



How-to Series: The Art of Conversation

Tips, tools and techniques you can use
2017



The Art of Conversation

One of the best techniques for gaining rich insight about a brand, product, service or website is to engage in conversation with the audience.

A conversation goes way beyond simply asking a pre-determined list of questions. A list of questions only goes so far – it gets you the answers to those specific things you have written down. A conversation is far more revealing. Conversation-based research allows you to get insight into questions you didn't even know you needed to ask! It minimizes assumptions that we have as marketers and allows us to analyze the core essence of the brand, product, service or website.

How do we converse?

Conversation-based insight is just like a regular conversation in the way that to some folk it comes easily, and to others it's a challenge. That's okay, it just takes practice. The hardest part about using conversation as a research technique is how we as marketers need to subtly guide the conversation.

The unique qualities of a conversation can work for and against us. An organic conversation can not only foster truthful and revealing insight into the topic at hand, but it can also get out of control quickly and start wandering down channels of irrelevance.

Here's how to get the best out of conversation based-research.

Prepare your core questions

Although the goal is to encourage and foster a natural conversation, we still need to develop key lines of questioning. These core questions represent the general goals of the project. In fact, we use prompts instead of questions and then develop the conversation around those prompts.

For example, a prompt could be, "uncover emotional state after seeing ad." Our conversational questions could include:

- So, you just saw that ad – what are you thinking right now?
- You were shaking your head a little while watching that, why?
- How do you think other folk will feel after seeing that?

From these prompts we can further expand and drill-down. Remember, the art of conversation isn't just about asking questions and getting answers. You HAVE to inject a social atmosphere into the conversation. It's okay to laugh in order to make the respondent feel relaxed and encourage more dialogue. You can use body-language like the raising of your eyebrows to show the respondent you're listening and you'd like them to expand. You use these social cues to get more information, but not to influence their responses.



Think like an investigator

When uncovering rich data, you really have to think strategically and you always have to bring you're "A Game." Investigators are extremely good at not only listening, but paying attention to what's being said at all times. People often say things and then later contradict themselves later in the conversation and this is when investigators start cross-referencing the conversation in an effort to uncover the real truth of the matter.

While your goal isn't to trip anyone up and haul them to jail, employing an investigative attitude is a great mentality when conducting conversation-based research. Obviously, to get a respondent to speak about contradictory statements you're not going to use an accusatory tone, but more of one of curiosity. "Kristen, I totally get what you're saying. This ad made you feel angry...so earlier you mentioned it was funny. How do those two things relate?"

Be prepared to reel things back in

The whole point of conversational research is to encourage something which is natural and organic. However, when employing this technique, it is relatively easy for the respondent to start talking about things which are off-topic. That's okay, you just need to know when to reel things in or when the trip down the rabbit hole is actually going somewhere. Again, curiosity is your best asset.

"So, you were talking about the ad, and how it made you not want to buy their

product, how does that fit in with your sister's dog, Charlie?" If it does relate to Charlie somehow, the respondent will explain at that point. If not, you can laugh and then redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand.

Use props

To have a conversation, one of our goals is to put the respondent at ease. We do this with the tone of the conversation, of course, but we can also use simple props to help foster effective, organic research.

Perhaps we can move the research out of the board room and into the lounge. Maybe add some subtle ambient noise in the form of music. A pot of coffee, donuts and other drinks are a must for morning interviews – but don't forget to help yourself, too. No-one wants to feel like they're the only one eating!

When we're interviewing people about the user experience, we always have a laptop or tablet to hand. "Hey, I think I know the part you're talking about – is it here?" We're using these things to make our conversation richer and more informed.

Strength in numbers

If our topic of research doesn't rely on confidentiality or sensitive topics, we find adding more people to the mix can really help and further promote the conversation.

Oftentimes, with two respondents or *small* groups of people, the respondents can generate a conversation among themselves



which, with subtle guidance, can be very revealing. In fact, we see respondents becoming curious with one another's answers and taking on the role of moderator from time to time. It's great!

