



**AN ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO  
UNLEASHING THE CREATIVE  
POWER OF CONSUMERS**

# **An Essential Guide to Unleashing the Creative Power of Consumers**

by Jeff Hirsch

*Focus groups may be a relic, but fresh approaches to qualitative group work are as relevant as ever.*

## **Introduction**

The humble focus group may not be dead yet, but is certainly heading in that direction. A new generation of marketing and insights professionals have embraced digital techniques with gusto, leveraging data from online consumer panels and communicating with consumers via voice, photo and video when they are in the “brand moment” or when feelings and behaviors are fresh in their minds.

I recently met with the VP of Strategic Planning for a global ad agency who could only recall a single instance in the past year when focus groups were commissioned by the agency or any of its clients.

The phenomenon is easy to understand on many levels. As we have seen, digital research, for better or worse, is capable of uncovering enormous amounts of finely nuanced information. Moreover, clients and agencies are under constant pressure to control costs. Eliminating travel to focus groups saves time and money.

Other qualitative techniques such as In-Depth Interviews and Ethnographic work continue to be employed but have also been affected. Again, travel is problematic for clients, who often prefer to watch a live stream, a video after the fact, or just wait for the report to come around.

There are likely generational issues at work as well. Social interaction to Gen X'ers and Boomers means conversation with people together in the same place at the same time. Millennials grew up texting. As this cohort moves into senior marketing and insights roles, it only makes sense that they would be just as or perhaps even more comfortable digitally-based qualitative research. Their definitions of “social” or even “intimate” are not limited to in-person encounters.

The traditional focus group is certainly a relic. For all that is good about groups, there was never anything organic or authentic about assembling people in sterile facilities to sit around conference room tables in front of one-way mirrors. Separating clients from respondents may have been a great idea in the 1970's when there was a risk that the latter would be too intimidated or too polite to criticize the client's products, ads or new ideas.

That is no longer an issue in our age of entitlement, when every Facebook and Instagram post not only reinforce the notion that "I've got to be me" while providing the illusion that people really care about what you just had for lunch. Respondents, especially Gen's Y and Z, are equally comfortable looking clients to let them know their work "is great" or "stinks."

It's a better conversation when the clients in the room, talking directly to their target customers. Respondents don't want to feel like perps on Law & Order. And while the back room may just be a few steps away, it's another world, filled with the distractions of texts, emails and reports due tomorrow. It's the difference between watching a movie and being in the movie.

That traditional focus groups are steeped in artificiality is exacerbated by the fact that marketing practices are now so transparent to consumers. They have been surveyed and focus grouped to death. They've seen Mad Men. They are working on their personal brands. It amazes me how many "regular people" toss out marketing terms as if they're in the business. They know just enough to be dangerous. Rather than responding as consumers – acting spontaneously and telling us how they feel about an idea, many go into full analytic mode, blessing us with their "expertise" in predicting what will "work" or "not work" in the marketplace.

Moreover, traditional groups are all too frequently flawed by looking to the past to predict future behavior. Having respondents keep diaries, make collages or engage in other "homework" exercises is useful to a point in understanding consumer perceptions and behavioral dynamics. But getting research participants focused on the future requires us to present them with innovative new ideas. We need to put stakes in the ground to jolt people out of their comfort zones and help them by providing them with the vocabulary to articulate what may be hard to express thoughts and feelings.

## The On-going Value of In-Person, Qualitative Groups

Despite the current trends in marketing insights, I strongly believe in the continuing value – the *necessity* – of engaging people face-to-face. I've written extensively on the importance of “high touch,” in-the-moment human interaction as well as the benefits of brand teams embarking on “road trips.”

I also believe in the power of groups, where people can play off each other's ideas and to transcend the obvious and forge new ground. If we think about group work differently, in a way that is capable of moving participants out of passive reflection mode into a state of active imagination, we are way ahead of the game.

### Creative Consumer Workshops

The Creative Consumer Workshop is a qualitative group technique, but certainly not a focus group. The method is designed to leverage the strengths of group work, namely creative collaboration, and to minimize or eliminate the more problematic aspects of focus groups. Most important, Creative Consumer Workshops work well within the Big Data framework, providing critical, face-to-face contact with consumers in an efficiently and effectively.

This method is best used to unpack and develop ideas – not to evaluate. The focus of sessions can be “upstream” and broad, such as identifying and exploring entirely new categories for potential growth. Or the scope might be more narrow. Consumer Creative Workshops are ideal for developing positioning concepts, new product ideas or other innovations.

Participants are never asked to “rate” concepts, nor do they ask or encourage anyone to opine. Instead, people are put to work, engaged in creative exercises to reveal their internal thought processes and generate ideas. Respondents who may have been “marketing critics” are transformed into passionate participants. They are engaged in a way that is constructive and emotionally revealing, while minimizing “group think” and other awkward, forced, or self-conscious moments that may occur in traditional groups.

Creative Consumer Workshops differ from focus groups in other meaningful ways.

- The ideal number of sessions is usually **one**. This session can be conducted in the same market as the client's headquarters (unless there is a compelling logistical

or strategic reason to do otherwise) and does not stretch out for multiple days and in multiple markets.

