



# FOCUS GROUPS WITH TEENAGERS...

## *You Can Do That!*

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**A** major media company carried out a nationwide survey on a sample of 1,000 teenagers to test a new product concept; the research agency assured that their methodology would give sales forecasts with high accuracy, thanks to a large normative database.

The results confirmed high attractiveness of their concept and predicted sales at the level of 12 million units. This would ensure the required profitability of the project.

So the product was launched, and very soon it was clear that sales levels were seriously overestimated. In the first month, the company achieved sales at the level of six million units (despite a massive campaign). Second month, sales were at four million, and subsequent weeks confirmed the decreasing trend.

At that moment, we met the client for the first time and were called to find out what had happened. Our qualitative study of just three well-targeted groups showed that the product needed major changes if it was to be continued. Here is how we did it.

As an experienced moderator or qualitative researcher, you may have conducted hundreds of focus groups — most of them very successful, some less so. You may have encountered dominating respondents that you had to let go, shy groups that were reluctant to say anything, offensive people who intimidated other participants and so on. You have scores of good and bad experiences from



various situations, which were not always easy to predict. (Recently in our case, for instance, a group of young women recruited for a cosmetic study appeared dressed all in black, just the latest fashion. The atmosphere became really depressive, and the group was negative about virtually everything. Otherwise, recruitment was perfect. Do we now ask participants how they come dressed for the meeting?)

There is, however, one thing you can expect without much effort: a teenager group means trouble. In our conversations with clients and other moderators, we have heard scores of horror stories — disorder, mischief and boys mumbling “cool” as the most articulate response to anything. Many moderators state up front that they do not take this type of job. Sound familiar? Below are two authentic stories.

### Example One

A focus group meeting starts. Girls, 13 to 14 years old, sit uncomfortably around the table, staring into the one-way mirror. One of them says, “Look, there’s a video camera up there,” and everybody freezes in horror.

M: Tell me something about yourselves.  
Maybe you? (Moderator addresses a girl on the right-hand side and smiles.)

R1: Errr...(almost shivering) My name is Cathy... I am 14, I have a little brother, but we don’t like each other, we used to fight... um... and I have a dog named Rocky.

R2: (reciting, as if by heart) My name is Julie, I am 13, I don’t have a brother, I don’t have a dog, but I have a hamster named Toby and gold fishes.

This pattern was repeated many times during the session: first answer is used as a ready-made template for other responses. That is OK during warm-up, but later it is rather hard to make personal responses from the learned ones. The problem is that the first response may be quite incidental.

M: When you get up and dress for school, what do you do?  
R1: I like to comb my hair when it feels soft...  
R2: Yes, it feels soft...  
R3: Yes, I like that, too...  
R4: Yes, that’s great...  
R5: Yeah, sure...  
R6: And it feels soft...

Well, you think, do ALL girls like combing their hair so much? Those with thin, short hair, too?

**Example Two**

Boys are sitting as if they are in the last row in the classroom. It is obvious they came for money. They pretend to be smart and give “desirable” responses, leaning back in their chairs with arms crossed on chest, obvious signs of withdrawal.

However, one of them is really talkative. Suddenly encouraged by the focus group setting, he is unusually outspoken. You start to suspect he would not speak out in a peer group, since other boys look at him with scorn. So you don’t let him talk too much. He jiggles and wriggles but tries to please you, to be the moderator’s friend.

The group is lame and boring for everybody.

M: (after presentation of a product concept) How do you like it?

R1: It’s OK....

M: Why do you think so?

R1: Well, it’s... er...

R2: ... just so... cool or what.

M: What do you like most in this concept?

Long silence

R3: It’s cool.

M: Is there anything wrong in this concept?

