

Good foreplay – deeper insights

Why warm-up exercises in focus groups lead to more authentic responses

Séissmograph 2015

Editorial

- ▶ Why should we care about the first 15 minutes of a consumer group discussion? Or of any workshop?
- ▶ Well, group dynamics don't come along with putting several people in a room, closing the door and turning on the mic. Like smashing all ingredients into a bowl doesn't make a pie!
- ▶ In the past years, we've observed in a self-reflecting process that we tend to give in to general time pressure: the economic and social climate is about efficiency. And business wants to maximize the time "spent" on consumers. Why take detours when you can ask people directly what they like, need or want???
- ▶ Before our qualitative research was fully caught up in this path, we decided to verify if and why the beginning is important, if and why it matters to take the consumers along on an associative and imaginary journey before "extracting" the facts out of them...
- ▶ You not only never get a second chance to make a good first impression, but you also never obtain novel insights if you start asking standard questions.

*"If you do what you've always done,
You get what you've always got" – Henry Ford*

Methodology (1/2)

In a first step, we made a **random selection of 120 group discussions** conducted by Séissmo all over the world and over the past **18 months** in order to guarantee a good mix of **cultures, topics, moderators and techniques** during **introduction** and **warm-up**.

We identified **4 different types of “starts”**:

- ▶ Free Standard Introduction
- ▶ Standard Introduction with Focus on Topic
- ▶ Playful (projective) Individual Introduction
- ▶ Playful (projective) Collective Warm-up

We chose and analyzed **10 groups per start type** with a total of **40 group discussions**. 50% were conducted in **Germany** (Frankfurt, Berlin, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Mannheim) and 50% **abroad** (France, Belgium, USA, Great-Britain, Poland, China).

Topics: cosmetics, technology and food.

Moderators: 9 different male and female moderators over all countries.

Methodology (2/2)

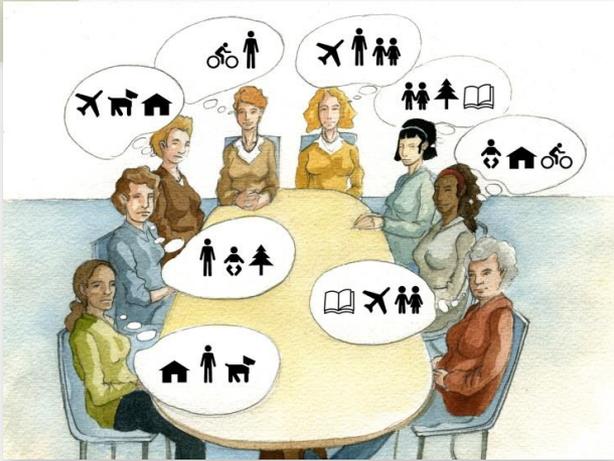
- ▶ We analyzed a 30-40 minutes sequence starting from the very beginning of the group.
- ▶ This phase includes the **moderator's presentation** (setting and rules of the game), the **participants' introduction**, in some cases a **warm-up** exercise (in other cases without) and the first steps into **thematic exploration** (attitudes/ behaviors/ collages/ cluster...).
- ▶ We watched this sequence several times by putting on "**different glasses**" to be able to measure the **impact of each step** on the **output quality & quantity, depending on the starting procedure** (what kind of introduction round, w and w/o warm-up...).
- ▶ The mix of different countries, topics, moderators and techniques allowed us to have a very broad perspective and to control any bias.

Main key learnings

- ▶ Our research has shown that **the first minutes of a group discussion have a strong impact on later sequences**, in other words they **condition the output**.
- ▶ The “right” beginning **influences the whole dynamic** of the focus group. It **increases the quality of statements** we get to hear during the introduction rounds and the depth of projective exercises. It **encourages the self-reflection process** of consumers and **creates emotional engagement on their side**.
- ▶ Bottom line: it seems vital to **“lose” time at the beginning** with a projective introduction or some warm-up exercise in order to gain **more productivity and quality at the end!**

What happens...

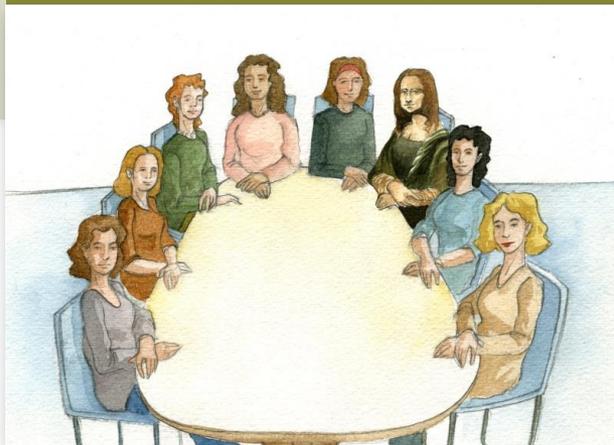
...during a standard introduction



... during a more playful introduction



→ stiff, not lively, quiet: the “Mona Lisa” effect



→ open and active, less rational and more imaginative: the “Unicorn” effect



The different opening types and their outputs

Free Standard Introduction

- Missing individual information about each participant
- More conformity in the answers
- Stiff and tensed atmosphere
- Greater stimulus by the moderator necessary

