

The Focus Group

Topic: Marketing Research (Respondent Privacy)

Characters: Elspeth, Associate Research Specialist for a marketing research firm in a large midwestern city
Franklin, Project coordinator and Elspeth's immediate supervisor
Peggy, participant in the focus group study

Elspeth, associate research specialist for a marketing research firm in a large Midwestern city, had just moderated a very successful focus group for a regional personal injury law firm. The focus group represented two firsts: it was the first time Elspeth had moderated a focus group, and it was the first time the law firm had used any type of marketing research.

The purpose of the study was to aid the law firm's partner in charge of marketing in developing a new series of TV commercials. Franklin, the project coordinator and Elspeth's immediate supervisor, along with three senior partners of the law firm, had observed the focus group from a viewing room. Because everyone was so pleased with her performance, Elspeth felt confident that she would be asked to moderate more groups in the future and that the law firm would hire her company for additional marketing research.

During the focus group session, Peggy, one of the participants, mentioned that her husband had used the services of the client firm to handle an insurance claim for a work-related injury. Peggy said that she and her husband were dissatisfied with the handling of the case. The next day, Franklin told Elspeth to give the client Peggy's last name so that the law firm could determine if Peggy's complaint was justified. If Peggy was right, the firm would take steps to prevent similar occurrences.

Focus group participants had been told that the study was being conducted for a personal injury law firm, but the name of the company had not been revealed. Participants also knew that the proceedings were to be videotaped and that representatives of the law firm would observe through a one-way glass in the wall of the focus group room. Although Elspeth's company had the full name, address, and telephone number of each participant, these were not made available to the client. Only first names were used during the focus group.

As Elspeth was looking up Peggy's last name, she began to think that giving it to the client would be a violation of participant confidentiality. She trusted that the law firm's intentions were sincere; besides, no one had ever told the participants that they wouldn't be identified for the client. Still, it seemed wrong to her. On the other hand, marketing research usage was down among traditional research users because of poor economic conditions in the area and her firm was doing everything possible to obtain engagements from nontraditional organizations such as law firms. What would Franklin think if she said it was improper to identify Peggy?

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