However, you still have to have an investigative mindset and be aware of when one respondent might be influencing another's answers. "Dave, it looks like you're agreeing with Kristy right now, but earlier you said you didn't understand the message. What's changed?"

The tone in which you ask questions about contradictory answers is especially important when interviewing more than one person, because you don't want to create any suggestion of ridicule or mistrust. Anecdotal comments can work in your favor, "my wife says I change my mind all the time...did you change your mind or are you just looking at this a little differently now?"

Final Thoughts

We can all agree, there is an art to producing and sustaining a productive research conversation. We will leave you with this: your approach is going to vary from conversation to conversation. Humans are a dynamic species, and while one approach will work for one person or group, it won't for another. Adaptation is key, and do not be surprised if you have to dramatically change tact to get the information you need – that's normal.

Focus Groups: How to Avoid Useless Research

We often get asked, "hey, does Evolve do focus groups?" HECK YEAH, is our typical reply. We don't just do focus groups; we do *great* focus groups.

No, that's not just marketing talk, or a self-inflated perception of our own service. We've learned a lot over the years – through experience, brutal groups and challenging goals. But the hard graft has paid off, and we are thoroughbred focus group Svengalis. We thought it only fair that we share some of our insight with you.

The Goals & Strategy

All successful research starts with clear and defined goals, and focus groups are no exception. The research feeds into a marketing strategy, so it is vital the research agency knows *how* the goals feed into this. Specificity is the name of the game. "Testing animatics" is not a goal. What specifically are we testing about the animatics? The tone of the message? The perceived call to action? How the animatic translates to a digital medium versus a traditional format? You get the point – it's time to be persnickety.

It is also vital to determine if all of the goals are useful to the strategy. There is no point spending precious time (and focus group time is *extremely* precious) testing something if it is not going to be used. It's time to separate the nice-to-know from the need-to-know.



The Participants and Screener

This may be obvious, but it's absolutely essential. You need to get the right people to participate in your focus group, i.e. the *exact* audiences you are trying to target. For example, one audience might be females ages 18-30 and another might be people in the market to purchase a new vehicle in the next 6 months.

When recruiting participants to take part in a focus group, we use screening questionnaires. These are essentially 3 minute surveys to ensure that the folk who show up are exactly the audience we want.

Screeners serve to sort participants into homogenous groups and reject people who are not a good fit for the study. For example, it might be prudent to separate Republicans from Democrats, male from female, or younger from older.

Thinking about potential conflicts of interest is essential when designing the perfect screener. Removing "subject experts" at the screening stage is a wise move. Some time ago we conducted a study with Millennials about the environment. In our group we happened to have a geology major who "knew" everything there was to know about the environment. That's not necessarily a bad thing, but "experts" often talk the most and end up dominating the groups – other participants feel less inclined to talk because they are not as educated on the topic as the so-called expert. In our case, we had to politely boot the respondent from the group and add a question to the

screener for upcoming groups which eliminated participants with any sort of geology or environmental science degree.

The Questions

The questions, AKA The Moderator's Guide, are clearly an important part of the focus group. These are the things which allow us to elicit responses from our participants and give us the information required to achieve the goals of the study.

Open-ended questions are focus group staples. Why did you say that? Can you elaborate? How did that make you feel? Focus group classics, each and every one! However, for a focus group to be as useful as possible, we need to make sure our participants are engaged and paying attention at all times. This can be challenging when conducting an hour and a half focus group late in the evening!

Sometimes what we're testing isn't all that sexy. A discussion about natural gas rates isn't something which holds immediate appeal. It's up to us to inject something engaging into the line of questioning to produce the most well-thought responses possible. We need to get creative! We LOVE to use notecards and nominate various group members to scribble things down and pin them up on the walls of the room – it gets people involved, and they have fun along the way.

It's not all about the questions and creative exercises, a large part of running a successful focus group lies within the choice moderator....



