In a consumer-driven world, focus group testing better determines what will appeal to the customer and why. Is it any wonder that the large-format film industry has turned to focus groups to determine what audiences want in a film?

BY TERRELL E. FALK

Most likely, the music play list of your favorite radio station was created with the help of focus groups. The portable mixer, as well as many other everyday consumer goods, also was inspired and improved upon by focus groups. Your local newspaper, like one in Texas, may have used focus groups to make it more reader-friendly. Literally thousands of products—from minivans to ice cream—have been refined by focus group testing to assure that they meet consumer expectations and needs. Is it any wonder that the large-format film industry has turned to focus groups to determine what audiences want in a film?

In a consumer-driven world, focus group testing better determines what will appeal to the customer and why. "It is the sales path," says John Fosdick, who spent six years as director of research for the Taylor-Smith Group in Houston and is currently director of development for the College of Biblical Studies. For example, when you shop for a vacuum cleaner, what features do you want? Why do you prefer product A over product B? As Faith Popcorn writes in her book, "The Popcorn Report," "If you want to know what consumers want, ask." However, this is not as simple as it sounds. Whom do you ask? What questions? Who does the asking? And, finally, how do you interpret what they are really saying?

Focus group testing is one method of asking the consumer. It is, very simply, gathering a small group of eight to 15 people and having a one-to one-and-a-half hour moderator-guided
discussion to elicit information about a product or service. The discussion is usually viewed by the client via a two-way mirror. It is one kind of qualitative research; for example, it measures attitudes, opinions, and expectations. It differs from quantitative research, which measures how much or how many—something focus group testing cannot do. Paul Fraser, vice president of marketing and theater development for Ogden Entertainment, Inc., New York, and former vice president of corporate development at Angus Reid Group, Toronto, says, “It is a great tool for some situations, but researchers shouldn’t be wed to only one method of research.”

WHAT CAN (AND CAN’T) FOCUS GROUP TESTING TELL YOU?

Laura Martin, director of education and research at the Arizona Science Center and former vice president of production research for the Children’s Television Workshop, says, “With focus groups you can do a quick, national sampling of how people are perceiving your product. There is a richness of data. It flushes out what people are thinking.”

Focus group testing also is used to pare down a list of ideas, products, or services for further testing. Carla Flamer, senior vice president, financial services division, Angus Reid Group, says, “Let’s say a company has 25 new products. It doesn’t want to go to the expense of evaluating all 25 quantitatively. So, it uses focus groups to determine the five it will test.”

Fraser notes that focus group testing is often used to create a better questionnaire for a quantitative survey. A client planning a $100,000 USD study would be wise to first do a less-expensive focus group study to make sure he is addressing the right issues. For instance, when testing five potential film titles, a quantitative study will tell you which one is the most popular of the five. However, the best title choice may not even be on the list. “You may think you have the answer, but you may not even have the right questions,” says Fraser.

“Film producers love focus groups because they get into the heart and mind of the viewers,” says Valerie Crane, president of Research Communications Limited near Boston. However, Ross J. Loomis writes in his book, “Museum Visitor Evaluation,” that “The experience (focus group discussions) can be painful, but it does provide insight.”

It is important to note that focus group testing cannot predict the box office appeal of a film, nor can it forecast revenue projections. Crane says, “It shouldn’t be used to the exclusion of other research.” Therefore, it is always a good idea to follow focus group testing with quantitative research to validate the results and collect more information. “You need,” says Fosdick, “a percentage of the universe (population) to be statistically valid, usually 300 to 500 people in a city the size of Houston.” Flamer says, “You can’t use focus groups to determine what huge numbers of people will do.” Says Barbara Cintado, president of BRC Consumer Research in Chicago, “It can’t tell you if something will be successful.”

Once the decision is made to do focus group research, how do you run a successful program? By breaking the process up into the following steps: determine goals, recruit the group, test several groups, design the questionnaire, select a moderator, run the session(s), evaluate the results, and remember caveats.

DETERMINE GOALS

“First of all,” says Cintado, “you must understand the clients’ objectives for the study. What do they want to know?” Crane says, “It is important to control the clients’ expectations to make sure that they are realistic. You can’t determine marketplace projections with focus group testing alone.” Other issues, such as price sensitivity, are better reached through alternate forms of research.

Once these goals are determined, the researcher and client decide upon the kind of group that will elicit the information the client wants. For instance, if you are testing film concepts, you will want a representative sample of your typical audience. Do you want to attract new viewers in a particular market population, for example, more young adults? Then, you will
want to recruit people from that niche. Do you want to increase the frequency of your present audience? Then, you need to target current users.

