

Customer Insights

Innovation Guru® Insight

In the pursuit of a higher level of Innovation, we wish to share a short Innovation Guru Insight with you each week. This week's Innovation Guru Insight is:

Customer Insights:

A common approach to gaining insights into customer needs is the focus group research method. Six to ten participants are asked to participate in a roundtable discussion in a specially-designed room, which is outfitted with a two-way mirror. The client, or those interested in hearing the customer feedback, sits behind the two-way mirror in a separate room, while the participants and moderators are in the main room. The focus group session usually lasts for two hours, during which time the moderator leads the participants through a series of pre-planned questions designed to tap into their attitudes regarding the chosen subject, product, or service.

Many people use the focus group research method strictly out of habit--they simply have relied on its use for many years. However, the focus group research method is inherently flawed due to: (a) the artificial setting; (b) the presence of other strangers which inhibits true dialogue; (c) the lack of time to really probe in-depth attitudes; (d) the lack of real stimuli such as competitive products and service examples; (e) the assumption that the participants' comments reflect their actual behavior; and (f) the lack of follow-up (any comments or insights the participants may have following the session are lost). Some focus group moderators even position their groups as unique because they restrict the number of participants or include creative thinking exercises. In our opinion, the only difference is that the invoice is higher; the flaws of this technique still remain!

Given these concerns, the use of the focus group research method, no matter what the size of the group, should be restricted. Instead, try other methods of market research, such as direct observation, in-depth interviews, lead-user research, and investigating or benchmarking what's working or not working in other markets and countries.

Are you, as an Innovation Guru®, exploring new research methods in order to gain the best, that is, most valid and reliable, customer insights?

Innovation Guru Insights is a regular column of *The Innovation Journal*. Insights are also offered as a free service via www.innovationguru.com. For more information, please contact [Elaine Dundon](#) or [Alex Pattakos](#). Many of these insights highlight key examples, and tools included in Elaine Dundon's new book, [The Seeds of Innovation](#), published by the American Management Association (ISBN 0814471463).