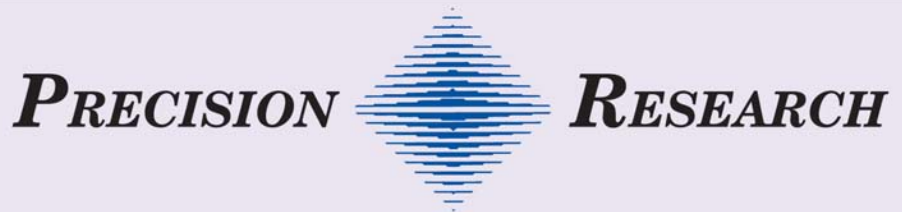
Silence

M: How could you improve it?

Silence

And so on...

Now comes the end, finally. Boys go out and light cigarettes in the street. (Yes, in my country, teenage smoking is a major issue. The moderator happened to be a smoker herself and went out as well, so she could overhear the group.)



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One of the boys starts: “F\*\*\*... It was so stupid, hahahaha... Those suckers will market it!” They discussed the concept between themselves in dirty language. The “moderator’s friend” looked frightened and went away as quickly as possible.

You don’t want to conduct groups like these, do you? In our company, we started to think about what makes teenager groups so hard to conduct. A few details may be different in your country, but young people are more or less the same everywhere, more so now, in the internet age. What came out from our brainstorming sessions, was that:

- Group dynamics in teenage groups are different from adult groups in almost every aspect.
- Therefore, you have to challenge every “standard” rule of doing focus groups.
- Every age group has specific behavior patterns; group age span should therefore be as narrow as possible.

So we challenged the rules and found at least four key factors that determine success in any qualitative study, and teenagers are no exception: recruitment, group setting, guideline and moderator. However, in this case, each part has to be done in a different way.

Observing teenagers, we discovered that most of them look almost the same as the rest of their close group, with a few exceptions. Those exceptions are of two kinds:

- Outcasts: boys and girls who were withdrawn and dismissed by their peers as being “not cool,” “ugly” or “stupid.” Most of them are not ugly or stupid at all; as for

being cool, we cannot say. Quite a few of them were labeled as “nerds,” and they preferred contacts with adults (such as teachers) to their colleagues.

- Weirdos: young people with a high level of self-esteem. Obviously, they do not care what others will say, and they are really proud to be different, somewhat rebellious. For a weirdo, being different is just it — she will become a punk among good girls and a good girl among punks, a rapper among hippies and so on. Her peers may look with awe, but as soon as they try to follow, the weirdo will change her image.

Key questions for the qualitative researcher clearly emerged:

- Whom to invite for the group?
- How to make the difference?

