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reading

“Unless you show me a need for a new product, I’m not going to change.”

Need **Out-of-the-Box** Thinking? Try Advisory Panels

We have a confession to make. In our years of helping business-to-business clients tackle the complex issues of how to launch new programs and products, we’ve come to the conclusion that traditional qualitative research techniques can only take you so far.

A case in point is the focus group. It is very effective for highly exploratory work. If you want to know what’s top-of-mind, get initial reactions to concepts, understand decision-making processes and grasp the needs of the marketplace, focus groups are hard to beat.

A New Research Paradigm

Often, what’s really needed is more along the lines of getting your target audience or members to help you structure a certain program or product. You need their emotional investment, their stamp of approval to go forward.

What’s called for is some out-of-the-box thinking. You need to break some of the time-tested rules of consumer focus groups, such as never revealing the subject of the group, recruiting participants who do not know each other and – most sacred – directly asking your target audience for advice.

We have had particular success with several variations on a common technique called “advisory panels.” The first of these panels we have termed the “Next Generation,” and it is ideal for testing new programs and concepts.

For instance, suppose you were developing a new program. First, you might recruit professionals in different geographic markets and get their initial input. Armed with this learning, you would refine your ideas. Now, it is time to validate the potential new programs.

As always, some of the participants from the original focus groups were more knowledgeable and helpful than others. Instead of random recruiting for the second round of testing, we suggest contacting the individuals who were most helpful and asking them for names of two peers with whom they networked.

The point is, not everyone has the same abilities to think conceptually, much less express themselves. We can pretty much guarantee that the discussion will be much more free flowing than normal, and the input will yield both depth and usefulness.

Board of Directors Panel

Another version of the advisory panel concept goes even more in-depth. We call it the “Board of Directors Panel.”

For example, we have a client in the chemical industry that discovered a new class of chemicals with different properties for a market it currently wasn’t addressing. The problem: In that specific market, there were completely entrenched competitors and a distribution channel that had invested in doing business in a way that was incompatible with the new product. Despite these barriers, our client decided to move forward because the potential volume was so great.

After a few preliminary rounds of concept testing, we were completely stymied. The level of discussion was pedestrian because the end users weren’t able to think beyond how they had always conducted business: beyond the here and now.

“Unless you show me a need for a new product, I’m not going to change,” was a common theme in our research.

It was then we hit upon the idea of recruiting the leaders within that industry, those who might act as early adopters. Our client contact called in favors from his many years within the industry, and we further bolstered the “board of directors” with highly regarded scientists.

Not only were we able to have this group determine critical issues, such as how to set up distribution and the structure of the sales effort, but we also ended up with trials by key scientific institutions. The group is now actively helping shape the future strategy of the division.

A Place for Experimenting

In both cases, we spent a substantial amount of time recruiting the study participants.

We also spent time during each group to reward participants. For the “Board of Directors” panel, which entailed two- and three-day getaways semiannually, we brought in guest speakers to liven up the discussions. We also took care to provide an open forum during one meal each day for members to discuss whatever was top-of-mind.

“The way to make the research effort a catalyst for your organization is to make it a breakthrough.”

Research should be a dynamic process. It needs to be a place for experimenting, a time for trying out new techniques. We suggest a good place to start is by adopting some form of an advisory panel.