In developing materials for inner-city classrooms to use to accompany television programming, Martin used a balanced (ethnically and by gender) selection of inner-city teachers for focus group testing. Barbara Flagg, director of Multimedia Research near Boston, used middle school students in diverse places such as Taiwan and the Netherlands to find out if they were familiar with the Hollywood films highlighted in Special Effects.

**RECRUIT THE GROUP**

To select the members of the focus group, the researcher designs a screening questionnaire containing a list of demographic specifications (gender, age, education level, household income) and more specific information: How many large-format films have you seen? Are you a museum member? Do you have children under the age of 12? The more complicated and precise the screening instrument, the more difficult and costly the process of selecting the group. Sometimes the research company will subcontract a recruiting firm to do this, especially if the focus group testing will take place in several cities. Group members are compensated—usually with cash. “The sampling is extremely important,” says Crane. “It should be randomly drawn.”

**TEST SEVERAL GROUPS**

Comprehensive research consists of testing more than one focus group, often in different markets. Flamer suggests that the minimum be two groups, but she recommends a base of four to eight. Ed Capelle, senior vice president of distribution and film development for Destination Cinema, Ogden, Utah, will use six to nine groups for the company’s upcoming film on Egypt. John Jacobsen, president of White Oak Associates, Inc., Boston, says that The Living Sea was tested in three different cities with two groups per city. Mike Day, director and executive producer of the William L. McKnight 3M Omnitheater at the Science Museum of Minnesota, St. Paul, has been using focus group testing for more than 10 years. He usually tests four groups—two all-male and two all-female.

Steve Bishop, Space Center and Omnimax
projects manager for the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, says that the museum used three different Chicago-area focus groups to find out what would make an exhibit on Navy technology at sea appealing to a general public, which originally had a low level of interest in the subject matter. (Opened in 1994, it is a popular exhibit with up to 2,300 visitors a day who are attracted by the experiential large-scale recreations and combat mission motion simulator—elements that might not have been included without the focus group testing.)

DESIGN THE QUESTIONNAIRE
The questionnaire or discussion guide is very important, although it is only an outline. The actual group discourse may vary drastically. Cintado says, “You must go with the flow.” The digressions of the group can tell you more about the film than strictly following a predetermined set of questions, exposing you to unforeseen issues. In testing a potential advertising campaign, Fraser discovered that the image of a hand on a globe was mistaken for the “hand of God” by a significant percentage of respondents—a perception the creators of the ad hadn’t considered.

Although the client provides the information—such as descriptions or images—for the questionnaire, the researcher makes sure that no bias is included. Jacobsen says, “The questionnaire should be consistent in style and tone. There should be no judgmental adjectives. It should be written in the second person, ‘you.’ If it is not done well, it is not valid.”

Often, in the case of film testing, a focus group is shown storyboards, location stills, graphics, video, or even raw 15 perforation/70mm footage prior to discussion. The questionnaire is keyed to the group’s reaction to the materials. Although Mark Katz, vice president of sales for Sony Pictures Classics, Large Format, reports that focus group testing is not done as a rule, the ending of Across the Sea of Time was reshoot due to a group discussion following a larger quantitative study. Capelle discovered that, foremost, people expect to see the pyra-

mids in a film about Egypt. Day learned which of five geographic themes chosen for The Greatest Places held the most appeal and was most easily understood.

Sometimes the true feelings of group participants must be elicited through the “back door” in the case of sensitive material. Says Flamer, “It helps to learn techniques to get at attitudes people might not normally share.” One way to do this is to show pictures of different people (for example, a blue collar worker, a punk rocker, a well-dressed office worker) and ask, “Would this person be likely to go to see this film? Why? Why not?” Then, follow up with “Would you go with them to see this film? Why? Why not?”

SELECT THE MODERATOR
What you ultimately learn from focus group testing is due to the skill of the moderator. Fosdick warns that the results are “only as good as the facilitator,” who can very easily slant the discussion. The moderator, therefore, shouldn’t be associated with the product or service, so that group members feel comfortable talking honestly. Training and experience also assure that the moderator is “able to think on his feet and follow up leads in an unbiased fashion,” says Flagg.

“It is very difficult to do well,” says Fraser, who sees the ideal moderator as an objective “performer, analyst, arbitrator, and host.” The talented moderator is one with the rare ability to understand what is really being said and react quickly with follow-up questions that further probe the issues.