(a small variation)

Standard Introduction with Focus on Topic

- Getting to **know** the participant on a specific topic/ level
- More personal information about each participant
- Less conformity in the answers
- Less self-censorship
- Bonding through commonalities
- Feeling at ease with the topic

(greater variation)

Playful (projective) Individual Introduction

- More personal and intimate information about each participant
- More spontaneous and honest answers
- Trains associative thinking and use of analogies
- More self-confidence and less leadership effects
- Engagement and bonding (through movement)

(massive variation)

Playful (projective) Collective Warm-up

- Relaxed atmosphere, people less nervous
- Associative and divergent thinking
- No holding back, playing and being crazy
- Less focus on the moderator, less need to “please” him/her with the “right” answers
- Helps to engage as a participant

Free Standard Introduction

Explanation:

“Traditional” introduction with name, age, family situation, profession, hobbies... and no warm up exercise > goes straight to the topic of the study.

Output:

- ▶ The introduction of each individual remains at a **very superficial level**. Participants tend to talk a lot about their families, especially their dedication to their children and their passion for nature when asked to talk about themselves without any additional instruction. They tend to forget their individual personality and become one with the peer group they represent (be it the family, the profession...).
- ▶ The statements of each participant tend to become very similar as there is a lot of **conformity**. There is a need to keep up with each other and to avoid appearing like an outsider. Consequently, the variety of contributions and opposite statements decreases during the ongoing discussion.
- ▶ The **atmosphere remains formal and unrelaxed**. The participants might not feel comfortable and are held back which in return hinders their spontaneity.
- ▶ Due to the missing introduction and preparation, the participants **need a greater stimulation by the moderator**. The moderator thereby obtains a very prominent position during the group discussion. Interaction between the participants decreases compared to those discussions that start on a more creative or topic-related note.
- ▶ The first questioning/ exploration exercise after the introduction round **takes more time to run smoothly** – which means finally all time “won” is “lost” right after.

Standard Introduction with a Focus on the Topic

Explanation:

Classical presentation of each participant telling some facts about themselves, but focusing on the research topic, i.e. questioning their personal relationship to it.

Output:

- ▶ To **get to know the participants on a specific topic** is especially important for manufacturers. Already in this phase, the participants talk about their preferences, their experiences and what they like about a certain product. It is an **easy entry as everyone has something to say**, it's about their personal experience.
- ▶ Asking about their preferred fragrance or their shopping behavior lets the participants be **individuals** with **specific character traits** as it is quite an implicit way of talking about oneself. They dare to be true to themselves without having to share private/intimate matters.
- ▶ Participants don't feel the need to keep up with the others and show **less conformity in their answers**. We observe a variety of answers, also contrary ones, which in return can have a positive effect on the diversity of views during the rest of the session.
- ▶ Focusing on an object/ topic reduces the feeling of talking about one's privacy; talking about an object feels somehow less revealing, i.e. **minimizes the possibility of socially desirable answers and self-censorship**.
- ▶ The participants often find similarities in their usage or behavior. They start to exchange experiences, which soon leads to **interactive discussions and bonding**.

Playful (projective) Individual Introduction

Explanation:

Introduction of each participant with a projective task (via a picture, a piece of material, identifying as a dish, as an animal...) in order to train visioning and imaginary thinking.

Output:

- ▶ Helps to **get to know the consumers better** because they tell more personal details about themselves compared to a traditional presentation. In a traditional round the participants often tend to present themselves just like the person before.
- ▶ **Reduces conformity.** Helps to better understand the target group as they are more precise and open about their character traits.
- ▶ Creates very spontaneous answers as it is not something one could have “learned” before (no script).
- ▶ It helps to **get used to the projective techniques** that will be used later during the group discussion to reveal underlying motives and barriers. The participants will be ready to start and the moderator won’t have to motivate much nor will influence via frequent probing.
- ▶ **Less leadership** because every one has the same chance to be valued and to feel “special”. There is no immediate opportunity for the “louder” ones to become leaders.
- ▶ In the case of collage material or picking pictures on the table: participants move around and **get in physical contact with each other.** This favors bonding and group cohesion.

