

## **Nonverbal communication in the focus-group**

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**Abstract:** *In the process of analysing the information obtained through focus group qualitative marketing research, a very important source of data is represented by non-verbal communication. Although the literature reveals an abundance of published material that describes how data obtained through focus group should be analysed, one of the least addressed issue is the interpretation of signals from participants: gestures, posture, dynamic and rhythm of speech or even the silence.*

*This Article addresses precisely aspects of non-verbal communication in the focus group's and although not intended to examine in detail the results of a focus group, it shows how some of signals transmitted by participants of such research have been analysed and interpreted.*

**Key-words:** *focus group, focus group analysis, non-verbal communication*

### **1. Matters on non-verbal communication in the focus group**

The focus group is a qualitative research method known for the opportunity to gain insight into how people assign significance and interpret their world.

Focus group was identified as technical research in social psychology by Robert Merton, M. Fiske, P. Kendall, who used it in the mid-40s being used widely from 1950 in marketing.

Focus group research is a way of collecting qualitative information by engaging a small number of people, between 8 to 12, in an informal group discussion under the direction of a professional moderator. A typical focus group session will last 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours.

Researchers should carefully plan the group's composition and the group discussion to create a non threatening environment, so that participants feel free to talk openly and give honest opinions.

Focus group is benefiting from the emergence of the ideas within the group, each participant developing its position in the group due to expression of diverse positions in agreement or disagreement with other opinions.

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Even though the responses may be harder to quantify, focus groups offer a depth, nuance, and variety of discussions and ideas, that would not be available through surveys, since participants are encouraged to express their own opinions, to respond to other members or questions posed by the moderator of the group, therefore it offers a closer view on what people are really thinking and feeling.

In short, focus groups enable the researcher to collect information regarding both verbal and non-verbal communication between participants, on a social interaction context.

The beginning of modern scientific interest on the study of non-verbal behaviour is often traced to Darwin, who focused on the possible modification or impact of body and facial expressive movements on verbal language.

Primary benefits of focus groups are non-verbal communication and group interaction, because when we talk to someone, we gauge their meaning not just from their words, but also from their facial expressions, body language, gestures and eye gaze.

Non-verbal communication is accompanying the verbal communication and is easier to decode than this. According to specialists, affective and attitudinal contents are transmitted non-verbal 55%, 38% para verbal and just 7% verbal, thus a verbal message unaccompanied by the non-verbal and para-verbal component will be harder to decode.

Such non-verbal data include kinetic (gestures, body movements or postures), facial expressions (gestures, eye contact, smile), the proxemics (use of interpersonal space to communicate attitudes), chronemic (use of pacing of speech and length of silence in conversation), paralinguistic (all variations in volume, pitch, and quality of voice).

A full analysis of the information submitted by participants in a focus group should include along with the detailing of responses that each participant gives to questions posed by the moderator, by their nature, the way of supporting ideas, the order in which these answers were given should also contain information on non-verbal behaviour.

In literature we find more recommended ways to non-verbal message encoding. For example, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, Wendy B. Dickinson, Nancy L. Leech, Annmarie G. Zoran in the paper "A Framework for Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data in Focus Group Research" shows the proposals made by Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson (1974) and Silverman (2004) to systematize and present non-verbal behaviour of participants in a focus group in a matrix similar to that used for content analysis so in which the answers and comments of participants to questions asked in the focus group are exposed. There are also proposed a series of symbols by which to codify non-verbal reactions.

## **2. Interpretation of the significance of non-verbal behaviour of participants in a focus group organized to find out the opinions of specialists regarding the risks assumed by the OSH**

The following are the means by which were analysed and reviewed the non-verbal reactions of participants in a focus group organized in order to identify the views and opinions of union leaders on actions that could be taken to reduce costs, both economic and social generated the risks assumed by employees in the workplace.

In this research extensive discussions were conducted with a number of 8 specialists in Occupational Safety and Health. The research objectives were related to obtaining information about the importance given by both employers and employees to the knowledge and compliance with OSH, evaluating the potential risks of accidents and professional diseases in the fields of aeronautics and naval, identifying economic and social costs generated by risks posed to employees at work and generate proposals for action to be taken to realize employees and prevent occupational diseases and accidents at work in manufacturing.

Without the intend to present the synthesis of information gathered during the focus group's conducted and the conclusions of the qualitative study, we show the way gestures of the participants in this research were interpreted and the appropriate measures taken by the moderator in order to obtain relevant data for the research as mentioned above. In compliance with professional ethics, the conclusions have not been drawn in the form of value judgements, but keeping researcher position impartial, transposing factual information obtained by scientific methods in abstract conclusions.

The gesture in the image, shaking fist, in correlation with the things sustained by the participant was interpreted as a revolt against the facts described and also as his increased engagement.





Hands placed in front of the mouth means, most often, insecurity, braking of thoughts. The moderator, through repeated encouragements, tried to instill confidence to participant so that he can express his opinions freely.



Crossed arms are interpreted as a sign of lack of openness. Often indicate that the person is protecting himself, imposes distance or is unwilling to reveal something. Meanwhile, the crossed arms may mean a state of agitation, helplessness or disappointment. There is also the possibility that the man folded his arms, simply because he didn't know how to keep them.



Gestures during the discussion is often interpreted as the willingness to convince interlocutors and of safety.



Touching the neck during a discussion is associated with doubt. In this case the moderator, interpreting this way his gesture, invited him to speak up and to express his opinion.

Looking down often denotes disinterest in the topic being discussed or a desire to avoid an answer. The person should be encouraged to participate in discussions.



Stirring index finger can be interpreted as a desire to warn, to emphasize the weight of words or to express authority. The moderator considered it as a normal gesture during a talk between specialists but in general in a focus group, the authority of one or more members may lead to the inhibition of others.



Keeping hands folded on the table, though it may indicate an attitude of false interest is a preferable attitude to the disinterest that can be "contagious" and extend to other participants.



Hands folded and crossed legs means the person retracted from the discussion. The phenomenon is not very serious if the research is right at the end but if it is not, the moderator should strive to regain the interest of participants.





Hand as a headrest almost always indicate boredom. The moderator must relaunch the discussion or change the technique used to regain the interest of the participants.

In conclusion, we believe that in order to get relevant data for a focus group qualitative marketing research is particularly important to observe and monitor participants' non-verbal reactions. During organizing of focus group, paying particular attention to these details can provide a proper dynamics of the discussions or the opportunity of relaunching certain topics if necessary, while in the process of analysing and interpreting the data, ensuring an increased accuracy of the research.

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