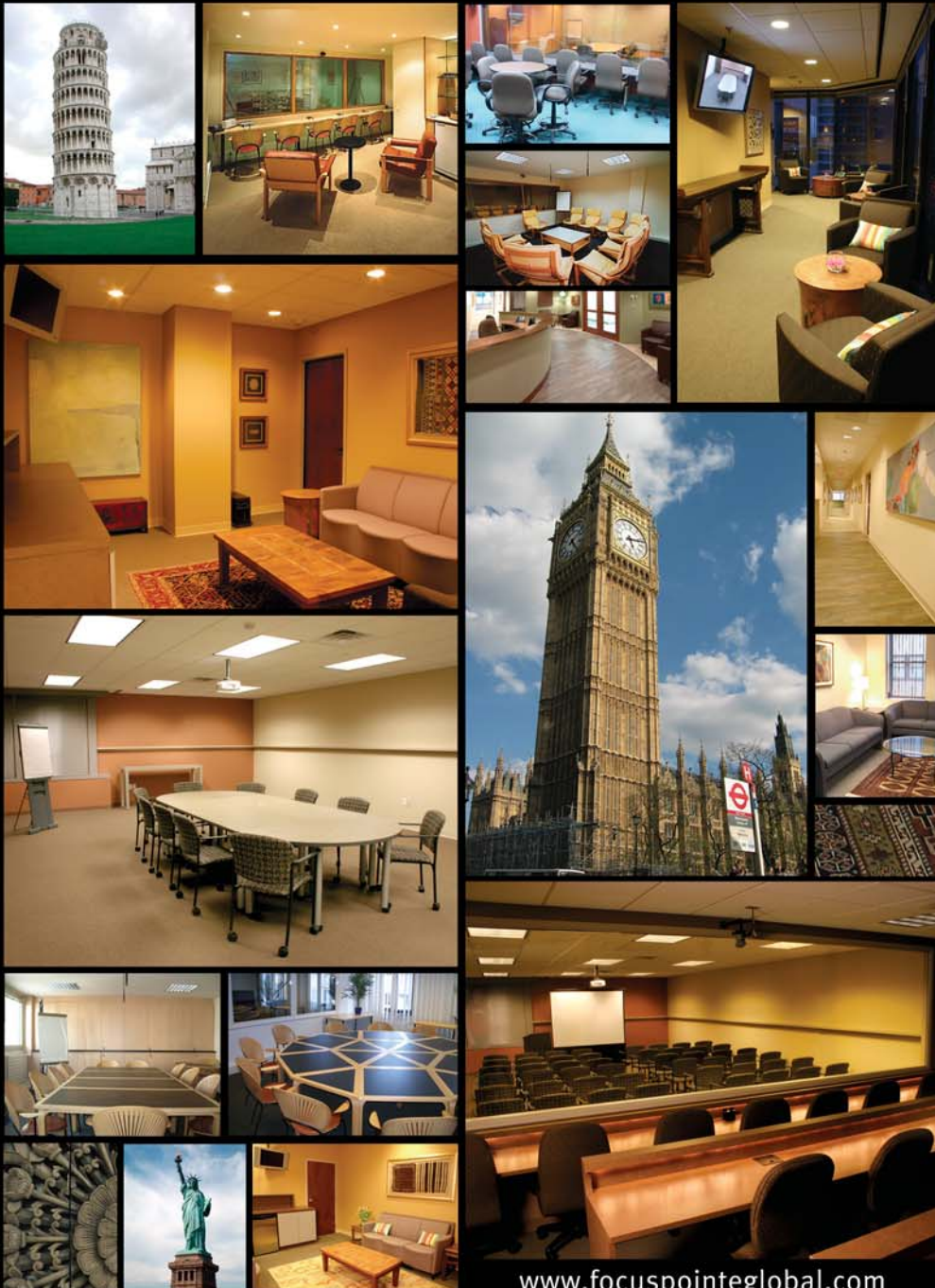
With the first question, the answer is the same as usual in qualitative studies: it depends on what you want to achieve. Typically, however, marketing research is about mass-market products and brands and not about subcultures or otherwise narrow niche behaviors and attitudes. So you do not want to have Weirdos in your group. Their opinions may be interesting, their outfit unusual and they are easy to spot; but do not invite them unless you really want their idiosyncrasies for a purpose. (It may be, of course, that their ideas are accepted by wider groups; this is, however, not so easy – see Malcolm Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point* for a thorough discussion.)

You probably do not want to invite Outcasts. Whatever they accept will be rejected by majority (a poor case for mass marketing, isn’t it?).





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However, it is exceptionally easy to recruit them because they are more comfortable talking to adults than others. Just beware.

And then you have the majority. For an inexperienced eye, they may look the same. Once, we spotted a group of 30 girls, all in short denim jackets, as if it was the only kind available. Faced with 30 identical girls, how you decide whom to recruit? The answer is: one of them was the first to buy a denim jacket. You have to find her — she is the true trendsetter in her peer group. With boys, it is (surprise, surprise) the same story. They, too, follow fashions in dress, music and everything else.

Having understood that, we arrived at the most important observation we ever made: young people seem to be rebellious and likely to contest everything only when adults look at them. Among themselves, they are as conformist as people can be. If you are a parent, you may have heard that marine boots are necessary to express your daughter's subtle personality. The truth is that "everybody else" in her class has marine boots. But, of course, unnerving adults is fun.

You just cannot overestimate the strength of group pressure among teenagers. This has consequences both for recruitment and all other key elements.

