

## Beware the 'Hallelujah' Chorus in Focus Groups

### Time for Some Clarity

Focus research groups can be great for the right purpose. We use them a lot when we are looking at broad topics, exploring attitudes, searching for direction, often in the early stages of a project. You do have to be aware of what can, and often does, happen when you bring groups of people together, however.

#### **Look Out for the Cascade**

The most documented is the 'herd' response. An early response, clearly articulated by one participant (as long as it isn't outlandish) is rapidly adopted by everyone in the group. However good the moderator is, fighting a collectively established point of view is very difficult.

The thing is people tend to like a degree of consensus and camaraderie. They derive comfort from anchoring themselves to a particular viewpoint.

Perhaps most frustratingly, often the adopted view is a cautious one. It means that stronger and more surprising ideas don't get a fair hearing. It's the tall poppy syndrome.

#### **Turn Down the Volume**

Discussed less often is the 'chorus'. It's linked to the herd. Described by Harvard Professor Cass R. Sunstein, he showed that a group will tend to exaggerate a slight bias. They will do more than that however.

They will amplify that exaggeration to a greater degree than the single most biased participant at the outset (i.e. their point of view before they walked in the door). That exaggeration can be towards more positive or negative, depending on the initial pre-disposition of the group. You really don't want that from your research.

#### **Getting Closer**

That's why at Clarity, often we will use methodologies that are more intimate and intensive. People like this sort of research. It feels like a more normal and natural conversation.

Importantly you hear their spontaneous, untainted view that you can explore in depth. Taking it further, it allows you to cross-reference an idea or view that someone came up with in another session, critically test it and then develop or reject it. Participants work harder too and get more involved in trying to find the solution.

It's perhaps not surprising that the high point of one overture is the firing of sixteen cannon outside. Focus groups can be a great overture, but when you are getting deeper in, beware of the 'hallelujah' chorus that sends you off in the wrong direction.

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