

A blurred background image showing the lower legs and feet of several people walking on a light-colored surface. One person on the left is wearing a backpack with a Union Jack patch. A large orange circle is centered over the image, containing the title and subtitle.

THE FRIENDSHIP GROUPS TOOLKIT

*Part 1: Goodbye Focus Groups,
Hello Friendship Groups*



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APPROACHING USER RESEARCH DIFFERENTLY WITH FRIENDSHIP GROUPS

The ways people consume information, interact with digital, and how they live today are a complete 180-degrees from 40 years ago. So, why are we still using traditional research methods like interviews, focus groups and surveys to extract the what, why and how from users? Are focus groups really a better methodology? No. Standard research techniques yield small quantities of information on today's customers and shallow insights on the true motivations that drive user decisions, patterns and feedback. In Part 1 of our Friendship Groups Toolkit—Goodbye Focus Groups, Hello Friendship Groups—we introduce friendship groups and discuss why this research technique more accurately yields user motivations and behaviors than traditional focus groups. If you want your next research session to produce insights that will lead to innovative, industry-defining experiences, then it's time to say “Hello” to friendship groups.



The two-way mirror

From the advertising giants on Madison Avenue to the stylized world of Mad Men's Don Draper, we've all seen focus groups in action. The scene—a group of 5–8 people sitting at a large table in a dull conference room while a skilled, soft-spoken moderator steers them through a 1–2 hour discussion on product, design and service concepts.

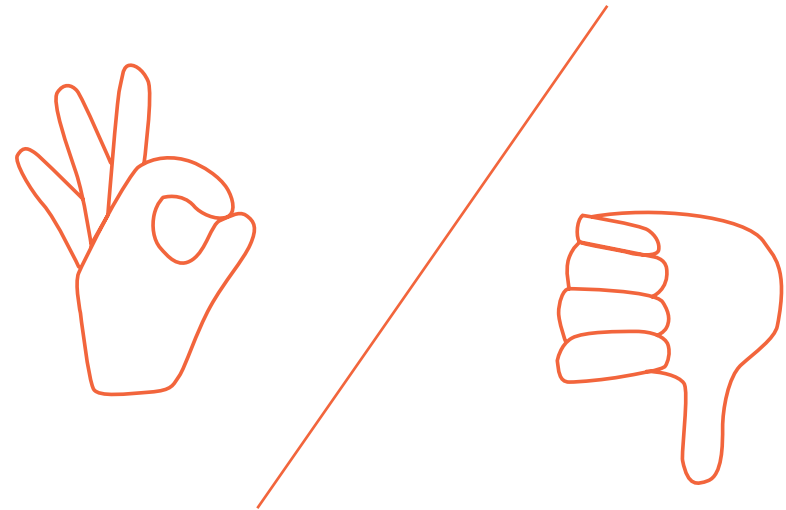
Over the past 40 years, focus groups have become one of the most used qualitative tools, yet today's user experience landscape is vastly different. So, are focus groups still accurately guiding us along the path of innovation? Yes, and no.

Is it time to move beyond the dark side of the two-way mirror?

Why do focus groups provide limited insights?

Traditional methods of straight interviews and focus groups yield only one level of information, which we usually refer to as “top-of-mind” information or answers. Emotional information, getting at what really happens or drives customers in a decision-making situation, is harder to extract.

Consider the complexities of how people think. They tend to abide by what are considered social norms and seek approval for their actions. They are self-conscious, wary about being in an unfamiliar setting with strangers; and often as a result, the more extroverted people take over the conversation or become the default leaders, even with a well-seasoned moderator. Participants are more likely to lean toward saying and doing things that will be accepted by the larger group. This unwittingly makes them more resistant to exploring disruptive design and innovation ideas that may differ from their perceived social norms. They express doubt and skepticism simply because the ideas themselves are deviations.



YES, FOCUS GROUPS WORK WHEN YOU'RE...

- + Understanding the inner dynamics of an organization (with participants occupying different positions)
- + Evaluating (at a surface level) a product, feature, or brand (e.g., product testing, brand perception, etc.)
- + Analyzing and building personas to establishing needs and wants
- + Uncovering insight for marketing and advertising strategy

HOWEVER, DRAWBACKS OCCUR WHEN YOU'RE...

- Looking to innovate or create visionary concepts, designing the complete experience around it (e.g., Tesla, Uber, Apple)
- Redefining an experience or service (e.g., Nest, RedBox, Postmates)
- Discussing private or sensitive topics (e.g., health issues, personal finances, etc.)

You know your focus group is failing when...



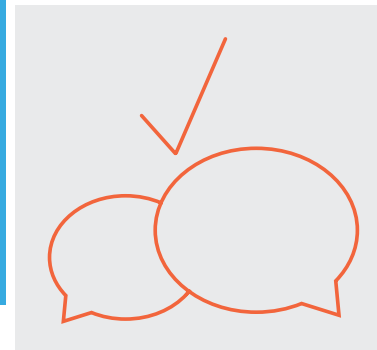
There's a lack of depth and participants are not giving detailed expressions of their honest opinions, especially when it comes to opposing the views of another respondent



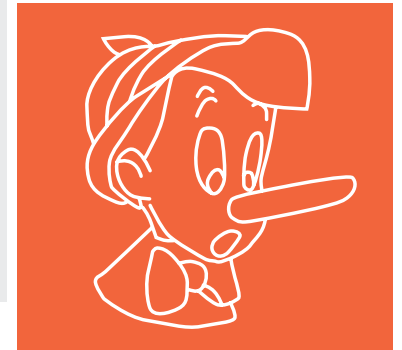
Outspoken individuals dominate discussions, creating an uneven group dynamic despite your moderator's best efforts



It becomes harder and harder to go beyond superficial answers to uncover real attitudes and behaviors



The group quickly, repeatedly without much discussion or opposition reaches consensus on usually contentious issues, features, etc.