Therefore, in the case of teenage focus groups, it is important to invite authentic opinion leaders: persons who are not afraid of expressing their own views in front of the peer group.

You want teenager group leaders, those who are really listened to, who are good mixers, who are true trendsetters. They usually do not show the same courage talking to adults as to peers and rather do not stand out so much as far as their external appearance is concerned. On the surface, they are perfectly "average." But we need to find them.



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**First Among Peers:  
How to Recruit Them?**

If you are able to find opinion leaders, you have achieved a lot, namely by replacing randomly occurring group conformism with authentic leadership in teens’ natural social environment. But HOW do you do that, if these leaders do not obviously show as such?

For this purpose, we designed a two-stage recruitment process. The first step was to recruit only three to four persons per group (we call them “Connectors”). The Connector had to match our criteria for being popular among friends and as close to being an opinion-leader as possible; his or her task was to invite two friends who really are. In other words, we needed an insider to infiltrate teenagers.

So, the recruitment looked like the diagram below.

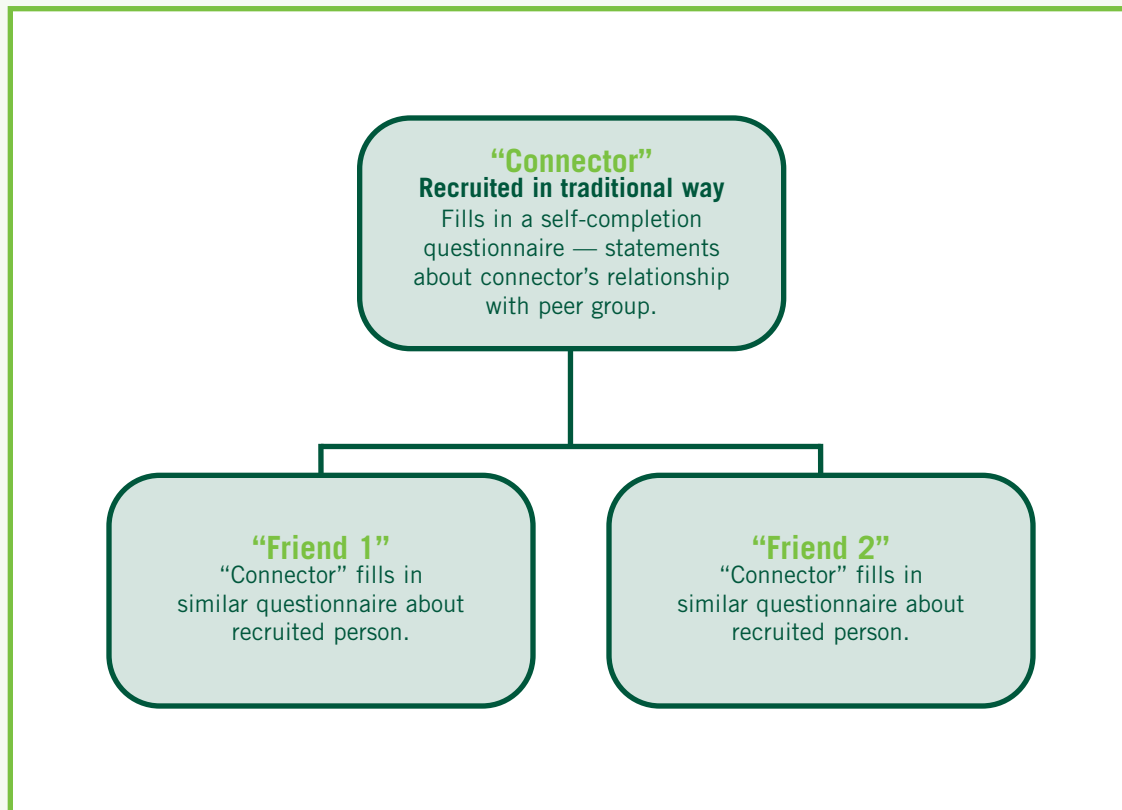
In this way, your participants come to the meeting in groups of three, never alone. This gives you even more advantages than having recruited the right people. (Which is already something!)

