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ideas

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It's 8:00 p.m., and the day is catching up to you. Two groups down, one to go. Not bad, considering you and your client have spent the better part of the day on an airplane, eating cold lasagna and drinking too much coffee. At least the M&Ms are behind the glass. Now, let's get those participants fired up. After all, it's only the season premiere of *Grey's Anatomy* they're missing, and surely they can't be as tired as they look. The rain has let up (sort of), and why wouldn't they want to stay a couple of hours? Fifty bucks is fifty bucks, right?

Think again, and while you're at it, think about the quality of the information you are collecting.

How far we've come from the days of interviewing neighbors in their living rooms. But have we? Qualitative research is very much about making connections with your target audience, understanding what makes people feel the way they do, listening to stories and uncovering the gems beneath the surface. But in order to make these connections, it is important to step outside our world and see their world, through their eyes, on their time and in their environment.

One way to do this is to re-

consider three of the tried and true "rules" of qualitative research. Maybe even consider breaking them.

Rule #1: Focus groups should be held at focus group facilities

With all due respect to the many fine facilities we have had an opportunity to work with, isn't it time we get into the environment of our target audience? So often we put respondents in a sterile focus group room, void of pictures, color and sometimes windows. Sounds kind of like prison. Then, we ask them to recall the imagery associated with a brand. We might even have them close their eyes and think back to the last time they experienced your brand or ate your product or made a purchase decision. Closing your eyes isn't always the next best thing to being there. As researchers, maybe we really should be there. Think about your favorite coffee shop. When you walk through the door, where does the smell take you? How does the coffee taste? Is the store layout well designed? Is the new creative approach consistent with the imagery of the brand?

Now, imagine asking similar questions to a group huddled around a table in the neighborhood coffee shop, lattes in hand. Put the respondent in the environment in which they experience the brand and watch the level of discussion move way up.

Let your respondents take you to the mall, the grocery store or even to the hospital. It's amazing what they can point out along the way. Things they might not have remembered or considered important if sitting in a facility, and things even the best of moderators would most likely never have thought to ask.

Granted, it's not always easy to get out of the facility, nor is it always necessary. The point is to take a moment to evaluate whether or not being in the respondent's environment, instead of yours, might yield a greater level of learning and insight. Sometimes, it won't. Other times, it will amaze you.

Rule #2: Focus group participants shouldn't know each other.

This rule could also be called "low-incidence recruiting doesn't always have to be a nightmare." The rule is built on a

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simple premise; respondents who know each other might influence each other. But are there situations when influence isn't such a bad thing? Consider researching home-improvement items. Wouldn't it be great to hear how both spouses view the home-improvement process? Maybe let them argue a little back and forth, and really get into a discussion regarding who influences whom?

Consider teens and their friends. The whole focus group experience might be just a little less scary (and a lot more productive) if best friends came together. When looking for parents of toddlers, why not invite several from the same neighborhood? The same goes for finding people who like to exercise - find them at the local gym, even in the same kickboxing class.

Now, just for fun, add another layer. How about holding your sessions in someone's home and inviting friends or a local church group? Think back to the last time you went to a Tupperware party. I'll bet the conversation was highly spirited, engaging - certainly not boring - and probably filled with lots of juicy information.

Again, this type of recruiting is not always necessary or appropriate, but it might be the only way to locate a low-incidence group.

It also might be the best way to capture the attitudes of joint decision-makers or to really understand the purchase process of a household.

Rule #3: Focus groups should be held in the evening - preferably at 6:00 and 8:00

Chances are, if you're tired at 8:00 p.m., so are your respondents. Work around their schedules, not yours. Why interview business owners at 6:00 p.m., when they could just as easily come for an early morning breakfast meeting? Interview moms in the early afternoon, before the school bus pulls up. Not at 6:00 p.m., when they are cooking dinner. Saturday morning is a great time to talk to men about mowing their lawns.

But please, don't even think about finding boaters during boating season, especially on the weekends. And stay away from farmers in the spring and in the fall. Would you jeopardize your livelihood for a few dollars? On the other hand,

trade show attendees might welcome the opportunity to meet with their peers over lunch. It's all about thinking through how and where your target respondents spend their days. Meet them when it's convenient for them and watch their concentration levels jump.

Granted, changing the location, rethinking the recruiting and moving the time slots sound simple in theory but are not always easy in execution. However, jumping into your respondent's world may make revealing connections with your target audience. And, it's a whole lot of fun along the way.

Bottom line: The insight gained from breaking the rules can be worth any extra effort it takes to think a little differently and try something new.