Professional respondents (who are dishonest during screening) compromises findings and results

it's time.

goodbye FOCUS GROUPS. ***hello*** FRIENDSHIP GROUPS!

Friendship groups are a different way of approaching research

They are a better option; one extremely viable, highly adaptable methodology suited for uncovering insights from today's users to create innovative, delightful experiences across different verticals. The apparent drawbacks associated with focus groups can be avoided by looking at other variations of focus groups such as friendship groups or circles.

- Friendship groups are smaller, giving each person more time to speak
- The presence of friends and/or family relaxes participants, encouraging them to speak more freely
- With rapport established, it's a completely qualitative research experience

KEY INSIGHTS



Friendship groups involve a more intimate gathering of 3–4 people who already have a familiar relationship with one another. Often these people are friends, neighbors, colleagues, or family.

In friendship groups, participants feel comfortable agreeing and disagreeing with each other, and they also keep one another accountable, ensuring that each other shows up and truthfully contributes to the overall conversation. Since little promoting is needed once the session gets going, the moderator is able to recede from the main discussion, giving the participants a more open, collaborative space to address the topics. This natural conversation style is more appropriate for research aiming to uncover underlying motivations and emotions that drive user decisions.

When given the choice and opportunity to choose between focus groups and friendship groups, we gravitate toward friendship groups because of the value we have seen across multiple studies involving this methodology.

WHAT WE UNCOVERED...



Friends share similar experiences. For a fast food chain study we conducted, several friendship groups relived their memories of dining out together. Their discussion helps paint the details of their end-to-end experience from noticing health ratings to customer service, including their reactions to tasting the food. The relaxed atmosphere encourages the friends to share different aspects of an experience.



Friends have different opinions. For a financial study, we put together friendship groups where friends had different money-management styles. Their curiosity for each other's money habits and styles sparked their own questions, which lead them to naturally, more deeply explore one another's specific activities and thought processes.



Friends know when you're lying. In most interview scenarios, there's a gap between what the users say they do and what they actually do. In friendship groups, we see friends light-heartedly call each other out when they know someone is lying. This innate behavior-checking grounds our research with insights that reflect honest actions and emotions—there's no guesswork or misinterpretation.

Planning your friendship groups: what to do



EXPLORE

What are your goals?

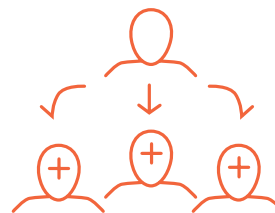
- Identify what you're trying to accomplish with a qualitative research study
 - Are you trying to understand the implications of increasing mobile usage for your brand?
 - Do you want to measure customer reaction to your brand/service/product across different markets?
- Create purposeful, overarching goals and objectives to pinpoint your focus



DEFINE

Who's going to be there?

- Identify your participants, Who do you want to speak with?
 - Users, non-users, casual users, extreme users, and so forth.
 - Consider a homogenous or mixed sampling.
 - Think about who will give you valuable insight on your goals and objectives.
- For internal teams, consider who will be affected the most by these insights (designers, product managers, customer service managers, etc.)



RECRUIT

How is recruiting for friendship groups different than focus groups?

- Friendship groups involve recruiting one respondent to bring in two to three people who they feel comfortable talking about a specific topic together.
- The recruited respondent can come from a recruiting database or customer list. Generally they are the target audience (user case) you wish to talk to and meet the established screening criteria.
- During the initial recruiting process, the qualified respondent must understand and commit to bringing friends (co-workers, neighbors, family, etc.)
- Follow-up tasks are important when recruiting for friendship groups. Once the recruited respondent confirms their friends' participation, they should provide the recruiter with all necessary contact information for the friends.
- Remember to schedule each person in the friendship group, making sure they know to arrive 15 minutes before their scheduled session. Of course, reminder calls are essential to confirm attendance.

KEY INSIGHTS



When recruiting for friendship circles, it's crucial to consider the type of dynamic that would be beneficial to your study. If you are capturing insight on the SmartTV experience, then examine different scenarios and select the best cases to identify the user groups you

need to include. For example, to uncover opportunities within the SmartTV experience, we would form the following friendship groups for our research sessions: Partners and Spouses; Teenagers; Heavy Gamers; Parents and Kids; Sports Fanatics; and TV Show Fanatics.

Do the friends need to be screened?

The choice is up to you. You can screen the friends before they are scheduled to see if they meet a specific set of criteria, or you can ask them to fill out a pre-questionnaire while they wait in the lobby before the

session to capture basic demographic and usage questions. Regardless—the value of the “friends” allows you to find respondents who would never be on a recruiter's database.

TO PUSH RESEARCH BEYOND WHAT IS TYPICALLY DONE, YOU HAVE TO THINK DIFFERENTLY



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