Both questionnaires contained the same recruitment criteria, which usually stated that the person had to match at least 15 or so statements out of 20. Here are some examples

of commonly used statements (in the questionnaires, they are expressed both directly and as opposites, where scales have to be reversed):

- X is a good mixer, popular among peers.
- X likes to talk in the group; other people eagerly listen to him/her.
- X is able to make other people cooperate, even if it demands some effort.
- Other people in the group (class) like to be invited by him/her; they like to be in his/her company.
- Others tend to join him/her, repeat opinions, buy the same things and follow his/her example in behavior, clothing style, etc.
- X is not a “teacher’s golden boy/girl.”
- X is not too controversial, nor a freak, etc.

In standard groups, when young people have to start talking, they feel a paralyzing fear of saying something wrong — they know nobody, and they cannot predict group reactions. So, to them, it is better to say nothing or repeat one after another. Here, however, everybody has some support — their friends are with them, so they can be much more open. Moreover, friends act as a lie detector; they correct exaggerations, plain lies and presentations of idealized self-



version. (R1: "I go swimming twice a week." R2: "Only in your New Year's commitments.")

Such a recruitment procedure helps to carry out a lively, open discussion. In our groups, teenagers share their opinions with greater courage because somebody stands up for them. It is easier to present a different point of view and not to agree with somebody else. And, as we cannot fight group conformism in teenage groups, we simply make use of it. Sure, many responses are automatically repeated by others; but now these are responses from opinion-leaders, so it is much more likely that they will be also copied in real life. At the same time, the

Young people seem to be rebellious and likely to contest everything only when adults look at them. In the peer group, they are as conformist as people can be.

non-threatening setting allows them to talk about individual feelings. This kind of recruitment is a perfect tool if you need to predict teenage group reactions to new concepts, advertising and the like.

### Group Setting: More Time and Space

Another major problem is that the typical setting — focus group facility, one-way mirror, office-like ambience — is unnatural and intimidating. Quite often, participants are suspicious about the real objectives of the study and assume that some big corporation wants to make money from their responses. Where adults see a fair deal (they get compensation for their time), teenagers want to make profits, as well, and "let them suckers pay."

We want them to come for something more than money, and therefore, we strive to make the experience interesting and challenging. We also need enough room for different activities. Ideally, we try to arrange a setting that is related to the project — a film studio if we test TV commercials, a publisher's house or even client's office. This is not easy and not always possible; if not, a private house is a good solution. In any case, the venue should be a part of the real world, as authentic as possible and a little bit

intriguing so that it relates to the topic of the discussion. You'd best do without a viewing room and mirror (instead, arrange a TV transmission). You will need at least two rooms for performing group tasks.

To be sure, this may be very expensive to arrange. If your budget does not allow any of these solutions, do one thing, at least — cover the mirror from both sides, and turn the viewing room into the second room for your group. Record the interviews as usual (recording from the second room is not always necessary; the moderator's assistant may take notes).

Another issue is length of the interview. It should match the usual length of a social meeting in teenage group; ideal duration is about four hours. Participants have to feel that they cannot just "survive," as they sometimes "survive" lessons at school, totally dumb and inactive, immersed in their own thoughts. The standard duration of one-and-a-half to two hours is just too short for a successful meeting and achieving research objectives. You will need time for warm-up and various activities, as well as enough space.

### Guideline: Attractive and Involving

Group recruitment and a suitable setting are not the only challenges you will face. Once the group starts, you need to follow your research objectives and keep the group focused.

You may quickly notice that your participants are smart and use their intelligence in a somewhat malicious way. If they find the discussion boring, they will let you know, sparing no feelings. You may also notice that they try to find what you "expect" them to say and say exactly that.

