinical, or phenomenological.

A moderator also should be aware of cultural conditions in a host country that may inhibit group interaction (Axtell 1993; McIntosh and Davies 1996; O'Grady and Lane 1996; Robinson 1996; CAG 2001; Gentry and Hyun 2001; Jun 2001; Farraro 2002) and/or confound interpretation of focus group results (Malhotra, Agarwal and Peterson 1996; Keillor, Owens and Pettijohn 2001). For example, individuals in some cultures may be hesitant to interact with strangers in a group environment (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961; Hall 1976; Hofstede 1980; Hall and Hall 1987; Hofstede 1994; Lenartowicz and Roth 2001; Shenkar 2001). In other cultures, status consciousness may cause an individual to defer to another individual (Adams 1965; Tedeschi and Norman 1985; Davis and Young 2002). Subjects may feel it is inappropriate to discuss personal opinions openly about a product or service, have different approaches to generating ideas (Swanson 1997), or be uncomfortable in group-discussion venues (McIntosh and Davies 1996; Frevert 2000; Gannon 2001; Farraro 2002). Cultural artifacts such as these may inhibit a focus group and confound its results.

Data from focus-group research are of a qualitative nature. Care in the approach and procedure of focus interviewing will yield qualitative data as valid as data from quantitative research. In fact, because focus groups give the comments and reactions of consumers, issues not apparent or detected easily in survey or experimental research may surface through focus-group interaction. Hence, the data from focus groups may provide attitudes, emotions, and perceptions of greater value to management than numeric data from quantitative research, particularly in situations wherein managers are new to a host country.

As a general rule, management should not participate in a focus group. If management insists on being in a

focus group, it should be only in the most exploratory focus-groups studies. Presence of management, whether obtrusive or not, has an impact on a focus group, on the moderator, and, in all likelihood, on group dynamics. This, in turn, affects the quality of the data.

While management should not participate in a focus group, it is possible to view a focus group unobtrusively. In fact, when entering a host-country market, management may learn a great deal about a country's culture and the uniqueness of its people by watching a focus group, even a focus group conducted in a host country with which a manager is experienced or familiar. As discussed above, videoconferencing and the Internet, through such providers as FocusVision Worldwide (2003) and ActiveGroup (2003), enable unobtrusive viewing of live focus groups direct from a host-country location to a manager's home-country office.

CONCLUSION

Survey and experimental research techniques often take too long (Parameswaran and Yaprak 1987) to yield the necessary information for managers who want to test a marketing strategy or a new product or service in a host country. As a result, managers may be tempted to avoid research and in so doing possibly make a major error in judgment (Thomas 2002). Focus-group research provides a vehicle for gathering information in a cost effectively and timely manner to inform international business decisions. A focus group employs any of three approaches (exploratory, clinical, phenomenological) or a combination of these approaches. Whichever approach used, a methodology should be established and followed in conducting a focus group.

This research posits a six-stage methodology for focus group research. A standardized focus group methodology enhances the quality of data (Cox, Higginbotham and Burton 1976). Quality of data, in turn, influences the quality of decision-making. If data are of high quality, immediate action in a decision is possible. If data are of lower quality, delay of decision occurs, opportunities foregone, and the firm may be a weakened competitor.

Given the volatile and highly competitive environment of global business, the need for immediate decisions is paramount. Focus-group research is a complement to quantitative research methodologies (Wade 2002). Focus-group research provides an efficient and timely method of gathering information for decision-making. Immediacy in decision-making enables a firm to move toward achieving a first-mover advantage (Hout, Porter and Rudden 1982; Kerin, Varadarajan and Peterson 1992) in the global-business arena.

The approaches and procedure presented in this manuscript provide a carefully considered and efficient approach to focus group research. The more efficient and considered the approach, the higher are the qualities of data from a focus group and the more valuable are the data to a global business manager.

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Acknowledgments: The authors acknowledge and thank Professor Michael d'Amico, Co-Editor of *Marketing Management Journal*, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful and thoughtful comments about the manuscript. The authors thank Dean Carl P. Zeithaml and Senior Associate Dean Ellen M. Whitener of the McIntire School of Commerce, University of Virginia, for encouraging our research and for providing a grant to support the research.