

## How You Can Concept Test New Product Ideas and Gain Valuable Customer Insights with Bulletin Board Focus Groups

By Henk Hoets

### About the Author

Henk Hoets is a RIVA trained professional focus group moderator and qualitative marketing research consultant.

Henk has moderated hundreds of focus groups and in-depth interviews for major corporations, and small and medium businesses.

He is the founder of Hendriks Research, a qualitative marketing research firm. He also is a former product and marketing manager and 20-year veteran of the wireless industry. He holds an MBA.

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Bulletin board focus group research is a method of qualitative research.

So you need to concept test your new product ideas against prospects, customers, or the trade.

- But, you have limited time to get voice of the customer reactions and insights.
- And, the target segment is difficult to recruit into a traditional focus group room.
- And, you are stuck with a limited travel budget.

Product and marketing managers face these problems all the time.

The good news is solutions to these problems exist.

This paper will show you how bulletin board focus groups can help you with concept tests and gain customer insights.

### What are Bulletin Board Focus Groups (BBFG)?

Bulletin board focus groups are a category of qualitative marketing research.

The purpose of bulletin board focus groups is to gain qualitative insights about prospects and customers...their perceptions, attitudes, opinions, and behaviors about a topic.

A bulletin board focus group consists of a moderator, 10 to 20 respondents, and observers.

Moderators, respondents, and observers meet on a bulletin board focus group web site. But, they don't need to meet at the same time. They can login any time during a BBFG session.

Bulletin board focus groups typically run for three days.

The moderator posts questions and concepts and respondents post their comments. Observers watch the proceedings.

## How Bulletin Board Focus Groups Work

The moderator recruits, screens and invites respondents similar as one would for traditional focus groups or in-depth interviews.

But rather than meeting face-to-face, participants meet on a BBFG web site.

Moderators, respondents, and observers login to a secure (HTTPS) bulletin board web site, using a user name and password.

Respondents login every day at their convenience and respond to questions and concepts. Moderators typically ask respondents to login two or three times a day...morning, afternoon and night.

Observers login at their convenience too. The respondents cannot see the observers. Top management and colleagues can watch the bulletin sessions from their computers. Observers can direct the moderator to probe respondents' answers.

The moderator sets the ground rules, builds rapport, and launches questions, concepts, and probes, using a moderator's discussion guide.

The moderator controls what respondents see... Questions, concepts, and respondents' responses.

Respondents post their responses...opinions, reactions, feelings, attitudes, views, stories, and descriptions of behaviors.

Transcripts are immediately available for analysis. You get instant word for word quotes and insights.

## Qualitative Product Concept Tests

Product and marketing managers use bulletin board focus groups to concept test new products, messages, ads and web sites.

Here is how you concept test using bulletin board focus groups.

The moderator presents product concepts, ads, or messages on a secure BBFG web site. The moderator can show concepts using several formats: written descriptions, images, or video clips. This is where you

Ask respondents to login three times a day to get rich results.

Verbatim transcripts are immediately available.

Uninfluenced answers are an effective feature of BBFG. Use it for concept testing.

can show respondents new product concepts or marketing messages, or even a web site, and get respondents' reactions.

The moderator controls group and individual responses to reduce group bias. BBFG allows for uninfluenced answers. Respondents must answer a question, before they can see answers from other respondents about the question. Uninfluenced answers are a unique and effective feature of BBFG. It is ideal for concept testing.

Respondents use BBFG mark up tools to write and draw on concepts.

Respondents can mark up concepts, using mark up tools available with BBFG technology. For example, they can highlight words and images they like and dislike, using red, yellow, green, and blue markers. And, they can add their comments about specific items in the concept, using word bubbles, highlighters, emoticons, arrows, question marks and more.

You will gain valuable customer reactions about your concepts.

You will gain valuable information about your concepts. You will see specific words, sentences, and images that respondents like and dislike. And respondents show you when they are confused. They reveal their inner feelings and thoughts about your concepts. Develop powerful products.

Use it to refine and develop powerful products.

### Internet Facts

Here are some Internet facts that support the use of bulletin board focus groups.

Seventy-one percent of U.S. adults use the Internet.

71% of U.S. adults use the Internet (early 2007), according to PEW Internet Research. That is about 160 million U.S. adults.

Also, according to PEW,

- 47% of adult Americans have high-speed broadband connections in the home,
- 4% access high-speed broadband from others places such as work,
- 15% use dial-up, and
- 5% are not sure what Internet connection they have.

And the number of those with high-speed Internet broadband at home rises with income and education. Younger segments use it too.

- 76 % of adults with annual incomes over \$75,000 have high-speed broadband connection at home,
- 70% of adults with a college education have high-speed Internet at home,
- 63% of adults age 18-29 have high-speed Internet at home.