Playful (projective) Collective Warm-up

Explanation:

Warm-up exercise with the whole group conducted after the individual presentation of each participant. The aim is to train peoples' associative, imaginary and divergent thinking which will be useful throughout the group. This step shall have no link to the actual topic of the study.

Output:

- ▶ This kind of exercise is very funny and creates a **relaxed and casual atmosphere**. The participants get in touch with each other and feel **less nervous** about the situation. It makes the setting less formal, participants feel comfortable and free to add their own "spice".
- ▶ Furthermore, it also clarifies the pace and style of answers in a market research setting: ideally **short, spontaneous, without thinking too long**, while listening to others and bringing in one's own view!
- ▶ Since projective exercises are difficult and unfamiliar for most participants, a warm-up helps to **get used to such questioning techniques** that may come later during the group. When it comes to the real exercise it's easier for participants to engage into a projection, personification or any other. The answers get more precise and detailed.
- ▶ Helps to **take the attention off the moderator**. Since it is a very interactive and fast-paced exercise, participants talk and listen more to each other and start interacting as a group. They forget standardized answers and typical statements: **honesty wins**.
- ▶ Helps them to forget everything around them and to **concentrate on the group discussion**.
- ▶ Makes clear that **playful interaction is enriching** and there is **tolerance for any kind of answer**, without right or wrong.

What happens in the later sequences of the sessions?

We found out that besides all other influencing factors (moderator's style, participants' personality, nature of the topic...) the way you start a group discussion has a huge impact on the efficiency of the group.

The **"lost" time for warm-up and introduction** at the beginning helps for following exercises (compared with standard introduction round and without a warm-up):

- ▶ It's easier for participants to dive into later areas of questions. We can go **deeper and faster** into the topic and obtain more detailed information.
- ▶ The moderator can stay more in the background and doesn't have to ask so much (i.e. less questioning bias) → the participants **talk freely**.
- ▶ They dare to utter their **more intimate thoughts** even if those are contrary to the others' and even if not in line with the main stream.
- ▶ Less leadership because everyone gets an opportunity to express thoughts from the beginning → **all equal** especially when facing "alien topics"
- ▶ We get to know **true individuals** and their underlying mechanisms. Being driven away from reciting preconceived answers, they show less conformity, less self-censorship and **more truth** in the **revelation of deep insights**.

**Quick view at the tool box:
our warm up techniques**

Techniques used:
why, how and what for

Overview

The techniques we use can be classified into 3 groups

- 1 techniques to stimulate physical movement (voice and body)
→ **Make the motor run and start moving**
- 2 techniques to break attendants' routines and preconceived answers
→ **Break the scripts**
- 3 techniques to activate and encourage associations and imagination
→ **Stimulate the imaginative power**

1. Techniques to make the motor run and start moving

Why?

The beginning of a group with a common introduction procedure bears the risk of staying static (as long there is no “real” need to move).

What for?

These techniques (like “mutual introduction”, “That’s me”) provoke making contact among the attendants and not only with the moderator. We obtain more dynamics by making people use their hands or move around the table

The effect:

People get out of a standby mode and accustomed to a certain kind of dynamic level for the ongoing time. Another benefit is that participants experience to be a group rather than the sum of single persons.

2. Techniques to break scripts:

What is a script?

If someone often has to tell the same story or does things often in a similar way, he wants to behave “economical”: It is less strenuous to talk about routines than to re-think every time. We create “scripts” which we can easily recall.

Why don't we like scripts?

Some participants appear well prepared and have a routine to introduce themselves or answer with standard hobbies and attitudes. All answers sound alike and we do not hear real news or can arise the curiosity of the others.

How we break them?

We have to surprise to re-entrench habits and break the routine of narrative scripts by asking unexpected questions they could not prepare for.

However, another principal is to let them talk about harmless and non-committal topics. No one is forced to reveal intimate details before knowing each other better.

So we get breaking news!

When we encourage and challenge our attendants we face a composition of profiled individuals and the participants “learn” that standards are neither welcome nor helpful.

3. Techniques to stimulate the imaginative power:

If we plan to use projective exercises in the group, it is helpful to activate the necessary skills at the beginning of the session

Excuse: What are projective exercises good for anyway?

Often people do not have access to their emotional and affective behavior themselves. By using projective techniques we reveal the unconscious, make it easier to express emotions and easier to reveal what would be held back under cognitive control

Why start with it?

Attendants tend and try to behave good and therefore rather rationalize yet we need their emotional competence. Especially to men it seems silly to “play crazy” spontaneously, so it helps to let them get the feel for it from the start.

What do we get?

With exercises like “What you see is not what you get” / “Handbagging” people overcome their shyness and notice that it is not about “knowing”. Exercises like “That’s me” also train to scan very quickly a lot of stimuli and then decide intuitively.