An adult group in their place will be much more polite and easier to guide through your research points. With teenagers, however, your guideline must be attractive. As teenagers are very much self-focused, it works best if they learn something about themselves (that's why even the most stupid psycho-tests in magazines are so popular). This is the most valuable incentive you can offer.

Teenagers are also very well trained in dealing with adults. They really read our minds and are able to manipulate us, as every teacher or parent will confirm. So don't just let them talk and deceive you; give them tasks. Your tasks should involve physical action, as spending four hours on anything can be exhausting. (Do not forget to offer a decent meal!)

Teens are trained at school to give the "right" or desirable answers (to teachers, other adults, strangers) as expected by the asking person. Collecting declared intentions

or opinions does not provide frank, authentic responses.

Your guideline should also contain at least 30 minutes for a good warm-up. Arrange an activity where they can establish their relationship as a group (remember, they came in groups). Let the arriving groups stay and speak together during warm-up, and try to split them later (i.e., when you pick up persons performing tasks in teams). They can talk about everyday life: school, teachers, family, hobbies, etc. Do not relate the warm-up to your research objectives — take it easy. You have to keep control of the group but gradually become “invisible.” As an adult, you are not allowed to hear their true opinions, so you must disappear, yet stay there.

The best method that works is to give them control over the content and message. Instead of being mere participants, turn your group into researchers or even investigators. You can make them feel responsible for the results through a very simple trick. Do not tell them you have a video camera installed; instead, give them one and tell them they have to record the session. (You will need professional recording, of course, so do not switch “normal” recording off!) One of participants becomes camera operator, and every couple of minutes, the camera goes to another person.

Once they have a camera, the teenagers can be researchers, as well. Another person may be assigned the role of “investigator,” and he or she should be encouraged to ask questions about the subject. Of course, a participant is not trained as a moderator, so his or her questions will be as revealing as any responses.

In one case, we asked the group to investigate which movie stars are suitable as role models. They produced a couple of examples, and the investigator asked, “Don’t you think Leonardo di Caprio is out of date, a lamer exploited by media? What does he do here?”

Involve in your guideline as much action as possible. If you arrange a “brand party,” do not let them talk — let them act. Divide the group into teams to prepare their versions of the brand party and give them the time and room to prepare (you need extra space here). The teams will have to perform the party in front of each other. This may be real fun! It makes young people involved in creating a relevant message for the client (if possible, the client should not be disguised).

If you work with visual materials, let them cut pieces, draw things, glue pieces together

and stick Post-It notes on top of their work with their comments, not just show boards to discuss. (This sounds like a collage, but you do not always need to put everything onto one big sheet of paper. If you have a set of standard office/copy-paper-sized concept boards and let them do the work, you can simply put everything into a binder.) You need more stimulus material and more creative guideline than usual, but you will get rich rewards.

### **Moderator: Strong as Steel, Patient as an Angel**

If all this looks like a hard job, it is. As a moderator, you must be tolerant but firm — you are responsible for their safety. You may need an assistant to control the situation in two rooms simultaneously, serve the meal, etc. You give them the freedom to express their feelings, but you also take the risk of it. They will not spare your client if they do not like what the company does. They will not spare you if they find you boring. They will not follow the discussion if they find it stupid.

As with adults, you never know what will happen once you close the door of your focus room. But, at the end of the day, you will be able to stand in front of your client and tell them you understand the market.

### **Last But Not Least: the Client**

It takes a lot of nerve to market products to teenagers. The client is vulnerable to every shift in teen fashions. Over two to three years, your client has an entirely new target group — the old one becomes too old! As soon as the company starts to understand one generation, another one takes the stage. You, as the researcher, have to be open and never assume that you know anything about the market. Any research older than six months is likely to be outdated.

*Unfortunately, there was no happy end for the media product. Our research showed that it would never become a real mass-market hit, as the whole concept was attractive to a narrow niche only. The losses it made by the time it could be re-launched made the (new) management too close to the project altogether. In the business world, it is not enough to know why things went wrong — you must get it right in the first place. Good luck! 📧*