The Moderator

We can't stress this enough, the moderator is absolutely vital to the success of a focus group. Moderating is a real talent, if not an actual art form. Seriously! You might be thinking, "but a moderator just reads questions from a list, right?" No, no, no, no.

First of all, a moderator has to build a rapport with each and every respondent. The moderator needs to know the research goals and strategies like the back of their hand so they can ask impromptu questions. Not only that, a moderator is there to facilitate a natural conversation which means asking questions in the order they appear in the group and not necessarily in the guide, and also to reinterpret questions on the fly if they're not yielding the depth of information needed.

Oh, then they have to encourage shy people to speak up, gregarious people to tone it down, ask questions being fed to them by the client via text message throughout the group, and keep track of time. All of this needs to happen simultaneously. And that's a freaking hard thing to do.

The Reporting

We won't touch too much on the reporting – that's a whole other bag of worms. Just know a report is not a transcript. The whole purpose of the report is to clearly communicate the findings for the study and how those findings impact the client's business.

We're huge fans of illustrations, infographics and video executive summaries. We use those things to tell the story efficiently. Client's don't have time to read a novel.

8 Skills Every Good Moderator Must Have

We can't emphasize this enough, the choice of moderator is so important. Moderating is an incredible skill. It's an art and a science!

Moderator's need to know the guide inside out. They not only need to know everything to be asked, they also need to be aware of the goals behind the research just in case things need to be asked differently.

A good moderator is one that is relatable – but relatable to all different participant profiles. That means you have to gain each respondent's trust. Our approach is honesty and ignorance. Seriously! I personally play on the fact that I'm English. "Wow, I have no idea what you mean – this is totally new to me! Could you explain it so an ignorant Englishman can understand?" Psychologically, you need to empower the respondent – they are the experts. If you can get them to a point where they feel like they are educating you, that they're helping you out, then you're in really good shape.

A focus group is like a conversation. The conversation may not happen in the order the questions are written, so the moderator must be prepared to bounce around the guide and adapt with the flow of the



conversation. A moderator's job isn't to read questions – it's to participate in and encourage discussion.

Flexibility is absolutely key. This is where knowing the client's goals and strategies is vital. Sometimes a question looks good written on paper but goes down like a lead balloon when asked to the group. Respondents might not understand it, or it's just not getting the required quality of response. A moderator must be prepared to ask a question in a number of different ways and this requires some really fast thinking. Which brings us to this...

What you have written down is not how the question is to be asked. Truly, the written mod guide is largely for the benefit of the client – it's a document that clearly communicates the content of the group. Questions appear in *written* English, not *conversational* English. The mod guide includes question prompts for multiple situations and scenarios, whereas all those specific questions can be covered with one umbrella question in the actual group. Remember, a moderator is not a question reader, a moderator is a master conversationalist.

The moderator must be a time-keeper extraordinaire. Focus groups typically last an hour and half. That's not a lot of time when you have a zillion questions to get through. A moderator needs to keep the conversation moving all the time in order to get everything covered. Sometimes this means cutting or skipping questions, but a lot of times it means...

Being bossy (in a nice way). A moderator must be on point all of the time. We constantly have to encourage quiet/shy people to participate and tell those "over-enthusiastic" people to pipe down. Of course, we need to do this in a way that doesn't appear to single-out anyone and offend them.

Don't forget about the client. These are the guys you need to keep 100% happy. As focus groups progress, the client may have additional questions as a result of the conversation. Typically, the moderator will go visit with the client fifteen minutes before the end of the group to get additional questions. However, we also like to give clients our moderator's cell number – that way as questions arise the client can text the moderator! Of course, the moderator still must be expert at integrating these additional questions into the groups.

Moderating focus groups is challenging and exhausting – the success of the project largely lies at the feet of the moderator. Through conducting hundreds and hundreds of focus groups, we've managed to become extremely proficient at moderating, but it didn't happen overnight. If you prepare, practice, and learn the above 8 skills, you'll be on the right track to be an awesome moderator.