- Sessions are longer (4-6 hours each) and include more people (10-25 or more). This provides adequate time for a range of minds to explore ideas from different perspectives.
- Sessions are always held in a comfortable, creative setting, not research facilities.
- That diversity of thinking is the result of bringing together target consumers, clients, their agencies, and outside creative people. There is no back room. Clients work directly with consumers.
- Respondents are recruited to be highly involved in their categories, aware of the world around them, articulate and creative.

## **Advantages of Creative Consumer Workshops**

Creative Consumer Workshops offer three major advantages over digital methods and traditional focus groups.

- Client/agency empathy for consumers is enhanced.
- Innovation and creativity flourish.
- Active participation of the brand team builds understanding and consensus.

## **Empathy towards Consumers Is Enhanced.**

We talk about “feeling the pain” of our consumers, but do we? It’s one thing to read or watch something on a screen, even in real time. But there is no substitute for sitting with consumers in the same room as they share their stories, experiences, aspirations and frustrations. You see their body language and tune into the tone and nuance of what they say.

No AI “moderator” or algorithm that can replicate this experience. Empathy and authenticity cannot be created virtually. Nor can those qualities be easily gleaned from streaming video or digital formats and a report.

There are no screens or back rooms for Creative Consumer Workshops. You are there. While there is a designated facilitator for sessions, client and agency people are active participants, asking questions, talking to and working with consumer respondents.

The ultimate result is transcendence of “understanding” your consumers on an intellectual, rational basis. Rather, you will truly feel what they feel, creating a far stronger position to create relevant, authentic marketing communications.

## **Innovation & Creativity**

There is magic in collaboration. It’s why creative people in your agencies always work in teams. One idea leads to the next.

Environment and process play important roles here as well. Rather than conduct sessions in research facilities, we seek out comfortable, creative spaces. These may be private rooms in restaurants or non-traditional meeting spaces set up to feel like living room or kitchen environments. Think of the feeling of a house party where people are comfortable and well-fed. Conversation flows freely. There’s lots of laughter. You float from one interesting group of people to the next.

And if there are a mix of people, even better. Collaboration among people who bring different perspectives to the table often lead to unexpected ideas. To that end, Creative Consumer Workshops blend the following:

- Clients representing a range of internal disciplines such as marketing, sales and technical/product development experts;
- Client agency people, as appropriate;
- Outside facilitators (The Right Brain Studio, e.g.) who are adept in both insights and ideation; and,
- Target consumers, recruited to be articulate, creative and engaged in the outside world.

The agenda toggles back and forth between discussions with the entire group and team exercises. Teams of 3-6 people are assembled so that consumers are always working alongside client and agency people.

Proprietary exercises are designed to generate and optimize ideas. The ensuing conversations, within teams, between teams and between individual participants,

provide a wide range of perspectives that strengthen insights and build solid, actionable marketing strategies and executions.

## **Consensus and Team Building**

It is far easier to build consensus when experience is shared and ideas are developed collaboratively. Creative Consumer Workshops provide that opportunity.

You are not a detached observer, isolated in the back room, reacting to a conversation in which you are excluded. You are part of the conversation, engaged in a dynamic process with target consumers and your peers.

This very act of working through issues in the moment has the inevitable effect of getting the brand team on the same page faster. They are not detached observers, they are participants, working through issues with target consumers in the moment.

Having been a part of the experience, empowered to ask questions and contribute to the conversation with consumers, the team is able to build consensus more quickly and make recommendations with a higher degree of confidence and unity.

## **Summary**

Marketing is a collaborative process. To be successful, we not only need a deep understanding of our consumers, but of our colleagues as well. Are we all on the same page? Is everyone motivated? Do biases or personal agendas exist that threaten to throw us off track? If so, how do we minimize conflict and maximize cooperation?

The shared experience of the Consumer Creative Workshop is a small but strong step in that direction.

Equally important is the return on research investment and the quality of the results. It's not days out of the office traipsing to two, three or more markets. The Creative Consumer Workshop does not offer the iteration of focus groups, nor does it allow us to talk to as many target consumers. However, the focus and intensity of the session, fueled by real-time, up close and personal human interaction, generates deep understanding and fresh thinking.

Your subsequent quantitative work will be with informed with insight. Concepts will be far stronger, grounded in powerful emotion. Best of all, the understanding gained from working directly with target consumers will attune you to their needs, wants, aspirations in ways that data alone could never accomplish.

## **About The Right Brain Studio**

The Right Brain Studio is a Los Angeles based qualitative research and strategic marketing company dedicated to uncovering human insights in a big data world. Our range of proprietary methods aim to transcend superficial observation to reveal the deeply held emotions, human needs and values that inform consumer behaviors.

## **About Jeff Hirsch**



### **Jeff Hirsch, Founder & President**

Jeff is the Founder & President of The Right Brain Studio and Adjunct Professor in the graduate communications program at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School.

His business development strategies and new product ideas are responsible for hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues for some of the world's top brands such as Pepsi, Colgate-Palmolive, General Mills, Johnson & Johnson, Brown-Forman, Pizza Hut, Taco Bell, Anheuser-Busch, Walt Disney and many others.

A former executive with DKG Advertising, Brown-Forman, Campbell-Mithun and Chiat/Day, Jeff knows how to find the emotional core of a brand's identity.

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