Often the used techniques do have a secondary benefit

l'art pour l'art?

Generally, the choice of a distinctive technique can also be driven by the purpose to practice exercises beforehand. Creativity can't be taught – it's:

- ▶ **Learning by doing**
So the group gets to know the mechanism of a certain technique and will have less difficulties when we need it at a later stage.
- ▶ **Invested time pays off**
As a benefit we can reduce the time that we would later need to advise. We save interruptions by repeating. The spent time is an investment in the best sense.
- ▶ **Examples**
If we plan to cluster (see Séissmograph...) we prefer to start with a collective projective exercise like **"handbagging"** (see p. 22)
- ▶ If we plan to work with collages, it can be helpful to start the session with a similar exercise: **"That's me"** (see p. 20)

Techniques to make the motor run (1)

Split Introduction

- ▶ A technique to make everybody use their voice as soon as possible by breaking the stiff sequential one-by-one- order.
- ▶ It is a 2-step procedure: First all names are given and collected before the real introduction.
- ▶ No one has to wait (and fall lethargic or get bored) before it's their turn to say something for the first time.

Mutual introduction

Introducing your neighbor instead of yourself requires a conversation (kind of interview) with the person next to you. It also takes empathy to listen and to find the right words when presenting the “results”.

Techniques to make the motor run (2)

“That’s me!”

Individual projective exercises:

- ▶ Our participants are advised to find a picture in a set of magazines that symbolizes them best.
- ▶ This trains to scan very quickly a lot of stimuli and decide intuitively before rationalizing too much.
- ▶ When afterwards people have to describe a quality or a habit they begin to start using their hands to accompany their words with visual gestures.

This exercise is close to

“pick and choose”

Here we enlarge the set of material to choose from to provoke mobility:

- ▶ We make everybody move and face the fellow participants to provoke physical contact (when standing up and searching for the adequate thing) and mutual communication (“would you hand me...”)
- ▶ A way to get to know each other in an informal way.
- ▶ A way to reduce nervousness: initial inner disquiet converts into movement

“If I were...”

... an animal/ a dish?

By this means we let attendants introduce themselves in an unconventional manner:

Everybody starts unprepared at the same level

The results: Have a look! [see illustration]

A positive side effect is the avoidance of show-off (“my house, my car, my last world trip”) or discrimination (no house/ no car/ no traveling).



Celebrating the coincidence

Why not pick up a topic that arises in a conventional introduction by coincidence?

If Max reports about growing guinea pigs in his garage, we spontaneously ask Anna about her “garage activities” - which surprises the same way.

This might work – but we also have to be careful ...

Feel free to ask us, why exactly

Techniques to stimulate the imaginative power

“What you see is not what you get”

- ▶ We choose an arbitrary trivial object and let everyone brain (and feel!) storm: What it might be if it were not what it actually is...
- ▶ This can be extended to profiling the assumed owner or user of this object.

This is almost like “handbagging”.

“Handbagging”

You might know the term “handbagging” as a special means in politics to beat your opponent (as Margaret Thatcher did). What we call handbagging is a projective warm up exercise to stimulate the collective imaginative power – the licence to be mad!

Stimulus are real bags and the questions are about

1: The owner

- ▶ Attendants create a profile of the owner

2: The content

- ▶ What might be inside consequently?
- ▶ Can we use other objects as stimuli? What, if participants cannot agree on one profile?
- ▶ If you want to know more about handbagging, contact us

We do NOT...

... compromise and embarrass

As long it is not about the real subject of the study, topics which look harmless and entertaining at first sight might be compromising or provocative.

To avoid discrimination

... We do not probe too much on traveling (when 5 participants are used to holidays in East Asia, would

you like to state that you spent 2 weeks in an old-fashioned province or had to stay at home?)

... We do not probe on partnership issues. Unhappiness with matrimonial or single status can unite and entertain a group, but does not have to – we are sensitive.

To avoid social desirability

... We do not probe too much on standard attitudes like openness, friendliness. We rather encourage those who confess to being lazy or unathletic.

To avoid any priming effects (i.e. comments which might influence all attendants for the rest of the session in a significant way)

... We renounce the use of techniques which enlarge the risk in this context (e.g. no “handbagging” when it is about lipsticks!)

So we take special care in moderation - If you are interested, feel free to ask!

Thank you

To all who have actively contributed to the present report and managed to keep a clear view on the topic despite watching endless hours of group discussions across topics and countries:

Marie Arbogast, Francesca Dandolo, Rolf Dobler, Susanne Faber, Kim Malzer & Julia Ohde.

Mannheim, July 2015 – Natacha Dagneaud

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