

16 Questions to Ask Yourself When Listening to Customers

Marketers listen to lots of focus groups. But they don't always know what to listen for. In the past, I have provided long checklists, but to experienced people, the lists probably come across as either a little condescending (that means talking down to people — just kidding!), unnecessary or — on the other side of it — a little bit overwhelming.

When people ask themselves questions, they are automatically at their own level and rarely take it as an insult. So, here's a list of "16 Questions to ask yourself while listening to a focus group."

1. What's the underlying, perhaps hidden, theme here? (There's ALWAYS an underlying theme.)
2. What can I learn from the misconceptions or otherwise "wrong" responses?
3. Are the quiet participants and inarticulate remarks conveying some hidden treasures?
4. What are the silences, pauses, chuckles, body language, voice tonality and other "background" cues trying to tell us?
5. Are we learning anything from their persistent refusal to get off a particular topic and get on to what WE think is important?
6. Are my prior experiences — and, yes, even prejudices — preventing me from learning something about that person I'm tending to write off?
7. How does what I'm hearing relate to the previous groups? Are there any trends that can only be understood in the context of multiple groups?
8. Since emotions are the signals of values (i.e., what's important), what are the emotions signaling us, particularly anything with emotional heat around it — passion, anger, resentment, awe, fear, etc.
9. Why doesn't the moderator move on? Since the moderator is a trained professional, is the moderator perhaps noticing something or going after something that is beneath the surface? Is the strange behavior, redundancy and persistence of the moderator perhaps attempting to get beyond superficial verbalization, rationalization and other defenses? Or, should the moderator move on and accept people's analysis of their own behavior? (Okay this isn't really a question.)
10. Given my vast experience in this product category, what unique perspectives can I bring to the table?
11. Rather than looking for the ONE RIGHT ANSWER, are there multiple answers: different kinds of customers, different customer needs, different perspectives that all legitimate?
12. Can the bitching, moaning and complaints of the participants be turned into a product that solves the problems? Is there an iPod hiding in the complaints about how disorganized their music collections are?
13. How can I fix it? How can I solve it? How can I improve an already great situation so they'll rave about it?
14. What are the breakthrough solutions rather than the tiny improvements?
15. What are the word-of-mouth implications for what I'm hearing. What are they telling their friends? What could I change to get them to rave to their friends?
16. What am I NOT hearing? Why?