



Enhancing focus groups with wireless group response systems

By Pat Moody

Editor's note: Pat Moody is director of marketing and new business development in the electronics division of Fleetwood Group, Inc., a Holland, Mich., maker of portable response systems. He can be reached at 800-257-6390 or at nbd@fleetwoodgroup.com.

Wireless group response systems are starting to become a frequent sight in focus groups. These systems combine handheld keypads, computer software, and (usually) a projection device. When used by a skilled moderator, these systems create an interactive environment that can inspire honest feedback and generate quality data that can be instantly sorted in myriad ways.

Using response systems is both simple and straightforward. At the beginning of a session, each group member receives a handheld keypad. During the course of the session, a moderator uses the software to pose a series of questions to the group while each member responds using his or her keypad. Generally, these questions involve simple multiple choice or Likert scale (strongly agree to strongly disagree) responses. However, depending on the type of response system, group members can also rank order options, compare alternatives, process lists, or even indicate their point-in-time response to a stimulus (which is sometimes useful in niche research like speech critique or advertising testing). After the computer receives the group's input, the results are tallied for immediate display to the moderator, group members, and/or observers.

Speed — the immediacy of tabulating group responses — is the most apparent characteristic of research sessions that employ response systems. Researchers can gather a lot of information from numerous people in a short period of time. Also, they can view and manipulate the data live. Granted, doing things fast can sometimes present a risk to

accuracy. However, electronic tools actually increase the accuracy of focus group research in several ways:

- With response systems, data is immediately stored on the computer. This avoids data entry errors that can occur when converting paper information into electronic files.
- Using wireless keypads instead of a show of hands or verbal responses (“all those in favor...”) allows participants to respond anonymously, which may encourage more thoughtful and honest responses.
- Once group members realize that they will not be singled out for criticism or suffer political consequences for their answers, they become less likely to follow the lead of a dominant personality. They may also be more willing to participate, which further improves response rates and sample accuracy. This can be especially important when discussing sensitive topics.
- Because a moderator can clarify questions or options to all group members at once, this group survey method avoids many biases common to one-on-one interviews or individual self-paced techniques.

The researcher's perspective

Opinion Polling Service, Teaneck, N.J., specializes in the technical and logistical sides of focus group research. It typically works with independent focus group moderators, supplying the equipment and technicians needed to conduct the research so that the moderator can focus on leading the group. The company has been using a wireless response system called MeetingNet in focus group settings for several years. MeetingNet is a group survey and analysis solution for Windows PCs consisting of wireless response hardware manufactured by Fleetwood Group, Inc. and software that Option

Technologies, LLC (OTI) developed for use with it.

“From a strictly logistical standpoint, the fact that the response system is wireless and portable provides us with an important advantage over our competitors,” says Hal Meier, president and project director of Opinion Polling Service. “The system is not hardwired into a particular location, so our technicians can travel with the system to wherever the focus group research needs to be conducted. Group members can be drawn from a variety of locales, ensuring a more diverse mixture of responses and opinions.”

Wireless group response technology can also increase the audience's interest and participation. “Allowing group members to view data as it's generated increases their level of interest,” Meier says. “Now, some clients may not like the idea of allowing focus group members to see the data; they may fear that this will taint the data or lead the group astray. But in my experience, some of the very best — and most interesting — focus group research that I've ever seen came out of groups where the respondents could see how their fellow group members answered particular questions. Seeing how other group members answered led them into all types of wonderful conversations and noticeably increased their participation.”

Wireless group response systems increase the amount of data available to focus group researchers, Meier says. “In a typical focus group research project, a moderator may work with eight different focus groups in four different cities. If there are 10 people in each group, then there are a total of 80 different people who are interviewed. And if those 80 people all voted on the same set of questions, then surely you would

want to find a way of tallying their voting patterns or preferences. The response system allows us to track the numbers and compile all the data at the end of the project.

“The system software also allows us to add questions during focus group sessions, which gives the moderator the ability to react to feedback that he or she receives from the group in real time. We can create not only new questions but also new crosstabs for referencing purposes. To be able to react like this in a group setting within the span of seconds allows the moderator to pursue new avenues that may not have been evident before the research started.”

Another group response system user is Reality Check, a St. Louis research firm that conducts group interviews to help clients decide how to position their products, understand their brands, and evaluate advertising. Typically, it arranges for a group of 30 to 60 people to meet in a hotel ballroom or large focus group facility. The firm's personnel lead the group through a quantitative questionnaire using a group response system also consisting of Reply-brand wireless hardware plus Unity software developed by Communications Technology International (ComTec). They then follow up with several smaller focus groups after the general session to gain an in-depth understanding of the answers given in the quantitative session.

Clients can unobtrusively observe these focus group sessions from a backroom, and they can watch the results being graphed in real time. Before the company began using the system, says Jim Chastain, president of Reality Check, some clients would question the results of quantitative research because they couldn't get a feel for the respondents used in the study. “Using response system tech-

nology, our clients can attend the sessions, observe the results, and also observe the people responding to their product or brand,” Chastain says.

Combined benefits

According to Mark Fite of Option Technologies, two characteristics of the wireless response system allow focus group researchers to increase the value of their research. First, the speed of the system permits moderators and clients to identify patterns more quickly in the data being generated by the focus group. And second, the moderator can then drill down and uncover the valuable insights they are trying to identify, whether they are audience reactions or pre-conceived beliefs.

In terms of expense, Meier says that the cost of conducting focus group research with his firm is roughly comparable to the cost of

videoconferencing on a per day basis. This will vary somewhat depending on the individual circumstances (mainly due to travel costs). Conducting focus group research on short notice on a particular day will cost more. The more advance notice involved, the more advance notice given, and the more flexible the schedule, the lower the cost per day will be. The equipment is not the major cost. The technicians and travel, as usual, account for much of it.

Of course, response systems can also be purchased. Starter kits begin around \$3,500. These kits include 10 keypads, a base station, and basic polling software. When more sophisticated survey, quantitative analysis or decision support software applications are substituted for the basic software, the kit price can range from \$4,000 to \$8,000. Additional keypads can generally be purchased for \$250 or less. So if a customer rou-

tinely uses the system a few times per year, buying may prove to be a better investment than renting. But first consider the value of getting someone skilled to run the equipment for you — which is where the research firms come into play.

Valuable element

Wireless group response systems are now adding a valuable quantitative element to the focus group process. They generate individual, demographic, and group data that can be analyzed immediately and in multiple fashions. This releases moderators to focus more on exploring ideas and identifying segmented interests, rather than worrying about how to collect all of the data necessary to support an interpretation of what happened in the group. With response systems, “what happened” is automatically documented, thereby providing more time to figure out what it means. [4]