

ATTACHMENT 3

Computer Assisted Telephone (CAT) Focus Groups¹

Telephone focus groups have been in use for over 35 years, and have been enhanced by computer technology invented in the late 1980s. Organizations are increasingly finding them valuable for reaching people from all over the U.S., going beyond the usual less-than-a-handful of major markets to represent many locations and kinds of participants that could not otherwise be considered. This is especially useful where participants are geographically dispersed, relatively rare, reluctant or unable to travel to a central facility, or in need of anonymity.

People can participate from the comfort of their home, office, or other private place where they have access to a phone. This permits equal ease across locations. Participants may also feel more candid than in face-to-face groups because there is less opportunity for facial “intimidation.” All are equal on the phone. There is less distraction, less silence, less formality and posturing, and a greater sense of privacy.

Everyone can hear everyone else clearly. Interaction starts fast and is often more natural and intense than in face-to-face groups. The fact that participants cannot see each other is not unusual or problematic. People use the phone to communicate all the time. Participants use complete sentences and nonverbal remarks, like “uh-huh” to substitute for the nonverbal head nods. They are encouraged to “chorus” their agreement or disagreement. Pauses become more obvious and meaningful. Many other auditory cues supplement the conversation, such as participants using their name each time they speak (which also improves transcript quality).

The computer technology provides several unique advantages. While participants are on their own telephone the moderator can identify who is talking -- on a computer screen. Observers can call in from anywhere to listen without being heard and can pass notes to the moderator by using their telephone touchpad or on-line chat to contact a technical assistant; the notes appear unobtrusively on the moderator’s computer screen without interrupting the group. Removal of the (rare) disruptive participant is quick, simple, and invisible to other participants.

Compared to face-to-face focus groups, CAT focus groups are more representative, faster and easier to recruit, and faster to set up. They eliminate the costs, time, and inconvenience of travel for client observers as well as for participants. They permit involvement by a greater number and variety of participants and observers (such as executives and implementers). They can also provide greater depth of response and flexibility of research designs (e.g., mixing participants in a group who might not be feasible or desirable to mix in person).

¹ For further detail, see: Balch, G.I. (2005). C.A.T. (Computer-Assisted Telephone) focus groups: better, faster, cheaper, *Social Marketing Quarterly*, 7, 4, 38-40; Cooper C.P., Jorgensen, C.M., & Merritt, T.L. (2003). Report from the CDC, telephone focus groups: An emerging method in public health research. *Journal of Women's Health*, 12(10): 945-951; Hurwith, R. (2004); Telephone focus groups (1994). *Social Research Update*, 4, Winter: <<http://sru.soc.surrey.ac.uk/SRU44.html>>; Silverman, G. (1994). *Introduction to Telephone Focus Groups*. <<http://www.mnav.com/phonefoc.htm>>.

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