### **Benefits of Bulletin Board Focus Groups**

BBFG is one of the fastest growing market research techniques today. Many companies are turning to professional moderators who use it.

Companies love the rich data, convenience, and speed compared with other methods.

Using bulletin board focus groups, you can,

- Assess reactions to product concepts, ads, messages, and web sites.
- Get rich word for word quotes and actionable insights. Respondents typically post well thought-out, written responses. Compare it to 10 -12 verbal minutes you get from each respondent in face-to-face, traditional groups. (90 minutes divided by 9 respondents in face-to-face traditional focus groups).
- Get verbatim transcripts immediately, and save money on transcripts.
- Avoid travel headaches, travel time and lost time. No more waiting in airport lines and having to take off your shoes in security lines. And, no more delayed flights, missed and rescheduled focus groups, and more nights away from home.
- Save thousands of dollars in travel expenses associated with traditional, face-to-face focus groups.
- Interview hard to reach segments. For example, executives, subject matter experts, professionals, teens, busy people.
- Get better geographical respondent representation than face-to-face focus groups.
- Vary and refine concepts in response to respondent replies during a three-day BBFG session.

BBFG offers several benefits.

- Get management and colleagues to engage in your project. They don't need to travel. They watch from their computers.
- Save money and time compared with ethnographic and traditional focus groups.
- Use advanced moderating techniques. Ask respondents to identify words, sentences, and images they like and dislike, using mark up tools available with the BBFG technology. Ask respondents to buy or use a product and comment about it. Ask respondents to e-mail pictures or video clips about a topic. Then post them for discussion.
- Launch quantitative mini-surveys during the BBFG sessions. This is useful when you want respondents to rate or rank product or ad concepts.
- Conduct one-on-one, in-depth interviews quickly with experts, customers, prospects, the trade and executives.
- Work with collaborative customers, lead users or panels for weeks or months. Develop and collaborate on new product ideas, concepts, designs, prototypes, alpha, and beta test products. Gain collective, collaborative intelligence. Web 2.0 is here. Use BBFG to interact with customers.
- Talk about sensitive subjects with respondents who prefer to be unseen and anonymous. BBFG can produce rich emotions about topics that respondents prefer not to talk about in face-to-face, traditional groups.

### **Other Applications**

Besides concept tests, you can use bulletin board focus groups for other qualitative research applications.

Use BBFG to,

- Create powerful new product ideas and concepts, using word for word quotes from prospects, customers, experts, and the trade.
- Identify key trends from experts and executives.
- Gain deeper understanding about quantitative survey findings. Use BBFG after segmentation, conjoint and

market test studies. Yes, you will gain valuable insights.

### **When Not to Use Bulletin Focus Groups**

BBFG is another tool in the marketing researcher's toolbox. As with any tool, you apply it for the right job.

If you need to see respondents' facial expressions and body language, or hear their tone of voice, don't use BBFG. Use face-to-face traditional focus groups.

Don't use bulletin board focus groups if people in the target segment have limited-access to the Internet. Or, if they don't have experience with computers and the Internet.

Bulletin board focus groups constrain only a couple of moderating techniques. Product sorts or image arrangements are not possible with BBFG.

Here are solutions to the limits of BBFG.

Mix a traditional focus group with bulletin board focus groups and gain the benefits of both methods. For example, hold a three-day bulletin focus group and one traditional focus group.

Or, supplement bulletin board focus groups with telephone interviews, especially when the emphasis is on in-depth interviews.

### **Who Should Moderate Bulletin Board Focus Groups?**

Use a professional moderator when first starting out.

When first starting out with bulletin board focus groups, use a professional moderator for best results.

A professional draws on training and experience in traditional and bulletin board focus groups methods. A professional helps you design effective research, moderate, and gain rich word for word quotes and actionable insights.

If you want to moderate bulletin board focus groups, first watch a pro at work, then get some qualitative and BBFG training. And, try it.

## Conclusion – You Will Gain Rich, Valuable Customer Insights

Bulletin board focus groups are an effective way to concept test new product ideas, ads, and messages...especially, if you face limited time and travel budgets.

Also, use bulletin board focus groups to create new product ideas, identify important trends, develop marketing promotions, and understand quantitative findings.

Start with a professional moderator, and learn by watching. If you want to moderate bulletin board focus groups, get some training and do it.

Develop powerful products.

Use BBFG for concept testing. You will gain rich, valuable, and deep customer insights. And, be able to develop powerful products.

## Where to Go From Here

This white paper provides an outline about bulletin board focus groups. If you need help with qualitative marketing research, consider *Hendriks Research*. We offer the following services,

- Focus Group Moderating,
- In-Depth Interviewing,
- Qualitative Research Design and Consulting

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## The Last Word

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