Martin believes that the moderator “must be a good listener who will encourage everyone to talk.” Flamer recommends that moderators be impartial, confident, patient, and able to control group members who unduly lead the discussion: “You don’t want them to talk too much.” Bishop has compiled a list of qualities that good moderators should possess: poise, self-confidence, a high energy level, and the ability to think on their feet. They also must be friendly, articulate, approachable, a disinterested third party, and able to deal effectively with many different kinds of personalities. Crane
adds that a good moderator also is “entertaining” because a two-hour session with a boring facilitator can be deadly. You don’t want participants snoozing through the sessions.

**RUN THE FOCUS GROUP**

As described by Day, the typical focus group session for film testing consists of a warm-up session of 20 minutes and a 40-minute preview of the film, followed by an hour discussion. During the warm-up, first-name introductions are made, and everyone is asked to specify a favorite film. “Name recognition of films is low,” says Day. Instead, participants will describe a memorable sequence like the astronauts jumping into the basket in The Dream is Alive.

During the introductory session, group members are asked to describe what makes a good large-format film and what they expect to see in a large-format film. Here, the responses typically emphasize the experiential, the richness of visuals, and the sound effects. “For instance,” says Day, “in a film called The Magic of Flight, audiences expect to get dizzy.” Fraser has found that diverse focus groups use remarkably similar phrases: “You feel like you’re there,” or “You feel like you are transported.” Flagg has found that audiences expect “an immersion experience.” Capelle uses the phrase “visceral experience.”

Focus group members are instructed not to talk to each other after they view the film until the organized discussion begins. One of the first questions is “Did the film meet your expectations?” This is followed by open-ended discussion on various elements: “What did you think about the script? The narrator? The music?” The film can be graded (A–F scale) to give a future database.

**EVALUATE THE RESULTS**

The researcher interprets the results and compiles the responses in a comprehensive report. This is sometimes difficult. Says Martin, “An inexperienced analyzer often goes for a clever soundbite. Or, (film) producers hear what they want to hear and may jump to conclusions.” (Remember that the clients are usually present behind a two-way mirror.) Sometimes misconceptions about the subject itself are confusing. Bishop reports that focus group members
In the world of large-format film production, focus group testing can:

- Give reasons behind your target audience's interest or lack of interest in a subject.
- Determine if viewers understand the film's theme, educational content, etc.
- Explain what audience members expect to experience in a large-format film and why.
- Generate more ideas for film content and titles.
- Provide language that can be used in advertising.
- Explore the appeal of a particular narrator (or theme, music, etc.).
- Warn you about something that may be objectionable (or boring, distracting, etc.).
- Measure the reaction to an advertising campaign, making sure it translates the film's subject well.
- Explore why viewers like or don't like something.

Focus group results are used not only to make films in production more financially viable, but also to eliminate unnecessary expenses.

other topics tested at the same time let him know that audiences did not want to see a difficult social issue on the large-format screen, nor did they prefer a straightforward documentary style.

REMEMBER CAVEATS

It should be emphasized that focus group testing is not an end in itself. "You should never base a major business decision on focus group testing alone. It is just a first step to further research," says Fraser. That additional research should include some kind of quantitative study that will give you numbers with which to make projections.

However, focus group testing is a valuable tool that can enhance your film, giving you ideas you may not have discovered otherwise. Says Jacobsen, "It is not the decision itself, just information on which to base further study." He adds, "Audience research is a fundamental part of this business." Capelle says, "As more and more films are made, the pressure is on the producers to give the market what it wants."

Regardless of the fact that a group discussion inspired a change in the ending of *Across the Sea of Time*, Katz does not foresee focus group testing being commonly used by Sony Pictures Classics to determine creative filming decisions in the large-format division. "There are now no plans nor formal structure in place to do focus group testing," Likewise, Fraser doubts that Ogden Entertainment will use focus groups to select film topics: "Perhaps (they will be used) to explore a particular treatment or to see how certain scenes play, but not for editing room decisions."

As Bishop sums up: "Testing is part of due diligence these days. If you are going to spend millions of dollars, it makes sense to do whatever you can to minimize the risk. It lends credibility to your project." However, he continues, "Focus group testing is not a substitute for good judgment. It should be considered in the light of everything else you know."

Terrell E. Falk writes frequently for The Big Frame. She is vice president of marketing for JQH Film Entertainment, Inc.